

# Rush to Judgment: Western Media and the 2005 Andijan Violence

John C. K. Daly

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
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# **Rush to Judgment: Western Media and the 2005 Andijan Violence**

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## Preface

On May 13, 2005, in the Uzbek city of Andijan, an armed confrontation took place between Islamic militants and troops from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In the course of the ensuing melee close to 200 persons from both sides were killed. There is no doubt that the militants initiated the confrontation by attacking local government offices and a maximum security prison, and that the appalling number of deaths was due to deliberate actions and poor judgment exercised by both sides. However, specific details on the day's events were lacking at the time and, on some points, remain unclear and in dispute down to the present day.

These grim events occurred at a delicate moment in the relationship between Uzbekistan and the United States. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the U.S. Department of Defense, the Government of Uzbekistan had offered logistical and basing support to NATO's Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Thanks to this, the Pentagon stationed U.S. Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps forces at the Karshi-Khanabad airport in southern Uzbekistan, whence they conducted operations in nearby Afghanistan. Many Americans supported this arrangement as an appropriate form of cooperation among friends. Others, including activists from various non-governmental organizations, criticized it as inappropriate collusion with a government they considered repressive and hostile to the human and civic rights of its citizens. A similar polarization of opinion occurred in Europe.

This situation all but guaranteed that every piece of information emanating from Andijan would become the object of fierce contention in America and Europe.

Three further factors caused the volume of these ensuing debates to rise still higher, and their tone to grow ever more bitter. First, caught off guard and not experienced with dealing with the international media, the Uzbek government was overly reluctant to release information that might have clarified points of



contention. On many key issues it was itself doubtless seeking evidence and clarification, and was not in a position to provide the instant reporting that reporters sought.

Second, the government's reluctance to wade into the mounting controversy over Andijan was due in part to a confrontation with the western organization Human Rights Watch that had occurred only eleven months earlier. In May 2004, a jailed murder suspect named Andrei Shelkovenko died while in police custody in Tashkent. Human Rights Watch promptly announced that his death had been caused by torture. However, the Uzbek Ministry of Internal Affairs accepted a suggestion by Freedom House for an independent investigation, consisting of American and Canadian experts. By the end of May the commission concluded that the death was a result of suicide and that there was no evidence of torture. To its credit, Human Rights Watch prominently issued a press release acknowledging its error, but by this time the damage was done. Few, if any, western media took note of Human Rights Watch's *mea culpa*, nor did western governments. This episode goes far towards explaining the Uzbek government's cautious and defensive response to requests for information and its opposition to requests for site visits to Andijan and for the establishment of another international commission.

In the end that reluctance proved counterproductive, but it is to some degree understandable.

A third factor contributing to the volume and bitterness of the debates that followed the events of May 13 was the evolution of the media itself at the time. On that date no major American newspaper or TV channel had a reporter any nearer to Tashkent than Moscow. Of those reporters for major outlets who filed stories on Andijan, none knew the Uzbek language and all were heavily dependent on reports from civil society organizations. Some of these provided accurate and useful information. But with barely a handful of representatives in the region, weak command of local languages, and an institutional agenda to advance, many did not.

Competitive pressure among such groups and between them and mainstream media assured that much baldly inaccurate information was disseminated and repeated.

Ten years after that tragic day in May, 2005, the Government of Uzbekistan once again maintains correct and positive relations with both the United States and the European Union. While they disagree on some points, all three parties acknowledge that they share important strategic and economic interests and are eagerly advancing them in a low-keyed and constructive manner. Neither the Government of Uzbekistan, the United States' State Department, nor the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council chose to mark the decennial of the 2005 events. For perfectly understandable reasons they prefer to let the matter lie, to look forward rather than backwards, and to allow a process of healing to continue in their mutual relations.

Why, then, issue two Silk Road Papers in 2016 on the subject of Andijan and its coverage in the West? The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center had no plans to commemorate the Andijan events until Jeffrey Hartman, former U.S. Defense Attaché to Uzbekistan, submitted his study of the Andijan events for publication. The draft reflected both extensive research and careful analysis. After vetting it with colleagues, we decided to accept it for publication. But in our view the Hartman study stopped short, because it did not follow the complex story of how the American and international press treated the May 13 events. We therefore engaged Dr. John Daly to prepare a companion paper on the evolving coverage of Andijan.

The purpose of both of these related papers on Andijan is to deepen our knowledge of what actually occurred on that day and the process by which it was reported in the American and western press. Unfortunately, this was not the first instance of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia or of a governmental response that elicits criticism in the West, whether just or not. We have seen the same in every country of the region, including Afghanistan. Nor is it likely to be the last. Without some understanding of these events, and the process by which they enter the consciousness of Americans and Europeans, neither Americans, Europeans, nor Uzbeks are unlikely to advance beyond their actions and responses back in 2005.

None of the many people involved in the events in Andijan, in the press coverage of them, or in official or unofficial foreign responses, covered themselves with glory. All sides made mistakes. These two studies are offered in the spirit of Edmund Burke's admonition that "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it."

Because the authors and editors of this report respect the wish of Tashkent, Washington and Brussels to look forward rather than backwards, we have waited a full year beyond the decennial to issue these two papers. We do not assume that either of these reports will be the last on the subject, or that they should be. New information will continue to surface and new perspectives will continue to arise over time. The authors and editors of these papers welcome them both. Their sole hope, and admonition, is that those bringing them forward will do so in the constructive spirit in which the present papers were undertaken.

S. Frederick Starr

Chairman, CACI/SRSP

## Executive Summary

A decade after the tragedy of Andijan (Andijon), the truth about what happened there on May 13, 2005, remains elusive. What is notable about events on that sultry day in the Ferghana Valley is both the relative paucity of objective eyewitness accounts from journalists and how quickly the narrative congealed into a tale of brutal, unwarranted repression by Uzbek security forces, resulting in the death of hundreds. That figure grew as time passed, with the increasing use of loaded terminology to define what happened. Extricating the truth about what happened in Andijan, a city of 300,000, became more, not less, difficult as time went on. In the subsequent superheated atmosphere, an accurate narrative of what really happened became hostage to political currents. This study examines how Western media and governments jumped to judgment on events in Andijan, thereby undermining the developing relationship between Uzbekistan and the West – to the detriment of both sides.

On the one hand are human rights groups, long critical of the policies of the government of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, who asserted that Andijan was proof of their assertions and quintessentially symptomatic of the repressive nature of the Uzbek government, which used excessive force to crush a peaceful struggle for freedom, killing hundreds, if not thousands, of peaceful demonstrators. This became the dominant narrative in the West, and it was amplified by the paucity of foreign journalists actually in Andijan when the tragedy occurred.

On the other hand, the Uzbek government asserted that the violence was instigated by Islamic militants intent on fomenting unrest. It pointed to evidence that militants brandished weapons seized from a police station the previous night, took hostages, deployed snipers and Molotov cocktails, and rebuffed all efforts by the government to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis. The government maintained that its response to events in Andijan was unfortunate but proportionate

and propelled by the actions of the militants themselves, and that it resorted to force only after negotiations failed because of the militants' confrontational demands.

Blindsided by the rising virulence of international condemnation, the Uzbek government retreated to a bunker mentality, and began to eject and shut down various foreign news agencies and NGOs, leading to suspicions that it indeed had something to hide.

As positions hardened, so did the international narratives, which began to incorporate phrases like "massacre" and "Central Asia's Tiananmen Square" more and more frequently, while casualty figures crept upward. Yet the high casualty figures have yet to be substantiated, while some of the eyewitness accounts they originally rested on have been contradicted by evidence. Indeed, a year after the violence, video footage shot by the militants themselves emerged in the West, appearing to corroborate many points in the government's narrative. But international perceptions had long congealed into a boilerplate interpretation of events in Andijan being the logical outcome of policies of a regime contemptuous of human rights that then tried to cover up its brutality. The video evidence was consequently ignored or denounced as propaganda.

In this charged atmosphere, when a number of Western academics and Central Asian specialists questioned the evolving narrative of an unprovoked massacre of peaceful demonstrators, and pointed to evidence corroborating the Uzbek government estimate that about 200 people had been killed (including militants, security forces, and civilians) they were derided as apologists for the Uzbek government, lacking moral commitment to denounce what transpired.

Two tectonic plates clashed over Andijan—Western insistence, led by human rights organizations, on the magnitude of the tragedy in a context largely devoid of analysis of Uzbekistan's earlier problems with Islamic militancy, countered by the Uzbek's government's stalwart defense of its version of events. A decade of divergence has left the reality of events in Andijan a decade ago missing as two opposite versions of the dreadful events of that day a decade ago continue to battle for primacy in cyberspace.

In the meantime, the threat of Islamic radicalism that Karimov's detractors summarily dismissed wreaked havoc on both Afghanistan and Pakistan in the decade that followed, with Uzbek militants playing an outsized role. Their impact reached as far as Idaho, where an Uzbek refugee was convicted in 2016 for conspiring to conduct an Oklahoma City-style bombing. The fact that the U.S. government is now moving directly against the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is a belated tacit acknowledgement that Uzbekistan's government grappled with Islamic militancy predating Andijan, where actions and video taken by the militants led the government to assume the worst.

The Western rush to judgment on Uzbekistan had serious consequences. It effectively destroyed the U.S.-Uzbekistan strategic relationship and sent relations between Uzbekistan and the West into a decade-long tailspin. Across the region, it amplified suspicions about Western intentions in the region, while undermining the credibility of Western media and NGOs. In the West itself, it led to the caricature of Uzbekistan as evil incarnate being established, and contributed to the country's isolation from the West. In so doing, it undermined efforts to work for positive gradual reform in the country.

## **Andijan, May 2005**

The volatile 5,250 square-mile Ferghana Valley stretches across the boundaries of three former Soviet republics—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Andijan is about 25 miles west of Osh, Kyrgyzstan, where the March 2005 uprising against Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev began, two months before Andijan. While Andijan is Uzbekistan's smallest province, covering only one percent of the country's territory, as part of the densely populated Ferghana Valley it is home to nearly 10 percent of the nation's population and the country's largest producer of cotton.

As the peoples of the USSR began to cast off communism, many began to revive their cultural and religious traditions, which had long been suppressed. This yearning to reconnect with their past was particularly noticeable among the Muslims scattered in the post-Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian regions and within Russia itself, a situation that Muslims from abroad were happy to exploit. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union, donors from Saudi Arabia had lavished money on restoring mosques and religious institutions in Uzbekistan—Andijan being no exception. Andijan's Juma mosque and madrassa (religious school) complex, operated as a museum during Soviet times, was reopened as a madrassa in 1990 until authorities, alarmed at the growing militancy preached there, closed down the complex for a second time in 1997, turning it once again into a museum. Andijan was one of the most religiously conservative regions of Uzbekistan, and the introduction of Wahabbi doctrine injected a stridency to the region's nascent religious revival that unsettled the government in Tashkent, as did events in neighboring Afghanistan.

Below follows a summary of the events in Andijan on May 12-13, 2005, drawing on the most authoritative research that has been conducted since. These include

primary accounts, such as Human Rights Watch's account of the tragedy, published in June 2005.<sup>1</sup> It also includes analytical studies by well-regarded Central Asia experts, British scholar Shirin Akiner,<sup>2</sup> Russian scholar Igor Rotar,<sup>3</sup> and the Uzbek-American scholar and politician AbduMannob Polat,<sup>4</sup> published in July 2005 and June 2007, respectively. Perhaps the most authoritative account of the events, however, is issued in parallel with this study, and authored by Colonel Jeffry Hartman, a former U.S. Defense Attaché to Uzbekistan.<sup>5</sup>

The impetus for the May 13, 2005 Andijan protests which erupted into violence and ended in tragedy was the arrest and trial of 23 local businessmen charged with "religious extremism." The men were arrested in June 2004 and their trial opened on February 11, 2005, in Andijan's Altinkul district court.

The confrontation that would end in tragedy was initially instigated by a group of 50-100 armed men who the previous evening began attacking a police station and then military barracks No. 34 of the Ministry of Defense, killing a dozen personnel. According to a prominent Uzbek human rights activist, these were the first fatalities of what would become a bloody day in Andijan's history.<sup>6</sup> According to a number of contemporary accounts, the attackers seized weaponry, including automatic AK-47 rifles, grenades, and up to 100 submachine guns, along with a significant amount of ammunition.

The insurgents then moved onwards to Andijan Prison UJa-64/T-1 after midnight, breaking down the gates with a Zil-130 military truck commandeered from the attacked barracks. After killing three prison guards, the attackers then opened

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Were Falling Like Rain": *The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005*, vol. 17, no. 5(D), June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Shirin Akiner, *Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment* (Washington and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program (CACI-SRSP), Silk Road Paper, 2005), [http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005\\_akerin\\_violence-in-andijan-13-may-2005.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005_akerin_violence-in-andijan-13-may-2005.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Igor Rotar, "Uzbekistan: What is Known About Akramia and the Uprising?," *Forum 18 News Service*, June 16, 2005, [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=586](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=586)

<sup>4</sup> AbduMannob Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations* (Washington: Jamestown Foundation, 2007), [http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Polat\\_-\\_Uzbek-US\\_relations\\_occasional\\_paper.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Polat_-_Uzbek-US_relations_occasional_paper.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffry W. Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising: What We Know* (Washington & Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program (CACI-SRSP), Silk Road Paper, May 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*, 11.



prison cells; the Procurator General's office subsequently stated that 527 of the 734 prisoners at the prison were freed during the assault.<sup>7</sup>

The attackers and the freed prisoners then proceeded to the "hokimiat" local administration building in Babur Square, approximately four miles from the prison, briefly encountering resistance from mobilized Uzbek security services. Nevertheless most of the attackers made it to the hokimiat and easily captured it, as it only had a single night-time guard.

More shooting occurred as the gunmen passed the National Security Service (NSS) building, where a heavy gun battle erupted around 1 a.m., lasting about two hours. In the darkness, just after 3:00 a.m., the insurgents broke off the assault after losing at least fifteen attackers, as noted in a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on Andijan issued the following month.<sup>8</sup> At dawn in Andijan on May 13, 2005, at least seventeen Uzbek government personnel had already been killed in the uprising, as well as fifteen armed insurgents.<sup>9</sup>

At the hokimiat the insurgents took hostages, secured the building, placed snipers on rooftops around the square, and made Molotov cocktails. By the late morning, video shot by the insurgents showed that they had collected a large number of hostages, among them at least ten Ministry of Internal Affairs patrolmen and guards, three firemen, suspected NSS provocateurs, the chief of the provincial tax agency, along with two Uzbek human rights advocates, roughly 30 in all.

The killings continued through the day after the insurgents took hostages. Around 3 p.m., insurgent Sharif Shakirov forced two hostages, a tax official and municipal prosecutor Ghani Abdurahimov, to address the crowd and confess their sins. The terrified pair stated that they had been forced by the government "like puppets" to prosecute those earlier on trial.<sup>10</sup> Shortly afterwards, Abdurahimov was murdered by members of the crowd.

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<sup>7</sup> Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising*.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Were Falling Like Rain," 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising*.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Were Falling Like Rain"; Durakan Kuzu, *The Andican [sic] Uprising, 13 May 2005* (Ankara, Turkey: Thesis for the Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, September 2008), 88–89; Bensmann and Bukharbaeva testimony, "Hearing: The Uzbekistan Crisis:

Qodir Ergashev, an Uzbek human rights defender, who knew several of “the Brothers” and advocated for them during the trial, arrived in the square to see what was happening. After a discussion and argument with Shakirov in the square, Ergashev was searched, robbed, detained, and held along with roughly 30 other hostages. Ergashev had criticized Shakirov for the murder of the prosecutor and the abuse of the other hostages, arguing that the actions of “the Brothers” had largely forfeited any possible public sympathy. A second human rights defender, Ergashev’s deputy Ortiqali Rahmatov, who later tried to mediate with the gunmen, was accused of being an undercover NSS informant and killed.<sup>11</sup> Ergashev also witnessed the beating and shooting of a suspected NSS official.<sup>12</sup>

According to eyewitnesses interviewed by Central Asian specialist Igor Rotar, “Akramiya members who had acquired weapons did not prevent free movement out of the square by those gathered there, but their attitude to the hostages did not meet international standards for the treatment of prisoners of war. Forum 18 learned that several hostages received severe beatings. The hostages had wire tied round their necks and were placed at the perimeter of the square as human shields. Therefore the first to die from the shots fired by Uzbek government forces were the hostages.”<sup>13</sup> The insurgents also took hostage firefighters who had been sent to extinguish fires on the square.<sup>14</sup>

As the day wore on various insurgents harangued the crowd that had drifted onto the square. Unknown to the onlookers, Minister of Internal Affairs Zokir Almatov flew from Tashkent late in the morning to Andijan to rally his forces and gain control of the situation. He personally took overall command of the situation. Almatov was followed by President Islam Karimov himself, who flew by helicopter in circles over the provincial capital buildings, observing the events from above before landing at the airport at the west end of the city. On the ground

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Assessing the Impact and Next Steps, United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission),” Washington DC, June 29, 2005, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*, 12; NGO representative accredited to Uzbekistan in 2005. This NGO representative had the opportunity to interview several of the Uzbek human rights defenders who were in Andijan in May 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising*.

<sup>13</sup> Igor Rotar, “Uzbekistan: What is Known About Akramiya and the Uprising?”

<sup>14</sup> Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*, 14.

Karimov met briefly with scared residents at the airport and reassured them that the government would restore order while directing officials attempting to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis. That evening, film of the meeting was included in the national television news.

During the rally Almatov negotiated with its leaders for hours over the phone. The insurgents reportedly demanded the government release all political prisoners, grant political and human rights, and send a top official to address the rally. Negotiations failed, however.

Later, as government forces closed in on the square packed with demonstrators, Ergashev and about 30 other hostages were tied together at the head of a huge column of demonstrators moving out of the center of town. "Hostages first, then unarmed civilians, then armed men. Only four hostages survived after an armored personnel carrier opened fire on the crowd," Ergashev said.<sup>15</sup> After fruitless phone calls between Uzbek interior minister Zokir Almatov and rebel leader Qobiljon Parpiev, government troops moved in and killed 100 or more armed insurgents and many more unarmed sympathizers.<sup>16</sup> A month later, on June 16 Uzbek Deputy Prosecutor-General Anvar Nabiev said that 176 people had died in Andijan, including 79 militants, 31 law enforcement officials, and 45 civilians.<sup>17</sup>

The final death toll of unarmed protesters killed by government troops remains in dispute. The Uzbek government claims that about 200 people in all were killed, among them government officials, armed rebels, hostages, and unarmed demonstrators.<sup>18</sup> These figures were immediately derided in the Western media as far too low, but in the charged atmosphere no serious material emerged to invalidate their accuracy. In fact, subsequent dispassionate analysis, such as that of Akiner, Polat, and Hartman, tends to give credence to the ballpark figure of casualties

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<sup>15</sup> David Holley and Sergei L. Loiko, "Uzbek Witness Tells of Brutality on Both Sides," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> "Доклады: узбекское правительство поднимает Андижане погибших до 176, в том числе гражданских лиц" [Reports: Uzbek government raises Andijan death toll to 176, including civilians], *Правда [Pravda]*, June 16, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*, 13.

provided by the government rather than to figures thrice as high or more advanced by the regime's detractors.<sup>19</sup>

Except for the casualty figures, none of the above narrative elements are in dispute. Narratives now begin to diverge, however, with international human rights organizations largely overlooking the previous violence. Similarly, Western media coverage either downplayed or eliminated entirely the brutal antecedents to events on Babur Square, which had been reported in a variety of sources, from the Uzbek government through human rights reports to eyewitness accounts. Instead, they focused on a narrative that troops had fired indiscriminately into a crowd mainly comprising unarmed demonstrators who were demanding an end to a trial against local businessmen, with "many hundreds" killed.

A second element in dispute and subsequently downplayed in most Andijan coverage was the taking of hostages by armed men. Even groups critical of the Uzbek government, such as Human Rights Watch, would address the issue of hostages. In its report issued the following month, "*Bullets Were Falling Like Rain*": *The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005*, the "The Taking of Hostages" section began thus: "In the early morning of May 13, as the crowd grew in Bobur Square, the gunmen started taking law enforcement and government officials as hostages." One gunman explained, "We started stopping the cars by throwing stones and blocking the roads. We took the soldiers and policemen out of the cars and took them hostage. Besides, people from the square also brought hostages to us. We kept them inside the hokimiat, there were about twenty of them. We let the soldiers go because we didn't believe them responsible, they were just following orders. ... But we kept the policemen, the tax inspector, and the city prosecutor."<sup>20</sup> According to insurgent Kabul Parpiyev, sometime around 5:20 p.m., he led a group of twenty-four gunmen with about thirty hostages as shields out of the provincial capitol building and headed north. Many of the hostages were NSS officers and suspected NSS members.

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this is the conclusion reached in the accompanying *Silk Road Paper* by Colonel Hartman in his careful review and evaluation of all available data.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch, "*Bullets Were Falling Like Rain*," 18, footnote 52; "Human Rights Watch interview with 'Rustam R,' Kyrgyzstan, May 20, 2005."

Again, this element of the protests in Babur Square was subsequently downplayed.

Much has happened since, not least the rise of Islamic extremism unleashed by the Arab upheavals in 2011, which has seen much of the Maghreb and Middle East engulfed by violence. The rise of the terrorist organization calling itself the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria has now seen its violence extend far beyond its birthplace to include the Maghreb, Nigeria, and Afghanistan. Given that post-Soviet Caucasian and Central Asians states now acknowledge that hundreds of their citizens are now fighting with ISIS and other militant Islamic organizations, the rush to judgement on events in Andijan, the fourth-largest city in Uzbekistan, stripped of their connection to Islamic militancy, increasingly looks like a significant oversimplification of what actually transpired.

A decade after Andijan, many issues remain in dispute. Among them, the number of casualties, which Western press coverage disputes with the Uzbek government's final number of 187 dead. Based on various accounts, dissenting Western accounts assiduously promulgated primarily by human rights organizations speak of "hundreds" of casualties, figures which mutated upwards over time. These figures were bolstered by eyewitness accounts by those who were present, such as Galima Bukharbaeva, project director for the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, but also by Western specialists including Craig Murray, former British ambassador to Uzbekistan (2002-04), who had raised profound concerns during his time there about Uzbek human rights policies.

Interpretations and numbers drifted above and beyond Uzbek government assessments to "hundreds," then "thousands." Radical Islamic groups such as 1924.org claimed casualty rates up to 20,000, a powerful Islamist recruiting tool.

The Uzbek government initially offered to convene an investigative body, but was rebuffed. The Uzbek government subsequently retreated from a policy of cooperation, insisting that its interpretation of events was correct. Western nations meanwhile casted about, hamstrung by both their commitments to human rights

and their interests in Uzbekistan. In any case, Andijan quickly became the metaphor for Asia's worst human tragedy since the suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989.

A decade after the tragedy, Western interests, led by human rights NGOs, grapple ceaselessly with the Uzbek government over the truth about Andijan. The Western media unfortunately has been less than objective in the past decade in ferreting out the truth, even as the Uzbek government has been obdurate in being less than supportive in delineating what happened a decade ago.

## Initial Media Coverage and Western Reaction

This chapter discusses the initial reporting on Andijan in the Western media, as well as the positions taken by non-governmental organizations and the U.S. government.

### Media Reporting, May 12-13, 2005

Satellite news networks did not have correspondents on the ground in Babur Square. The BBC's main correspondent, Monica Whitlock, was not in Andijan that day. According to Marcus Bensmann, a freelance journalist with Weltreport.net, there were six journalists in all in Andijan's Babur Square on May 13, 2005.<sup>21</sup> These included his girlfriend, Uzbek journalist Galima Bukharbaeva, whom he later married, who worked for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, along with her IWPR colleague Matluba Azamatova, Andrey Babitskiy from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Aleksei Volosevich from the Internet news agency Ferghana.ru. Bukharbaeva's reports for the Western media would become the highest profile source and the most widely quoted about events in Andijan. Even though video imagery released a year later contradicted many of the points made in her articles and testimonies, they nevertheless remain accepted as factually accurate. Other journalists in Andijan that doleful day included Reuters correspondent Shamil Bajgin, Associated Press photographer Efrem Lukatsky, and Agence France-Presse (AFP) correspondent Muhammadsharif Mamatkulov.<sup>22</sup>

After the firing began, on the evening of May 13, Uzbek security services ordered a Reuters news agency correspondent in Andijan to leave the city within 30

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<sup>21</sup> Marcus Bensmann, "Andijan, Germany and Europe," *Open Democracy*, May 13, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> "Освещая события в Андижане, журналисты столкнулись с ограничениями, блокировками, задержаниями и запретами" [While covering the events in Andijan, journalists faced restrictions, arrests and bans], *www.cjes.ru, Fergana*, <http://fergana.mobi/articles/3817>

minutes, as after that police would be unable to guarantee his safety. AFP reported that one of its journalists had been arrested overnight, then released and expelled from the city.<sup>23</sup>

The day of the shooting, CNN, Russian channel NTV, and BBC cable transmissions were halted and Russian independent websites (www.lenta.ru, www.gazeta.ru, www.fergana.ru) as well as several Uzbek websites were also blocked inside the country.<sup>24</sup> While Uzbek authorities cut access to Russian and foreign television news channels transmitted via cable, as of May 17 satellite channels were still accessible to those with satellite dishes.<sup>25</sup>

Curiously, the BBC appears to have had a reporter in Andijan the day before the shooting (May 12) covering the trial, a fact HRW references during a telephone interview with BBC correspondent Jennifer Norton on May 31. But the BBC website lists no articles filed by Norton from Andijan before May 24, 2005.<sup>26</sup> On May 14, a BBC Radio 4 report listed Norton as being "in Tashkent."<sup>27</sup>

In her report from the city 11 days after the tragedy occurred, Norton wrote, "It is clear that there is a concerted campaign going on in Andijan both to suppress the truth about how many people really died in the violence, and to silence eyewitnesses who saw what happened." Norton then quotes a single unnamed source that said he feared the death toll could be much higher than the 500 casualties estimated in the aftermath of the violence.<sup>28</sup>

### **The U.S. Government Media's First Reports on Andijan**

The first U.S. government-funded media agency to report on Andijan was RFE/RL. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. Congress has appropriated funds for

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<sup>23</sup> "Reporters Without Borders 'extremely worried' as journalists expelled from Andijan," *Reporters Without Borders*, Uzbekistan, May 14, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> "Start of an 'information war,'" *Reporters Without Borders*, May 13, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Valentinas Mite, "Uzbekistan: Authorities Try To Control Reporting On Crisis," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 17, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bullets Were Falling Like Rain," 9, footnote 19; "Human Rights Watch telephone interview with BBC correspondent Jennifer Norton," May 31, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> "Has the government of Uzbekistan managed to reassert control after the trouble in the eastern city of Andijan - Jenny Norton is in Tashkent," *BBC Radio 4 Today program*, broadcast May 14, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Jenny Norton, "After the violence, fear in Andijan," *BBC News*, Andijan, May 24, 2005.



RFE/RL in the form of a grant from the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which today oversees all non-military U.S. international broadcasting, including besides RFE/RL, the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Marti, Radio Free Asia, and World Net TV. RFE/RL's "Mission Statement" statement begins, "RFE/RL's mission is to promote democratic values and institutions by reporting the news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established. Our journalists provide what many people cannot get locally: uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate." Given RFE/RL's central role and the fact that its reports are broadcast not only into the post-Soviet space in 28 different languages but worldwide, it is worth noting their evolving coverage of Andijan. RFE/RL's first article on events Andijan was published on May 13. Entitled "Several Dead After Violent Day In Uzbek City," the article began:

There's been a bloody day of violence in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan, where a number of people have been killed in clashes between protesters and security forces [...] The violence began overnight, when an armed group attacked a police station and military barracks just after midnight. The group took weapons, then freed prisoners from a high-security prison, before seizing the regional administration building [...] 'Hundreds of prisoners were released, and authorities said nine protesters and police were killed in the clashes that followed.'

The article quoted a single eyewitness, Galima Bukharbaeva, who told RFE/RL that "It was almost 5:30 p.m. when the people saw BTRs (armored personnel carriers) approaching. People started screaming and running away. We also ran [...] then, just five minutes later, more BTRs came, and they started shooting in our backs. Bullets were flying. It was terrifying."

The report then went on to add several points that were either downplayed or absent from many subsequent Western accounts. One was, "police say the first shots fired came from the crowd." A second item indicated that the Uzbek authorities had sought a peaceful end to the disturbance; the report noted, "Uzbek Interior Minister Zakir Almatov had begun negotiations earlier today with the

protesters, who said they were holding a number of policemen hostage." The report also contained a reference to U.S. government policy as follows: "White House spokesman Scott McClellan called for restraint: 'We urge both the government and the demonstrators to exercise restraint at this time. The people of Uzbekistan want to see a more representative and democratic government, but that should come through peaceful means, not through violence.' The U.S. State Department said it is worried that members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), designated a terrorist group by the U.S., may have been freed during the jailbreak."<sup>29</sup>

RFE/RL's second article on the Andijan crackdown was published the next day. After giving the background of the Akramiya trials, under the subheading "Violence Erupts," the article noted, "Because there were few reporters in Andijon when the unrest erupted, the picture of what happened there on 12-13 May is incomplete. But the overall outlines, along with many corroborating details, are clear in the numerous reports filed from Andijon by correspondents for the BBC, fergana.ru, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and Reuters. The following condensed account is based on those reports."<sup>30</sup> A significant item was contained in the report that few other articles noted at the time: "As these events unfolded, President Karimov arrived in Andijan from Tashkent to direct personally his government's actions, as official news agency UzA later reported. Special Forces and army units took up positions. Negotiations began but led nowhere." As for the number of dead and injured, again relying on outside coverage the article observed, "The only official report on casualties, issued before the escalation in early evening, listed nine dead and 34 wounded. But Reuters, the BBC, and fergana.ru all reported that dozens of protesters had been killed. The BBC later said that some Andijon residents put the possible death toll in the hundreds."

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce Pannier and Gulnoza Saidazimova with contributions from RFE/RL's Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Tajik services, "Several Dead After Violent Day In Uzbek City," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 13, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Kimmage, "Uzbekistan: Bloody Friday In The Ferghana Valley," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 14, 2005.

Under the subheading, "Crushing All Dissent," the article then drew a parallel with events in Syria 23 years earlier:

In 1982, Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad ended a confrontation in the city of Hama between his government and the Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood by turning his army loose on the city. Thousands were killed. The brutal crackdown evoked a muted international response, for its purported target was an Islamic extremist group, and al-Assad, having established a fearsome reputation for himself at home, ruled undisturbed until his death in 2000 [...] Though the scale of 13 May's events in Andijon does not match the slaughter in Hama, the logic behind President Karimov's actions appears similar – to crack the whip and cow any would-be challengers.

On May 15, RFE/RL's coverage shifted to favoring higher numbers of fatalities, beginning, "There are no new reports of violence today from Uzbekistan after two days of bloodshed in which hundreds of people appear to have died in a government crackdown on protesters in the eastern city of Andijon." The article then featured a report from one of its own correspondents, Sadridin Ashurov, who reported by telephone from Andijon that, "The situation in Andijon is now under the firm control of the military forces." Admitting that initial evidence was contradictory, the article noted, "Exactly how many people were killed when security forces fired upon a crowd of several thousand protesters surrounding a seized public building in the square on 13 May is still unknown. The government puts the number of dead around 30. Uzbek President Islam Karimov said late yesterday that 10 police and troops were killed in what Tashkent described as a fight against rebels. But witnesses and human rights group say the number may be as high as 500, and most were civilians."

The report then quoted Gulbahor Toraeva, head of the Uzbek Animakor NGO involved in the protection of the rights of medical doctors and their patients. She told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service that on May 14, she personally saw hundreds of corpses in Andijan, remarking, "If we speak about (yesterday's) events, I went personally to School No. 15 in Andijon (yesterday) and I saw the bodies (that) were gathered there. I saw it with my own eyes. There were about 500 bodies or

more.”<sup>31</sup> The report then noted that one consequence of the violence was that thousands of Uzbeks were fleeing towards neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

The report concluded, “As people in Andijon are reported to be burying their dead today, debate is raging in Uzbekistan over what motivated the protesters and how the government responded to the events.” It then quoted Karimov that Islamists intent on overthrowing his government and establishing an Islamic state in its place fomented the unrest, who told reporters, “Their goal was to benefit from the situation in Andijon, and overthrow the constitutional order and establish one branch of some unfeasible (Islamic) state named ‘Islamic caliphate’ and thus establish their own rule, their own government.” In reply, Hizb ut-Tahrir spokesman Imran Waheed, speaking from London in a phone interview with RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service, said the Islamists were being made a scapegoat, asserting, “Our organization is not involved in the violence. Rather our organization is involved in working to remove Karimov via political means. And we are continuing our work throughout Uzbekistan and in Andijon and the Ferghana Valley in order to bring about an atmosphere where the Islamic caliphate can come into existence once again.”

After noting that Hizb ut-Tahrir is outlawed in Uzbekistan the report continued, “Karimov, a U.S. ally in the war on terror, has long cracked down on Islamist groups, including by arresting suspected members on charges of sedition. But the Ferghana Valley is also rife with poverty and unemployment that has long fueled resentment against Karimov’s government. Local human rights activists accuse the government of ignoring the region’s problems and cracking down on any community leaders seen as posing a challenge to it.”

By July 20, the VOA’s position on Andijan had hardened. A VOA editorial, “Time To Investigate Andijan,” marked as “reflecting the views of the United States government,” declared, “A new report by the United Nations indicates that many Uzbek civilians were indiscriminately gunned down during a demonstration in Andijan [...] The Uzbek government claims fewer than two-hundred people were

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<sup>31</sup>“Uneasy Calm In Uzbekistan After Two Days Of Violence,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 15, 2005.

killed during the protests. But the U-N report says other sources, including human rights groups and asylum seekers, put the death toll at hundreds more. According to eyewitnesses interviewed, events in Andijan amounted to a 'mass killing.'"

The editorial added, "U.S. State Department acting spokesman Thomas Casey says the United States continues to call on the Uzbek government to allow an international investigation of events in Andijan: 'Certainly, the Uzbekistan government owes its citizens and owes the international community a serious, credible, and independent investigation of those events. And we are continuing to push for such an investigation with the government of Uzbekistan and with our partners in the international community. We certainly stand ready, as we always have, to cooperate and assist in such an investigation.'" For the first time, the editorial hinted at government consequences. "The U.S. is required to withhold assistance to the government of Uzbekistan if it fails to meet its commitments, including progress on human rights. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will consider all issues – including recent events – relevant to the state of economic, social, and political reform when making this year's determination on whether to continue assistance to Uzbekistan."<sup>32</sup>

### **The Issue of an Investigative Commission**

Karimov on May 17 asserted that the "tulip revolution" in Kyrgyzstan had facilitated the flow of arms into Uzbekistan for terrorism and condemned Kyrgyzstan for harboring the fleeing "terrorists." The next day Karimov rejected a call by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for an international inquiry into events in Andijan and instead directed his legislature to conduct a probe.<sup>33</sup> Ten days after the events in Andijan, Uzbekistan's Parliament resolved to create an "independent commission" of its own to investigate the events.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Time to investigate Andijan," *Voice of America* editorial, July 20, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Jim Nichol, "Unrest in Uzbekistan: Context and Implications," *Congressional Research Service*, June 8, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Uzbek embassy in Brussels, Press release "Resolution of the Legislative chamber of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Creation of Independent Commission of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Investigation of Events that Took Place in Andijan," June 1, 2006.

As early as June 10, 2005, the Uzbek government indicated its willingness to cooperate with both the UN and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). An Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release affirmed that "UN and OSCE missions and all overseas embassies accredited in Tashkent were all welcome to acquaint themselves with the situation in Andijan city and to have direct meetings with the local population."<sup>35</sup> The U.S. and EU rebuffed this offer since it fell short of the "independent investigation" they both insisted upon.

The Uzbek government invited a number of governments with diplomatic presence in Tashkent, including the U.S. and France, to monitor the work of the parliamentary commission. Both the United States and France declined, but others, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan's post-Soviet Central Asian neighbors participated.<sup>36</sup>

By the time that the Uzbek government had established its commission, Andijan's scene of carnage had become an international symbol of the Karimov government and its alleged defiance of international norms. Rather than work with the Uzbek government, human rights NGOs in Central Asia and many Western governments immediately demanded an international investigation, with initial claims of hundreds or thousands of civilian fatalities capturing world headlines.

Why did the Uzbek government refuse to set up the commission demanded by the U.S. and EU and then proceed to set up one of its own? One reason is that the Uzbek government had acceded to human rights NGO demands for a previous independent investigation after serious charges were made which impugned the country's reputation. The subsequent investigation backed up the government's assertions, but the damage was done as the retraction of the charges had little media impact, unlike the NGOs' earlier assertions. Murder suspect Andrei Shelkovenko had been arrested in Gazalkent, near Tashkent, on April 23, 2004. On May 19, law enforcement personnel asserted that he died after trying to hang himself while in police custody. His family was convinced that he had died from torture while detained by the Uzbek police. Two days later, Human Rights Watch,

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<sup>35</sup> "Press-Release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan," June 10, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Briefing: The Uzbekistan Crisis: Assessing the Impact and Next Steps," Washington DC, June 29, 2005.

without qualifications, announced this as a case of government-sponsored torture.<sup>37</sup> Its Tashkent staff was so convinced of its claims that they actually hid the body in their apartment to protect the evidence. Freedom House approached Uzbekistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs with a proposal to establish an international investigative commission. Surprisingly, the ministry agreed, and a highly qualified team was assembled, including Dr. Michael S. Pollanen, chief forensic pathologist for Ontario; independent criminal justice expert James M. Gannon, deputy chief of investigations for the Morris County, New Jersey Prosecutor's Office, and Victor Jackovich, former U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia.

The commission was given full access to the evidence and observed Shelkovenko's second autopsy. They concluded that there was no evidence of torture and concluded that the death was caused by hanging, i.e., suicide, as the government had declared. Pollanen "confirmed the results of the first autopsy and demonstrated findings compatible with hanging" and stated that there were no significant injuries at the time of the second autopsy.<sup>38</sup> Gannon confirmed Pollanen's findings and also stated that there were "no indications that Mr. Shelkovenko was hanged by another."<sup>39</sup>

When the findings upholding the police version of events were announced, the Uzbek activists who had promoted the case to human rights monitors then proceeded to attack the findings of Dr. Pollanen, Gannon, and Jackovich. Human Rights Watch grudgingly acknowledged their error, writing, "As soon as the forensic team publicized its findings Human Rights Watch publicly acknowledged, through a press release that was posted permanently to our website, our error in attributing the cause of Shelkovenko's death to torture. We attributed the error to erroneous conclusions we made based on wounds observed on Shelkovenko's

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<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: New Torture Death Belies Claims of Progress," May 21, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Report of Dr. Michael Sven Pollanen, Forensic Pathologist, "Observing Forensic Pathologist's Report on the Second Autopsy of Andrei Shelkovenko," Tashkent, Uzbekistan, May 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Report of Mr. James M. Gannon, Deputy Chief of Investigations, "Observing the Death Investigation of Andrei Shelkovenko," Tashkent, Uzbekistan, May 2004.

body, which in fact had been caused by postmortem drying, a natural process.”<sup>40</sup> The Western and especially U.S. newspapers that had widely publicized the initial accusations against Uzbekistan were silent on the commission’s findings. Nor did the Department of State issue a statement correcting its earlier and scathing pronouncements on the case.<sup>41</sup>

### **Initial Non-Governmental Coverage of Andijan**

On May 16, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued its first coverage on Andijan, an alert which began, “Uzbek authorities maintained a virtual blockade today on news coverage of civil unrest in the northeastern city of Andijan.” The report briefly recounted the secondhand accounts of the experiences of Ren TV and NTV film crews, along with Reuters correspondent Shamil Baygin and IWPR correspondent Bukharbaeva. CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper said, “the Uzbek people should not have to rely on rumors to get information about the political crisis in Fergana Valley. President Karimov's suppression of news coverage seems designed merely to perpetuate his iron grip on power – but he has an obligation to his citizens to allow the reporting of major events in his country.”<sup>42</sup>

On August 1, Cooper wrote an open letter to Karimov which began, “The Committee to Protect Journalists is deeply concerned about your regime's ongoing crackdown on independent journalists and media. Your government's actions are especially troubling in the aftermath of the May 13 unrest in the northeast city of Andijan, during which security forces opened fire on antigovernment demonstrators, killing between 500 and 1,000 civilians, according to local and international human rights organizations and eyewitness accounts.”

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<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Nowhere to Turn. Torture and Ill-treatment in Uzbekistan*, vol. 19, no 6(D), 2007, Appendix I. “A Note on the Case of Andrei Shelkovenko,” 73, 74.

<sup>41</sup> “Newswire,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 28, 2004; John C.K. Daly, “Chronology of U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005,” in *Anatomy of a Crisis: U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005*, eds. John C.K. Daly, Kurt H. Meppen, Vladimir Socor and S. Frederick Starr (Washington DC: Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, February 2006), 67-110.

<sup>42</sup> “Amid unrest, Uzbek authorities continue obstructing journalists,” Alerts - Uzbekistan, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, New York, May 16, 2005.



The letter detailed the cases of local IWPR correspondent Tulkin Karayev, Kyrgyz journalist Erkin Yakubjanov, and U.S.-based non-governmental media-development organization Internews. Cooper's letter then castigated the Uzbek government for an intensified harassment of media following Andijan, and its "virtual information blockade on Andijan." The letter commented that the government claim that "the unrest claimed 187 victims" was "a figure several times lower than estimates provided by witnesses and human rights organizations."<sup>43</sup> Over the next decade, CPJ would issue an additional 78 articles on Andijan.

Islamist activists placed the number of those killed in Andijan far higher, with a Hizb ut-Tahrir offshoot, 1924.org, claiming 20,000 dead.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Hizb ut-Tahrir quickly moved to exploit the events in Andijan and reported on May 25 "from credible and trustworthy sources" that 7,000 had died there. Imran Waheed, the Representative of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain, said: "The genocide is evidence of the desperate and extreme measures that must now be taken in order to prevent the imminent return of the Islamic Khilafah."<sup>45</sup>

The unregistered Ozod Dehqonlar opposition party said that its members counted "at least" 745 dead after going door to door not only in Andijan, but Pakhtaobod and Qorasuv as well.<sup>46</sup> Its leader, Nigara Khidoyatova, said that the events in Andijan were well known in Tashkent, and "everybody felt indignation," adding, "The beginning of the end of the (Karimov) regime has already started."<sup>47</sup> Despite numerous inquiries from reporters, nearly two weeks after the incidents in the three towns Ozod Dehqonlar had not released its list of those killed.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Uzbek leader urged to end harassment of independent press," Letters - Uzbekistan, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, New York, August 1, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> John C.K. Daly, "The Andijan disturbances and their implications," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 29, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> "Andijan Genocide – One Year On," May 12, 2006, Hizb ut-Tahrir (UK), <http://www.hizb.org.uk/press-releases/andijan-genocide-one-year-on>.

<sup>46</sup> "Uzbekistan: The blood-red revolution," *The Economist*, May 19, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, Jalil Saparov, "Slaughter 'signals end of Karimov regime,'" *The Guardian*, May 18, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Spontaneous Popular Uprising In Andijon, Or Terrorist-Led Upheaval?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 25, 2005.

## **Official Washington's Initial Reaction to Andijan**

The U.S. government's first public intimation of trouble in Andijan came from the State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Council, which on May 13 issued the first of two Wardens' Messages to citizens. The first led with a message about an aborted suicide attack on the Israeli embassy: "Embassy Tashkent has confirmed that a suicide bomber was shot outside of the Israeli Embassy this morning (May 13). The Government has received reports of gunfire and possible explosions in the city of Andijan. BBC is reporting that a group of armed men took over the prison and released prisoners [...] Travelers should avoid traveling to Andijan at this time.<sup>49</sup> Later the same day the U.S. embassy in Tashkent issued a second Warden Message noting, "Embassy Tashkent has confirmed with the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) that no one will be allowed to enter or exit the city of Andijan for the time being."<sup>50</sup>

On May 24, the issue of Andijan arose at the State Department's press briefing, when State Department spokesman Richard A. Boucher fielded a press question about a human rights activist arrested in Uzbekistan. Boucher would be subsequently sworn in as the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs on February 21, 2006. Among other things, Boucher stated that, "Our view and that of many others in the international community remains that Uzbekistan should make a credible and transparent assessment of events in Andijan, in cooperation with the international community and in tandem, Uzbekistan needs to take some fundamental reforms." He added that,

we've seen these reports of arrests in Andijan and we view them with great concern. Some of those arrests may include prominent human rights activists who have been reporting on government abuses. We're

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<sup>49</sup> Bureau of Diplomatic Security, "Warden Message: Suicide Bomber Shot Outside Israeli Embassy, Violence in Andijan," Consular Affairs Bulletins South Central Asia - Uzbekistan 13 May 2005, [https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=1685&\\_\\_Referrer=morning\\_newsletter\\_12\\_03\\_2013](https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=1685&__Referrer=morning_newsletter_12_03_2013)

<sup>50</sup> Bureau of Diplomatic Security, "Warden Message: No Entrance or Exit to Andijan Permitted," Consular Affairs Bulletins, South Central Asia—Uzbekistan, 13 May 2005, <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=1688>

concerned that the government is trying to silence activists through arbitrary arrests and intimidation. Once again, we point out freedom of speech is essential for a credible accounting of these events and we've called on these areas to be opened up to journalists, humanitarian workers, UN agencies, and others so that they can go in and find out what happened and take care of people who need their assistance [...] I think in order to really get the understanding of what happened there, not only does there need to be more access, but there needs to be a credible investigation. A bus tour was, by no means, a substitute or even a partial substitute for that.<sup>51</sup>

Andijan brought differences between the State Department and Pentagon over Uzbekistan to a head, producing conflicting responses. On October 7, 2001, less than a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Tashkent and Washington had reached an agreement that allowed the U.S. military to use Uzbekistan's southern Karshi-Khanabad (K-2) airfield, which subsequently housed the army's logistic Camp Stronghold Freedom base to mount operations in Afghanistan, 90 miles to the south. K-2 was used for U.S. Special Forces deployment, intelligence and reconnaissance missions, air logistics flights, and housed about 1,800 personnel. An hour after the United States-Uzbekistan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was signed allowing the U.S. to use K-2, the U.S. Air Force began its bombing missions in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.<sup>52</sup>

Even before Andijan tensions had arisen in U.S.-Uzbek relations. In 2004 there was a partial U.S. aid cutoff because of Uzbek human rights violations, which served to add to Karimov's growing fears that the United States was fostering democratic "revolutions" in Soviet successor states.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> U.S. State Department Spokesman, "Daily Press Briefing," Richard Boucher, Washington DC, May 24, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. State Department, "Fact Sheet," Washington, DC, November 27, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> Jim Nichol, "Uzbekistan's Closure of the Airbase at Karshi-Khanabad: Context and Implications," *Congressional Research Service*, March 29, 2006.

Although not known at the time, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's memoir *Known and Unknown*, published in February 2011, indicates that he appeared to support the Uzbek government's contention that extremists were behind the events in Andijan. In the memoir, he writes that "it appeared that the goal of the assault was to release members of an Islamic extremist group accused of seeking to establish an Islamic state, a caliphate, in eastern Uzbekistan. [...] Self-proclaimed human rights advocates with longstanding records of opposition to the Uzbek government quickly got into the act." Rumsfeld added that "Human Rights Watch declared them peaceful 'protesters'" and "Amnesty International called the uprising a 'mass killing of civilians' and denounced the Uzbek government's 'indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force.'" Rumsfeld then wrote that "comparisons were made to the massacre of Chinese citizens in Tiananmen Square, and stories circulated of a deliberate massacre of civilians peacefully demonstrating in the street." While acknowledging that "the government's security forces and public affairs officials functioned poorly," Rumsfeld concluded, "... this was not a simple case of soldiers slaughtering innocents."<sup>54</sup>

Rumsfeld's view clashed with that of then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who wrote in her 2011 memoir *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* of her dealings with Rumsfeld over Andijan,

We'd crossed swords, for instance, on Uzbekistan where, after bloody riots in May 2005, State had issued a tough human rights report against the regime. The Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, had responded by threatening to expel us from the military base that he'd allowed us into at the time of the invasion of Afghanistan. Let us recall that we'd paid a small fortune for the privilege, but the dictator felt no obligation to honor that deal and said so.

Don called me to say that we needed to back off. 'The military needs that base,' he said. 'Our security is at stake.' I told him that I was sympathetic to the Pentagon's plight but that, in my view, the United States

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<sup>54</sup> James Kirchick, "Did Donald Rumsfeld Whitewash Massacre In Uzbekistan?," *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2011.

could not soften its position on human rights as a quid pro quo for the military presence in Uzbekistan. 'What's more, now that he's threatened us, we can't afford to cave,' I told him. Don somehow heard this as 'human rights trump security' and told Steve Hadley [then White House National Security Adviser] to take the issue to the President. The President obviously wanted to keep the military base, but he didn't tell me to tone it down, so I didn't. Eventually Karimov would carry through on his threat, but I would negotiate basing rights in Kyrgyzstan and the Tajiks made it clear that we could use their territory 'as needed' too.<sup>55</sup>

When on May 31 a reporter asked President George W. Bush during a press conference why he had not been more outspoken about Andijan he replied, "We've called for the International Red Cross to go into the Andijon region to determine what went on. Listen, we expect all our friends, as well as those who aren't our friends, to honor human rights and protect minority rights. That's part of a healthy and peaceful world. It will be a world in which governments do respect people's rights."<sup>56</sup>

The U.S. administration's mixed signals on Andijan led Tashkent to inform Washington on July 29, 2005, that it was abrogating the agreement permitting the U.S. military to use K-2 under terms of the bilateral SOFA, giving the Pentagon 180 days to end its activities there. Washington finished evacuating the base on November 21, 2005, one month ahead of schedule. While the Pentagon put on a brave face, the loss of the K-2 base, just 90 miles from Afghanistan in Uzbekistan's Qashqadaryo province, was in reality a significant blow. The U.S. 416th Air Expeditionary Group based there had averaged 200 passengers and 100 tons of cargo per day on C-130H missions supporting Operation Enduring Freedom. U.S. air assets would subsequently be shifted to Afghan air bases in Bagram, Kandahar, as well as Manas in Kyrgyzstan, 400 miles from Afghanistan.

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<sup>55</sup> Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (NY: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Tully, "U.S.: Bush Addresses Rights, UN Nomination, and Other International Issues," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 31, 2005.

## **The Involvement of U.S. Congressmen**

On May 29, U.S. Republican Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and John Sununu traveled to Uzbekistan on a self-appointed fact-finding mission, during which no Uzbek government officials would meet with them. After meeting opposition groups and witnesses to the violence, the trio held a press conference at the U.S. embassy, where they called for an international investigation into events in Andijan. McCain immediately established a strident tone saying,

We are here today because we are concerned about recent events which entailed the killing of innocent people [...] We find the recent events to be shocking but not unexpected in a country that does not allow the exercise of human rights and democracy. We believe there should be a complete investigation conducted by the OSCE and I believe that the United States must make this government understand that the relationship is very difficult, if not impossible, if a government continues to repress its people.<sup>57</sup>

Bensmann and Bukharbaeva were now invited to share their reporting from Andijan with U.S. Congress. On June 29, 2005, Kansas Republican Senator Sam Brownback, chairman of the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission), convened a briefing entitled "The Uzbekistan Crisis: Assessing the Impact and Next Steps." In his opening remarks Brownback said, "Along with the U.S. government, the European Parliament, the OSCE, and many international organizations, the Helsinki Commission has urged President Karimov to permit such an independent international investigation [...] He has refused to do so, suggesting that we rely on the conclusions of a parliamentary commission of investigation. Unfortunately, given the absence of meaningful separation of powers in Uzbekistan, we cannot place any faith in that commission, whose conclusions will surely echo those already pronounced by President Karimov." Bukharbaeva testified,

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<sup>57</sup> Embassy of the United States in Uzbekistan, "Senators McCain, Sununu and Graham Visit Uzbekistan," Press Release, May 29, 2005, <http://uzbekistan.usembassy.gov/pr-052905.html>

I was on Bobur Square in Andijan among thousands of Andijan citizens, when at 5:20 p.m. local time on 13 May the merciless authorities of Uzbekistan opened fire on their own people [...] Thousands of people were unarmed and they were not forced by rebels to stay on the place. [...] It was not Islamic uprising. I did not hear any “Allah akbar” outcries, or any demands to build Islamic state ... The shooting of Andijan citizens, everyone who was on the square at that time – children, teenagers, women, the elderly, journalists – took place in cold blood, without mercy or pity. It was simply professional mass murder [...] It seemed that all of Andijan had been turned into a slaughterhouse, and all its inhabitants turned to cannon fodder [...] High official police source in Andijan gave us secretly an interview and said that that days [sic] were killed up to a few thousand people [sic], he was eyewitness when governments tried to hide bodies in mass graves in all over Uzbekistan [...] I also agree that massacre in Andijan is possible to compare with Tiananmen Square tragedy. And it was the same, like shooting people without mercy, without any chance for them to leave the square or to save their lives.<sup>58</sup>

As for fatalities Bensmann stated, “I succeed [sic] to get from one person some death certification [sic], where we had (inaudible) the number 372. I do not know. Maybe it's become higher, but that is the number which I have.”

Muhammad Salih, the leader of Uzbekistan’s opposition Erk (“Freedom Party”) also testified, commenting, “An armed group gave him (Karimov) a good excuse to commit a mass murder ... The Andijan massacre could be compared to [the] Tiananmen Square crisis, but the response from the world community to the events in Andijan is many times smaller.”

A year later, video taken by the demonstrators themselves would conflict with many points in Bensmann’s and Bukharbaeva’s testimony.

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<sup>58</sup> United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Briefing: The Uzbekistan Crisis: Assessing the Impact and Next Steps.”

McCain, Graham, and Sununu were not finished with Andijan. On September 19, 2005, the trio along with fellow Senators Joseph Biden, Patrick Leahy, and Mike DeWine wrote to Rumsfeld seeking to block the Defense Department from paying Uzbekistan \$22.985 million for the use of K-2 until "...Uzbekistan shows that it is again willing to work in partnership with the United States. The current Uzbek regime is one that expelled our forces from its country, massacred hundreds of demonstrators at Andijan, and is disregarding U.S. concerns on a host of issues."<sup>59</sup> Rumsfeld ignored the letter and forwarded the payment for the Pentagon's previous use of K-2.

A year later, on the first anniversary of Andijan, McCain addressed an event at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace titled "The Repression of Andijan - One Year Later." McCain stated that,

President Islam Karimov's security services fired on demonstrators after protestors stormed a prison and local government headquarters. The government still contends that less than 200 people were killed by the troops, all of them armed Islamic militants. Yet eyewitnesses, journalists, and independent groups told a darker, much different, story. They estimated the dead at somewhere between 500 and 1000, and said that the vast majority were unarmed men, women, and children protesting the government's corruption, lack of opportunity, and continued oppression. [...] During our brief stop in that country, we saw photos and heard other evidence that was as compelling as it was shocking, and it was clear that the government's account of the events in Andijan simply did not add up. It was also apparent that the killings were just the most dramatic and violent example of government repression in Uzbekistan – but that they were in no way an isolated incident.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "2005-09-19 from McCain Biden DeWine Leahy Sununu Graham re Uzbekistan," The Rumsfeld Papers, [http://papers.rumsfeld.com/library/default.asp?zoom\\_page=1&zoom\\_per\\_page=10&zoom\\_and=0&zoom\\_sort=0&zoom\\_query=Andijan](http://papers.rumsfeld.com/library/default.asp?zoom_page=1&zoom_per_page=10&zoom_and=0&zoom_sort=0&zoom_query=Andijan).

<sup>60</sup> John McCain, "The Repression of Andijan- One Year Later," Address to Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 12, 2006, <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2006/5/post-7d27d681-b4d8-456d-86eb-608ec35305fc>.



Washington was also concerned about the potential impact Andijan might have on U.S. citizens in Uzbekistan. On June 2, the U.S. State Department issued a travel warning that "authorized the departure of non-emergency personnel and all eligible family members of U.S. embassy personnel and urges all U.S. citizens to defer non-essential travel to Uzbekistan," superseding a heightened Public Announcement issued only five days earlier.

One month after the events in Andijan, the Voice of America, the U.S. government's official external broadcast institution, issued an unsigned editorial, "Investigating Andijan," "reflecting the views of the United States government." Rather than presenting U.S. government data, the editorial paraphrases a May Human Rights Watch report that "security forces in Uzbekistan killed hundreds of men, women, and children in Andijan." The editorial added that:

The United States regrets the loss of life. U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack says, however serious the attack on the prison that preceded these shootings, it cannot excuse this grave violation of the human rights of so many innocent Uzbek citizens. The government of Uzbekistan should permit a thorough and independent investigation of the violence, involving credible international organizations. We continue to urge Uzbekistan to undertake a credible and transparent assessment of the tragic events in Andijan, in cooperation with an international partner, as well as undertake fundamental democratic and economic reforms.

As for the media environment in Uzbekistan, the editorial comments, "Independent news reporting from Uzbekistan is difficult. The Uzbek government of President Islam Karimov tightly controls all news media. Journalists who criticize the government risk arrest or harassment by authorities." The editorial writer added that, "According to the U.S. State Department, Uzbekistan's human rights record is very poor. Uzbek citizens do not have the right to peacefully change their government. Police arbitrarily detain and torture political opponents of President Karimov and routinely detain citizens in order to extort bribes. Human rights monitors are harassed. Freedom of religion is restricted." The editorial concludes, "These policies do not serve Uzbekistan well. In the words of Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice said [sic], the U.S. 'will continue to clarify for other nations the moral choice between oppression and freedom, and we will make it clear that, ultimately, success in our relations depends on the treatment of their own people.'"<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "Investigating Andijan," *Voice of America* editorial, June 12, 2005.

## Competing Narratives

Over the months that followed the Andijan violence, a dominant narrative rapidly gelled around the high casualty figures, and downplayed the armed attacks on government facilities that had preceded the events on Babur square. Yet some Central Asia specialists gradually voiced dissent from this emerging dominant narrative.

### Human Rights Campaigners and Andijan

On June 20, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issued a 31-page report "based on 44 in-depth interviews by the ODIHR team with refugees in the Suzak Camp, near the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, between 26 May and 2 June 2005." The report noted, "Based on testimonies from refugees, the ODIHR considers as realistic estimates that a total of 300-500 people were killed on 13-14 May in Andijan or en route from Andijan at Teshik-Tash." The ODIHR report recommended "to call for and work towards the *establishment of an independent, credible, international investigation* into the events of 13 May in Andijan, and in particular, into the killings." (Emphasis in original.)<sup>62</sup>

One of Uzbekistan's harshest and most persistent critics is Human Rights Watch, an international organization with staff in more than 40 countries. Founded in 1978, it defines its mission as follows: "Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide. We scrupulously investigate abuses, expose the facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of

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<sup>62</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Preliminary findings on the events in Andijan, Uzbekistan, 13 May 2005," Warsaw, June 20, 2005.

human rights for all." HRW researchers were deployed to the region within days of the Andijan tragedy and interviewed more than 50 witnesses.<sup>63</sup> Over the past decade, HRW has published 250 articles on Andijan.<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly, it was only on March 15, 2011, that HRW announced that it would end its 15-year presence in Uzbekistan after the government acted to revoke its Tashkent office permit. A report on the event on EurasiaNet.org, operated by the Eurasia Program of the Open Society Foundations funded by George Soros, noted that "HRW managed to maintain registration in the country after government troops massacred protesters in Andijan in May 2005, probably, observers suggested, so that the Uzbek government could maintain the fiction that it was interested in improving the country's human rights climate. Since Andijan, however, the HRW office had encountered numerous problems, including the constant government denial of visas and accreditation for staff."<sup>65</sup>

Another of Uzbekistan's most prominent critics was Craig Murray, who had been British ambassador to Uzbekistan from August 2002 until his dismissal on October 14, 2004, after accusing the Karimov administration of wide-scale human rights abuses. The night of the Andijan shooting, Murray told *The Observer* that "the Islamic elements in the Andijan crowds were moderate – 'more Turkey than Taliban'" —which is an extraordinary assertion given the paucity of information available from the city at the time.<sup>66</sup>

Three days after Andijan, in his "What drives support for this torturer" editorial, Murray answered his own question in his opening sentence: "Oil and gas ensure that the U.S. backs the Uzbek dictator to the hilt" despite the fact that Washington had no hydrocarbon interests operating in Uzbekistan (and that its energy exports are small) and then continues, "The bodies of hundreds of pro-democracy protesters in Uzbekistan are scarcely cold, and already the White House is looking for ways to dismiss them. The White House spokesman Scott McClellan said

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<sup>63</sup> United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Briefing: The Uzbekistan Crisis: Assessing the Impact and Next Steps."

<sup>64</sup> See website of Human Rights Watch.

<sup>65</sup> Murat Sadykov, "Uzbekistan: West's Realpolitik Helped Get HRW Booted from Tashkent - Activists," *EurasiaNet.org*, March 17, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, "Uzbekistan on the brink as clashes spread," *The Observer*, May 15, 2005.

those shot dead in the city of Andijan included 'Islamic terrorists' offering armed resistance. They should, McClellan insists, seek democratic government "through peaceful means, not through violence." In his conclusion, Murray castigates the media for not supporting this interpretation of U.S. policy, writing, "The western news agenda has moved the dead of Andijan from the 'democrat' to the 'terrorist' pile. Karimov remains in power. The White House will be happy. That's enough for No 10."<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding his dubious past and the highly personal nature of his vendetta, Murray became an oft-cited source of information, and could henceforth be counted on for the most scathing attacks both on Uzbekistan for alleged human rights violations and on the Blair government for cooperating with the United States.

The United Nations also belatedly weighed in on Andijan. On June 23, the UN's Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Manfred Nowak, the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Leila Zerrougui, and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on human rights defenders, Hina Jilani, issued a press release on Andijan in which they expressed concerns "about allegations of human rights violations, particularly torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary detention in Uzbekistan in connection with the violent events in Andijan of 13 May 2005." The statement also expressed "deep concern about reports that Uzbek authorities are pressuring human rights defenders who are collecting evidence on the events of 13 May, and pressuring Uzbek asylum-seekers in Kyrgyzstan to return, in order to suppress their testimonies in relation to the events in Andijan" before ending an expression of support "for an independent international investigation."<sup>68</sup>

The issue of numbers involved in every aspect of the Andijan events continued in a state of flux in the foreign press. On May 14, *The Washington Post* reported, "Widespread resentment over a government campaign against alleged Islamic

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<sup>67</sup> Craig Murray, "What drives support for this torturer," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> UN Information Service, "UN Experts deplore response to Andijan events," Press release HR/4859, Geneva, June 23, 2005.

extremists in the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan exploded into violence Friday when protesters stormed a prison and released *thousands* of inmates. ... Early Friday morning, shortly after midnight, a group of armed men stormed the local prison, freeing *at least 2,000* prisoners" (emphasis added).<sup>69</sup>

Editorial positions continued to harden. On October 8, *The Washington Post* published an editorial whose title, "The Ugly Uzbek," left its readership in no doubt as to its tenor. Its opening sentence reads, "almost five months after Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, ordered his security forces to massacre hundreds of mostly unarmed demonstrators in the city of Andijan, European governments are finally taking steps to punish his regime." The *Post* endorsed the EU's imposition of an arms embargo against Uzbekistan and visa restrictions on government officials, adding that "it raises the question of why the Western government that claims to be at the forefront of promoting freedom in the Muslim world – the Bush administration – has not taken similar action." The editorial pointed to the Pentagon's desire to retain its access to the K-2 airbase, but suggested suspending paying \$23 million in military subsidies, including for the use of K-2 for a year, as "a renewed [U.S.-Uzbek] partnership... must include political liberalization and an end to the malicious propaganda. In the very likely event that neither of those conditions are met, the Bush administration should join European states in siding against a dictator who deserves no more chances."<sup>70</sup>

### **Criticism of the Prevailing Narrative on Andijan**

Not surprisingly, the Russian-language press gravitated towards viewing events in Andijan in a larger context than mere repression of a peaceful demonstration, with a Kazakh journal noting, "The main question that worries the political elites, analysts and political scientists of the CIS now – amid the Andijan events – is as follows: whether it is an attempt to seize power by radical Islamists or another 'color' revolution."<sup>71</sup> Support for Karimov's stance also came from the Muslim

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Finn, "Uzbek Crowd Storms Prison In Anti-Government Protest," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2005.

<sup>70</sup> "The Ugly Uzbek," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2005.

<sup>71</sup> Russian-language Kazakh daily *Liter* cited in "Andijan violence unsettles region," *BBC News*, May 14, 2005.

world's leading academic, Muhammad Tantawi, the chief imam of Egypt and sheikh of Cairo's famed Al-Azhar University, who commented on May 27: "If the plans of the extremists are put into effect, this will drive the Muslim world many centuries back. Various terrorist and extremist groups, which cover up their real objectives by provocative slogans like 'revival of the Islamic Caliphate' and 'jihad', are really furthering anti-human aims."<sup>72</sup>

Others in Washington concurred that extremists probably participated in events in Andijan. Speaking on May 19 to a Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe meeting in Washington, Martha Brill Olcott, a leading U.S. expert on Central Asia, testified that that among the people who attacked the prison there may well have been terrorists trained in Afghanistan and linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>73</sup>

Three months after Andijan, Nancy Lubin, Senior Fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council and a long-standing scholar of Central Asia, reiterated Tashkent's security concerns, commenting, "Watching three governments fall in the near vicinity certainly doesn't help promote any democratic agenda. There's always been a real tension (in Uzbekistan) between control and democratization, and maintaining control has always won."<sup>74</sup> Notably, the interview began, "On May 13, a protest and prison break in the eastern city of Andijan, Uzbekistan, turned violent as police reportedly opened fire on unarmed civilians, leaving as many as 700 dead." As for the months of negative publicity Lubin commented, "Uzbekistan cares deeply about its reputation in the world, but it's balancing that against questions of maintaining stability and control at home."

The highest profile academic to feel the wrath of daring to take issue with the emerging consensus of Andijan as a brutal massacre of innocents was Shirin Akiner, Lecturer in Central Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London and Associate Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, whose *Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent*

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<sup>72</sup> "Muhammad Tantawi, Chief Imam of Egypt denounces Andijan rebels," *ITAR-TASS*, May 27, 2005.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Congress, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Briefing: Unrest in Uzbekistan," May 19, 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, Lionel Beehner, "Interview with Nancy Lubin on U.S.-Uzbek relations," September 21, 2005.

*Assessment*, was issued as a Silk Road Paper by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program in 2006.<sup>75</sup> Akiner, who speaks Uzbek and Russian, directed British government-funded training projects in collaboration with institutions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and served as a media consultant on Central Asia. In May 2005, Akiner spent two days in Tashkent for a NATO colloquium that was canceled shortly after the events in Andijan. Contrary to accounts by journalists and human rights activists, Akiner said the deputy governor of the Andijan Region had told her she could travel anywhere she liked and interview anyone she pleased.

Akiner also interviewed human rights activists, prisoners, physicians, local mahalla (neighborhood community) committees, morgue workers, elder citizens, imams, and the wardens of local graveyards, speaking to a total of 35 people. From her conversations and visits to the local hospital, morgue, and graveyards, Akiner concluded that the government's official statistic of 173 dead was likely largely accurate. She also said she would submit a written report to both the British Foreign Office and NATO on her findings. Her conclusions, first aired in the Uzbek media, most notably about the death toll in Andijan which she concluded was largely accurate, contradicted other reports from various NGOs groups who put the death toll much higher. (Akiner's written report is the text that, with minor edits, was published as a Silk Road Paper.)

Akiner concluded her report as follows: "If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes that were made in Afghanistan in the 1980s we need sober, objective analysis. Emotional rhetoric is no substitute for logic, nor is fantasy a substitute for pedantic research – but I fear these are the warnings of a Cassandra."<sup>76</sup> The release of Akiner's report unleashed a firestorm of *ad hominem* attacks on her and the study. Critics included human rights groups, NGOs, and Craig Murray, all accusing her

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<sup>75</sup> Akiner, *Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment*, 53.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



of producing a slanted, propaganda whitewash on Andijan. Bensmann and Bukharbaeva both challenged Akiner's account in their Helsinki Commission testimony.<sup>77</sup>

Former ambassador Murray now made it his mission to discredit Akiner's reporting. On September 29, 2005, Murray wrote to SOAS director Colin Bundy, accusing Akiner of being "a propagandist for the Karimov regime of Uzbekistan. [...] in her activities in attempting to justify the Andizhan massacre, Ms Akiner has entered the realm of deliberate dishonesty, and demonstrably departed from standards of academic method in a way that SOAS cannot ignore."<sup>78</sup> Murray requested that Bundy refer his email to the SOAS ethics committee and that he take action against her for allegedly promoting falsehoods.

Two days later Murray wrote, "Akiner's history is an example of how easy it is to become the expert in an academic field so obscure that few others are studying it. [...] Her work is dull, repetitive and positively tendentious. [...] Creatures like Akiner, who flourished in the dark, have shrivelled in the light as their lack of rigour and support for tyrants have been exposed to a wider audience."<sup>79</sup>

On October 6, Bundy rejected Murray's demand, noting that Murray's letter "makes a series of allegations but none of them is substantiated. [...] I do not believe that the Committee can proceed on the basis of unproven assertions."<sup>80</sup>

Murray would continue to attack Akiner's credibility on charges of being an agent for the Karimov administration and underestimating Andijan's casualties. During a January 2006 interview, when asked about Andijan Murray volunteered that "it was a dreadful massacre ... what was happening in Andijan was effectively no different to the pro-democracy demonstrations that you saw in Ukraine or in Georgia, that brought down a, you know, dictatorial regime and succeeded in

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<sup>77</sup> United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Briefing: The Uzbekistan Crisis: Assessing the Impact and Next Steps."

<sup>78</sup> "Akiner exposed – Craig Murray slams SOAS 'propagandist for the Karimov regime,'" September 29, 2005, [https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2005/09/akiner\\_exposed/](https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2005/09/akiner_exposed/)

<sup>79</sup> "The role of Shirin Akiner – further comments and analysis," October 1, 2005, [https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2005/10/the\\_role\\_of\\_shi\\_1/](https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2005/10/the_role_of_shi_1/)

<sup>80</sup> "SOAS replies to the allegations against Akiner!" October 10, 2005, [https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2005/10/soas\\_replies\\_to\\_1/](https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2005/10/soas_replies_to_1/)

doing so. In Andijan, the Uzbek government rather predictably responded by shooting the demonstrators, and those 700 people who died were not armed."<sup>81</sup>

### **The Uzbek Government Response**

Stung by what it perceived as the biased and increasingly negative coverage about Andijan, the Uzbek government by fall 2005 began to restrict and in some cases shut foreign news operations.

On September 9, 2005, the Tashkent municipal court ordered the closure of the U.S.-based non-governmental media-development organization Internews.<sup>82</sup> Internews had begun working in Uzbekistan in 1995. The following month, on October 26, the BBC announced that it was suspending its newsgathering operations in Uzbekistan due to security concerns.<sup>83</sup> A BBC statement said, "The BBC World Service's office in Tashkent is being suspended and all local staff withdrawn with immediate effect for six months pending a decision on their longer-term future. We are doing this over concerns of security."<sup>84</sup> BBC Regional Head Behrouz Afagh said, "Over the past four months since the unrest in Andijan, BBC staff in Uzbekistan have been subjected to a campaign of harassment and intimidation which has made it very difficult for them to report on events in the country. BBC World Service remains committed to covering events in Uzbekistan, and its English language correspondents will continue to seek access to the country and to report on events there as and when they are granted visas."

On December 13, 2005, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty announced that Uzbekistan's foreign ministry has refused to prolong the accreditation of RFE/RL correspondents based in Tashkent. RFE/RL had operated in Uzbekistan since 1996. RFE/RL acting president Jeff Trimble said, "this unwarranted action by Uzbek authorities further erodes the already dismal state of free speech in Uzbekistan

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<sup>81</sup> "Exclusive: Ex-British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray on Why He Defied UK Foreign Office by Posting Classified Memos Blasting U.S., British Support of Torture by Uzbek Regime," *Democracy Now!*, January 19, 2006.

<sup>82</sup> "Uzbekistan," Reporters Without Borders, September 12, 2005.

<sup>83</sup> "'Harassed' BBC shuts Uzbek office," *BBC News*, October, 26, 2005.

<sup>84</sup> "BBC World Service suspends Tashkent office due to journalist safety concerns," *BBC Press Office*, October 26, 2005.

and is yet another attack by the Karimov government on the basic human rights of the Uzbek people. While hindered, RFE/RL will not be deterred in its efforts to report accurately and objectively about events in Uzbekistan to the people of that country and throughout Central Asia and the rest of our broadcast region.”<sup>85</sup> The Uzbek foreign ministry said that its decision to suspend accreditation to RFE/RL's Tashkent bureau and the journalists working there was based on the fact that RFE/RL had recruited "so-called non-staff correspondents ('stringers') who engaged in journalistic activity without accreditation" by the foreign ministry, in violation of Uzbek media laws.

In reporting the RFE/RL closure, the NGO Reporters Without Borders wrote,

We are particularly pessimistic about the shocking state of the media in Uzbekistan which has deteriorated sharply since the Andijan uprising in May 2005. We are very worried by this terrible toll and the climate of censorship and witch-hunt against the independent media orchestrated by the Uzbek authorities. [...] After the closure of Radio Free Europe, independent Uzbek media is in freefall and has little remaining readership in the country. The main foreign news agencies are still present in Tashkent such as France-Presse (AFP), Reuters and Associated Press (AP). [...] Ironically, in Tashkent, publicly-owned Russian news agencies Ria Novosti, Itar-Tass and the private agency Interfax appear to be relatively objective in their coverage of Uzbek news, although they are much more controlled in Moscow. Other foreign media like the German international radio broadcaster Deutsche Welle have local correspondents but no permanent offices.<sup>86</sup>

On February 24, 2006, the Uzbek government adopted a resolution that it would no longer accredit any journalists from foreign media or any of their contributors who “interfere in internal affairs,” “violate territorial integrity,” or “call for the overthrow of the constitutional order by force.”

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<sup>85</sup> Gulnoza Saidazimova, “Uzbekistan: RFE/RL Forced To Close Tashkent Bureau After Government Denies Accreditation,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 13, 2005.

<sup>86</sup> “Closure of Radio Free Europe office signals endgame for free media,” *Reporters Without Borders*, December 14, 2005.

## **2006-2015: In Spite of New Evidence, the Narrative Hardens**

The decade that followed the Andijan violence is remarkable primarily because the dominant Western narrative of the events went in the opposite direction of the evidence and analysis that subsequently emerged. Western media and human rights promoters, in accounts mentioning Andijan, routinely cited casualty figures in the high hundreds or “thousands,” and increasingly ignored the violence committed by protestors before and during the standoff. Yet video evidence that emerged contradicting key elements of the narrative was ignored. Similarly, the dispassionate study by a respected critic of the Karimov government, Abdumanob Polat, was largely ignored—while Western media gave considerable credence to the lurid claims of an alleged defector from the Uzbek National Security Service (SNB).

### **A Year after Andijan**

Nearly a year after the events in Andijan, the 57-member OSCE covered the largely overlooked effort by the Uzbek government to mediate a peaceful end to the crisis in Andijan, writing,

In order to regulate the situation in Andijan, a special committee on hostage release and neutralization of terrorists was organized. “The committee faced the challenge of doing everything possible to minimize the life threat to the civilians and to free the hostages. Negotiations lasted for almost 11 hours. The Uzbek authorities were ready to settle for a serious compromise: they agreed to release 6 arrested extremists and offered terrorists buses and unobstructed transportation to the area of their choice. However, during the whole time, terrorists were putting new, deliberately unrealized conditions: in particular,

they demanded to free a number of imprisoned leaders of religious-extremist organizations, and to deliver them on an airplane to Andijan. Thus, making their demands a political issue, the criminals deliberately led the negotiations to the dead-end. All attempts of the Uzbek authorities to resolve the conflict peacefully failed. In these conditions the only right decision was to start a close cordon of the regional administration building. In response to this action the terrorists opened fire.<sup>87</sup>

On May 17, 2006, the Voice of America published an editorial, "Andijan Anniversary," listed as "reflecting the views of the United States Government," marking "the one-year anniversary of the tragic events in Andijan, Uzbekistan." The unsigned editorial noted that, "On the night of May 12th, 2005, unidentified individuals seized weapons from a local police garrison, stormed the city prison, and released several hundred inmates" and subsequently that "armed men reportedly attacked a regional administration building and took hostages." The editorial continues,

According to press reports, on May 13th, 2005, a crowd of several thousand civilians, mostly unarmed, gathered in the square in front of the same regional administration building. The demonstrators called for an end to repression and economic hardship. That evening, according to some eyewitnesses, Uzbekistan security forces fired without warning and indiscriminately into the crowd. Estimates of the number of people killed vary widely, ranging from one-hundred-eighty to over seven-hundred.

Before calling for an "independent, international investigation" the editorial observes that "the government of Uzbekistan maintains that the uprising was an attempted coup by Islamic extremists. Human rights monitors say Islamic extremism is being used by Uzbek authorities as a pretext for repression." The editorial quotes U.S. State Department spokesman Adam Ereli's statement that,

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<sup>87</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tashkent, "On the report prepared by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [ODIHR] on monitoring the legal trial in Uzbekistan, September-October 2005, against 15 active participants of the Andijan events in May 2005," April 19, 2006.

a year after the tragic events in Andijan, the government of Uzbekistan still owes the victims and survivors a full accounting of what took place. Numerous eyewitness reports of security forces shooting and killing several hundred men, women, and children have not been adequately addressed. The United States again calls on the government of Uzbekistan to allow for a full, credible, and transparent international investigation into Andijan.

The final paragraph of the editorial concludes, "Since the Andijan events, the government of Uzbekistan has cracked down on civil society groups and press freedom. The U.S. is urging Uzbek President Islam Karimov to cease the repression and take steps to uphold Uzbekistan's human rights commitments. A process of political and economic reform is the only path to stability for Uzbekistan."<sup>88</sup>

### **Video Shot by Andijan Protestors Emerges**

Video from Andijan shot by the demonstrators themselves took over a year to emerge. Bakhtiyar Babadjanov, a well-known scholar of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, provided the material to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, along with a commentary to the as-Saff Surah of the *Quran* allegedly written by Akram Yuldashev, the founder of Akramiya. Babadjanov had also served as a consultant for the Carnegie Endowment on a project on the roots of radicalism in Islam in Central Asia, along with providing expert testimony to the Uzbek Prosecutor General's office. In an inexplicable turn of events, Babadjanov had taken the video to the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment, but it was not forwarded to their Washington offices, only emerging a year later.<sup>89</sup>

The Andijan video was first seen in Washington on May 16, 2006, in a showing at the Hudson Institute at a meeting co-hosted by Zeyno Baran of the Hudson Institute and S. Frederick Starr of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. On June 22, 2006, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington D.C. issued a press release noting, "Martha Brill Olcott, senior associate in the Russian and

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<sup>88</sup> "Andijan Anniversary," *Voice of America* editorial, May 17, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Babadjanov in correspondence with S. Frederick Starr, by e-mail to author, May 28, 2015.

Eurasian Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has obtained the first ever unofficial video of the events leading up to the uprising. This 109-minute video was taken by two cameramen in the main square of Andijan during the day, but does not cover the most important and disputed moment: the end of the uprising itself."<sup>90</sup>

The recording consists of two lengths of footage shot by two cameramen in the crowd, reportedly filming the events for subsequent use by the demonstrators. The Uzbek authorities combined the two recordings and added selective subtitles in Russian and English. Fragments of the video were subsequently shown on national television and sent to foreign embassies. The government tried to use carefully chosen shots to prove that the events in Andijan were an anti-government uprising organized by well-armed religious fanatics. The video is far from impartial, having been used as evidence to prosecute men charged in the uprising, but it nevertheless is at variance with many points raised in Burkhabaeva's accounts and other subsequent descriptions of events that day.

The video shows Sharif Shakirov, one of the leaders of the unrest, proclaiming "the people have joined us, we won." At several points in the film, the men in the crowd chant "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great), which Burkhabaeva claims not to have heard. In one of the more telling moments on the video overlooked by critics, a man, Daniyor Akbarov, addresses the growing crowd of unarmed civilians in Babur Square, telling them he was part of a group of 100-150 armed men that had already lost 20 or 30 members in the previous night's fighting at the police station, army barracks, and jail. Other video imagery that contradicts Burkhabaeva's accounts includes gunmen making Molotov cocktails, posting snipers on rooftops around the square, and taking hostages.

In a commentary to the release of the video, Martha Olcott and Marina Barnett write that the video:

does support the Uzbek government claim that at least some of the demonstrators were armed, as it clearly shows armed men in the crowd

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<sup>90</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Press Release: The Untold Story of the Andijan Uprising," June 22, 2006.

of demonstrators, demonstrators seizing hostages by force, and demonstrators on the edge of the crowd making Molotov cocktails. ... Based on the footage in the film in our possession, at least some of the gunmen appear to have at least some rudimentary training, although it is impossible to know whether they acquired this while serving in the Uzbek armed forces, or as the result of training received in some sort of 'terrorist camp.' [...] But the most critical part of the story is missing – the ending. The film provides no footage on the last part of the demonstration, so demonstrators' claims that they were attacked without warning cannot be confirmed. We do see the demonstrators urging the crowd to remain in the square, even when some bystanders were urging them to leave, but it is impossible to know whether these scenes occurred before or after the government's negotiations with the hostage-takers had broken down. For from that time on the use of force by the government seemed virtually assured.<sup>91</sup>

The video had some influence in modifying slightly the boilerplate interpretation of events in Andijan that had developed over the preceding year. On June 22, *The New York Times* ran an extensive article entitled "Video of Ill-Fated Uzbek Rising Offers Haunting, Complex View." The article's authors, C.J. Chivers and Ethan Wilensky-Lanford, noted, "the recently available video, fragmentary and at times choppy, provides the most extensive visual account to date of the controversial chain of events that brought Uzbekistan international censure and deeply strained its relations with the West, while driving it closer to Russia and China."<sup>92</sup>

After noting that the video imagery had "been used as evidence to prosecute men charged in the uprising," the article acknowledges that the video in fact bolstered some of the Uzbek government's assertions, commenting, "Even allowing for the government's editing, other scenes belie some survivors' contentions that they were simply hoping to spark a nonviolent, national uprising like those that had

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<sup>91</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, Marina Barnett, "The Andijan Uprising, Akramiya and Akram Yuldashev," Carnegie Moscow Center, June 22, 2006.

<sup>92</sup> C.J. Chivers, Ethan Wilensky-Lanford, "Video of Ill-Fated Uzbek Rising Offers Haunting, Complex View," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2006.



recently toppled other corrupt post-Soviet governments. Serious crimes committed by the gunmen and poor judgment by the demonstrators are evident, as are the tactical difficulties faced by Uzbek security forces." Later on, the article reports, "the video becomes useful, if not conclusive, as it begins with the crowd assembling in the square. In the video, people in the crowd largely appear committed or quizzical, not coerced. Darker scenes soon appear, as government officials, including firefighters, are taken hostage by the armed men. In at least two instances, an armed man addresses the crowd. Later, hostages are forced into the seized government building." The authors note that the shooting started only after "hours of failed negotiations," but later add, "Human rights organizations have labeled the ending a massacre, and said there was evidence of executions of the wounded with gunshots to their heads. 'The attackers who took over government buildings, took people hostage and used people as human shields, committed serious crimes, punishable under the Uzbek criminal code,' Human Rights Watch wrote. 'But neither these crimes nor the peaceful protest that ensued can justify the government's response.'"<sup>93</sup>

As for the crowd in Babur Square being solely peaceful demonstrators, an assertion made by many critics, the article notes, "But some elements are beyond dispute. At least 40 armed men appear in the video, most with Kalashnikov assault rifles, one with a Dragunov sniper rifle and six with semi-automatic pistols. The remarks of Mr. Akbarov, the convicted killer, suggested that there were 30 to 90 more."

As for the number of those killed in Andijan the authors write,

Death tolls also remain in dispute, ranging from an official Uzbek tally of 189 to estimates in the low thousands, although there has been little public evidence for the highest tolls. An examination of the limited evidence available by The New York Times last year found that toe tags on bodies returned to families numbered at least 378. An Uzbek physician also told foreign reporters that she had counted 500 bodies in a

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

makeshift morgue in a school near the square. Uzbekistan's information blockade, however, has made establishing a precise toll impossible. All estimates remain unverified and inconclusive. The videos offer no fresh insight into this question.<sup>94</sup>

### **AbduMannob Polat's Study Sets New Standard**

There was one analyst on Andijan that the dominant narrative ignored, because his record and integrity made him difficult to dismiss: the late AbduMannob Polat, who passed away in 2010. Polat, born in Uzbekistan, was an independent analyst and a consultant on conditions and developments in the post-Soviet space, in particular in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, as well as U.S. relations with the region. Polat authored approximately 50 reports and articles published in the United States. His writings were published by, among others, Johns Hopkins University and the Washington DC-based Jamestown Foundation.

In 1988, AbduMannob Polat was a founding member of the first Uzbek movement for national revival and democracy known as "Birlik" ("Unity"), which he remained associated with until 1999. From 1991 to 2001, he served as the founding chairman of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, the leading Uzbek human rights organization at that time. In 1993-2003, he directed the Central Asian Human Rights Information Network of the Union of Councils.

Polat left Uzbekistan in June 1992. Six months later, after co-sponsoring and directing an international conference on human rights in Central Asia in Bishkek, he was abducted by Uzbek security forces, returned back to Uzbekistan, imprisoned and charged with "insulting the dignity and honor" of the Uzbek President. After nearly two months in three prisons, the Uzbek Supreme Court sentenced Polat to three years of imprisonment. He was freed by the court under a general amnesty, most likely due to pressure from the United States and Western Europe. In March 1993, Polat arrived in the United States, where he addressed various

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

conferences, American universities, and U.S. and international organizations, including hearings and briefings for the U.S. Congress, State Department, and the UN, while working as an analyst and human rights activist.

Less than a week after the events in Andijan Polat said, "By crushing the Andijan protesters, Karimov may have bought himself some time. But the underlying causes (fueling the revolt) – especially the poor economy and corruption – have not disappeared."<sup>95</sup>

Polat's dispassionate commitment to fact-based analysis about Uzbekistan was on display in Washington on March 1, 2006, when during a panel discussion about a new publication on U.S.-Uzbek relations, he chided the U.S. for not "acknowledging the fact" that Uzbekistan had held multiparty elections in 1994 and 1999. Instead of encouraging Karimov to engage in more reforms, the U.S. confronted him, and "the revolutions scared Karimov, you know his personality." After Andijan, he said the U.S. compared the events to Tiananmen Square but added that it was not at all similar, remarking, "How can we consider anyone 'responsible' when they say it was Tienanmen? [sic]."<sup>96</sup>

In June 2007, the Jamestown Foundation published Polat's *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*, a detailed attempt to unravel controversy surrounding events in the Ferghana Valley two years earlier.<sup>97</sup> Given Polat's impeccable record as a human rights campaigner and his fluency in both Uzbek and Russian, his effort stands alone in the literature about Andijan and is remarkable for its objectivity. Among his more significant points, he noted that "while Uzbekistan had already experienced some demonstrations and even riots brought about by declining social-economic conditions after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Andijan protests were notable because for the first time in the history of the country the demonstrations continued for nearly three months."<sup>98</sup> Polat's study points out the threats made during the trial by Akramiya members suggesting resort to violence if their demands to free the businessmen were not met. He highlights the

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<sup>95</sup> "Uzbekistan: No good political options in sight," *EurasiaNet.org*, May 18, 2005.

<sup>96</sup> Laurence Jarvik, "Can US-Uzbekistan Relationship Be Saved?," *Registan.net*, March 2, 2006.

<sup>97</sup> Polat, *Reassessing Andijan: the Road to Restoring U.S.-Uzbek Relations*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

violence perpetrated by the armed group the night of May 12, and the subsequent taking of hostages by Parpiyev's group, roundly criticizing Western media, human rights groups, and governments for succumbing to a one-sided interpretation of events, arguing that, "Karimov's exaggerated negative reputation as a tough and brutal dictator, ripening in the west after more than 15 years of one-sided and very critical media coverage, helped forward the critics' goals almost immediately ... The fact that the initially peaceful demonstrations in Andijan turned violent because of the armed insurgents', not government's actions, had been successfully 'forgotten.'"<sup>99</sup>

He discusses at length the discrepancy between Bensmann's and Bukharbaeva's eyewitness accounts and the documentary evidence that emerged, concluding that "video evidence directly contradicts Bensmann's subsequent testimony ... With all due respect to the eyewitness testimony of a human rights advocate and reporter with sympathies to demonstrators and innocent victims, the video images of the day's events should be given greater consideration." Further, he argues that Bukharbaeva "has since then changed her stories from her previous, more reliable and credible reports and has increasingly advocated an extremely one-sided agenda." Polat points out the reliance of media reporting on assertions rather than evidence, and concludes that, "If the two reporters do not produce their documentary evidence, then their assertions seem to be incidents of reporters abusing their prerogative for protecting the confidentiality of their sources or mere propaganda."<sup>100</sup>

Polat's commitment to objectivity is evident throughout the report's 28 pages as he sifted all available literature in Uzbek, Russian, and English, setting a standard that has yet to be bettered seven years later.

### **The Yakubov Episode**

The issue of the actual number of casualties from the tragedy at Andijan would continue to be contentious. In 2008 many in the media, including RFE/RL, promoted the story of Ikrom Yakubov, a 27 year-old former major in the SNB, who

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 14-16.

was seeking asylum in Britain. Yakubov arrived in the UK on September 1, 2008, and claimed asylum three days later. The day after Yakubov applied for asylum, former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray wrote in his blog of his assistance to Yakubov. He also helped disseminate some of Yakubov's sensational assertions, which the latter claimed to have received from a senior SNB official.<sup>101</sup>

Yakubov further alleged that the Andijan massacre was ordered by Karimov to terrify the populace and prevent any popular pro-democracy movement from developing in Uzbekistan. Other sensationalist claims made by Yakubov included CIA complicity in torture in Uzbekistan and that Britain's Richard Conroy, the UN's coordinator in Uzbekistan, was assassinated on Karimov's orders because he was aware that senior officials were involved in international drug trafficking.<sup>102</sup> The Uzbek response to Yakubov's allegations was swift and dismissive; on September 4, SNB spokesman Olimbek Toraqulov dismissed Yakubov's claims to RFE/RL's Uzbek Service as "slander," adding that "There is not any fact that would be worth commenting on. There is nothing logical."<sup>103</sup> The year after leaving Uzbekistan Yakubov was the subject of a 14-minute BBC Newsnight interview.<sup>104</sup>

Over the next three years, questions began to surface about Yakubov's veracity. Police checks by MI5 and MI6 via the Metropolitan Police's counter-terrorism unit failed to add credence to Yakubov's story. His story was weakest where he said that he was caught by the SNB and tortured for his disloyalty and yet allowed to go and serve in Uzbekistan's Washington embassy before his defection. Yakubov came under greater scrutiny in 2011 after his conviction by a British court for using a forged Portuguese driver's license that he claimed to have obtained while

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<sup>101</sup> "Evidence of Karimov's Crimes – and CIA Participation," September 14, 2008, [https://www.craig-murray.org.uk/archives/2008/09/evidence\\_of\\_kar/](https://www.craig-murray.org.uk/archives/2008/09/evidence_of_kar/); Jeffrey Donovan, "Former Uzbek Spy Accuses Government of Massacres, Seeks Asylum," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 1, 2008.

<sup>102</sup> "Intelligence officer claims CIA was complicit in torture in Uzbekistan," *The Herald Scotland*, September 13, 2008.

<sup>103</sup> "Former Uzbek Spy Case Sparks Heated Reactions," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 5, 2008.

<sup>104</sup> Peter Marshall, "Confessions of an Uzbek KGB officer," *BBC Newsnight*, August 11, 2009.

on assignment for the SNB. Even RFE/RL began to backpedal on its previous unwavering support of Yakubov's claims: "But a credible and widely-known Uzbek human rights advocate, Surat Ikramov, has told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service in an interview that Yakubov is not quite who he claims to be, and suggests that Yakubov's personal safety would not be in danger should he be deported back home. 'Whatever he is claiming is information he picked up while working for my organization,' Ikramov said." Ikramov heads the Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan.<sup>105</sup>

When tried in Kingston Crown Court for using a clumsily forged Portuguese driving license, Yakubov added 300 more casualties to the figures of Andijan dead, telling the jury, "in 2005 there was an uprising against the dictatorship and the head of state ordered the killing of more than one thousand eight hundred people."<sup>106</sup> The jury did not believe Yakubov's assertion that he acquired the document during a secret SNB posting to Portugal, sentenced him to eight months' imprisonment, suspended for a year for possessing a false identity document, with intent.<sup>107</sup> Yakubov is now a tutor and Ph.D. candidate in Politics and International Relations at the University of Dundee, where Craig Murray served as Rector 2007-2010.<sup>108</sup>

### **Andijan Focus Shifts to Commemoration**

A March 22, 2011 RFE/RL article, "Commentary. Uzbekistan's Forgotten Uprising," noted that "the remarkable silence that surrounds the 2005 Andijon massacre in Uzbekistan serves as a glaring reminder that some of the world's most brutal regimes can get away with mass murder with the tacit support of Europe and the United States..." adding that "...the plight of over 1,000 Uzbeks in Andijon

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<sup>105</sup> "Rights Advocate Contradicts Story of Uzbek 'Spy,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 7, 2011. Ikramov's credentials as a human rights activist predate Andijan; in August 2003, after he was abducted and beaten in Tashkent, Human Rights Watch Europe and Central Asia Division deputy director Rachel Denber said, "Ikramov has been a fearless critic of the Uzbek government. His reports let the world know about human rights abuses in Uzbekistan." See Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Uzbek Rights Activist Kidnapped and Beaten," August 30, 2003.

<sup>106</sup> "KGB 'Intelligence Officer' Caught With Fake Licence," *The Square Mile*, November 5, 2011.

<sup>107</sup> "Doubts over the 'KGB defector' with fake ID," *Daily Mail*, November 7, 2011.

<sup>108</sup> See staff profile at: <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/politics/staff/profile/ikrom-yakubov>

that May day in 2005 remains but a black-and-white World Brief buried in the back pages of the Western press, while similar and in many cases less catastrophic events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere are transmitted incessantly around the world and commented on by seemingly anybody with a degree in international relations." While the article ends with the disclaimer that "the views expressed in this commentary are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of RFE/RL," it nevertheless remains notable for both its tone and data.<sup>109</sup>

In a September 25, 2014 press release, "Uzbekistan: Prison, Torture for Critics. Sentences Often Extended for Merest Excuse," HRW announced the publication of its 121-page report, *"Until the Very End": Politically Motivated Imprisonment in Uzbekistan*. Stating that the survey is "based on more than 150 in-depth interviews, including with 10 recently released prisoners, and analysis of newly obtained court documents," the report includes "Seven [...] various perceived critics of the government or witnesses to the May 13, 2005 Andijan massacre, when Uzbek government forces shot and killed hundreds of mainly peaceful protesters: Dilorom Abdukodirova, Botirbek Eshkuziev, Bahrom Ibragimov, Davron Kabilov, Erkin Musaev, Davron Tojiev, and Ravshanbek Vafoev."

The most influential newspaper in the nation's capital, *The Washington Post*, on November 30, 2014, published an op-ed by editorial page editor Fred Hiatt. "The tyranny you haven't heard of" begins, "You could call it a stealth North Korea: a country in the same league of repression and isolation as the Hermit Kingdom, but with far less attention paid to its crimes." Pushing analogies with China as well as North Korea, Hiatt writes that "like China, it had its Tiananmen Square massacre: the shooting of hundreds of unarmed protesters in the city of Andijan in 2005, after which the government ramped up its repression nationwide."<sup>110</sup>

As recently as February 2015, *The New Republic* published Columbia University graduate student Casey Michel's article, "The Obama Administration Is Gifting War Machines to a Murderous Dictator." Casting aside any pretense of journal-

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<sup>109</sup> Dana Abizaid, "Commentary. Uzbekistan's Forgotten Uprising," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 22, 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Fred Hiatt, "The tyranny you haven't heard of," *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2014.

istic objectivity, Michel wrote, "Uzbekistan, the scorched, double-landlocked nation in central Asia, stands known mainly for three things: boiling its dissidents, encouraging child slavery, and authoring the largest government-led massacre of the former Soviet space. The country is one of Freedom House's 10 'Worst of the Worst' regimes and has been led since independence by President Islam Karimov, 77, who recently announced he'd be standing for yet another term. The regime's designation and brutality are unlikely to improve anytime soon." It asks, "why would the Obama administration proffer hundreds of war machines to a regime responsible for perhaps the greatest civilian massacre since Tiananmen Square?"

Despite Yakubov's diminished credibility, Michel nevertheless cites him as a source, writing, "On a spring afternoon in May 2005, Uzbekistan shattered. Fearing a potential reprise of the revolution that had just toppled nearby Kyrgyzstan, Karimov's forces aimed their weaponry at anti-government protesters gathering in the city of Andijan. Hundreds of civilians were killed—upwards of 1,500, according to a former major in the Uzbek state security service. Karimov's grip firmed, and he became one of the world's most notorious dictators."<sup>111</sup>

### **Former U.S. Defense Attaché Study Echoes Polat's Conclusions**

A news study echoing many of Polat's insights and conclusions on events in Andijan is Colonel Jeffrey W. Hartman's *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising*, published in parallel with the present study. Hartman was the U.S. Defense Attaché in Uzbekistan 2007-2009 and researched events in Andijan from 2006 until 2014. In the extensive study, Hartman carefully sifts the evidence, placing events in Andijan within the larger context of rising Islamic extremism in Central Asia, with a particular focus on the theological roots of the Akramiya movement. In one of the most telling passages about the motives of the militants beyond merely freeing their imprisoned compatriots Hartman noted,

After the prison raid, [militant leader Kabul] Parpiyev and the raiders had a chance to flee to nearby Kyrgyzstan. One of Uzbekistan's least patrolled and poorest demarcated borders is less than a half-hour drive

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<sup>111</sup> Casey Michel, "The Obama Administration Is Gifting War Machines to a Murderous Dictator," *The New Republic*, February 3, 2015.



northeast of Andijan, just southeast of Pakhtobod. The area is well-known to Andijan residents. When Parpiyev, other [Akramiya] 'Brothers,' and some of the freed prisoners who joined Parpiyev's group departed the prison, they were not under fire. Instead, the group gathered in front of the prison and started calling other possible sympathizers by cell phone to meet at the prison or at the provincial capitol building. [...] Parpiyev and his followers apparently had grander intentions. Instead of fleeing, the armed group, now reinforced by some of their freed brethren and other prisoners, headed downhill northwest along Navoi Prospect and Oskaria Street, and attacked the National Security Service complex.<sup>112</sup>

In other sections Hartman, like Polat, takes issue with inflated numbers of people in Babur Square: "From reviewing the captured film taken at the height of the rally, it can be estimated that around 2000 participants and bystanders filled both the square and the area of the traffic circle behind it," a fraction of the numbers given by Bukharbaeva. Hartman observed that "Bukharbaeva interviewed Kabul Parpiyev inside the provincial capitol building (the *hokimyat*) on videotape. This was witnessed by surviving hostages including Qodir Ergashev. To this author and other researchers' knowledge, Bukharbaeva never released the tape of this interview." Hartman also observed that "Bukharbaeva testified that Parpiyev told her that Minister Almatov threatened 'if they had to kill 300, 1400 people, they would take the rebels,'" but those comments were not on the recordings of Almatov's and Parpiyev's conversations.

On the fractious issue of fatalities, Hartman notes that, subtracting those killed before dawn on May thirteenth and at the Kyrgyz border on May fourteenth, and estimating that a maximum of 2,000 people were near the capitol building, Bobur Square and the traffic circle during the height of the rally between 3:00 and 4:00 pm, it is entirely plausible that at least 24 hostages, 25 (Akramiya) "Brothers" and their supporters, and around 128 bystanders and other residents were killed, and

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<sup>112</sup> Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising*, 29-30.

about 250 seriously wounded, during the final gunfight which probably commenced on Cholpon Street and reverberated back to the provincial capitol building and Babur Square. He therefore argues that the Uzbek government's unpublished figure of 211 killed would appear conceivable.<sup>113</sup>

Hartman offers a personal and telling observation regarding the exaggerations of reports by various NGOs regarding matters in Uzbekistan:

Some of these groups' willingness to say or report anything to embarrass the Karimov government was demonstrated after the July 10, 2008 ammunition storage site explosions at Kagan near Bukhara ... human rights representatives in Bukhara reported hundreds of casualties, mass evacuations and entire sections of Kagan, including the train station, as leveled. These allegations were repeated in the Internet press and among foreign governments. When the author visited Kagan several days after the blasts, it was clear that human rights contacts had grossly exaggerated the damage. Seven persons perished in the disaster. Bukhara was never evacuated. The Kagan train station was fully functioning. ... To the author, the incident illustrated how some of these organizations' hatred of Karimov and their desire for attention led some of them to sensationalize their reporting, which some Western media and some foreign governments accepted without challenge.<sup>114</sup>

In summing up events in Andijan that day, Hartman concluded that the uprising and the violent confrontation "were certainly avoidable," attributing the result to "a series of misjudgments on both sides." While concluding that Parpiyev and the Brothers "lacked a non-violent course of action," he also notes that "the Uzbek government, the NSS, and especially the Andijan provincial government could surely have handled this matter more deftly."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 59, footnote 143.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 64.

## Andijan Interpretations 10 Years On

A decade after the tragic events in the Ferghana Valley, terms such as “massacre” and “Tiananmen” continue to dominate recent discussions of Andijan, including in professional journals such as *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*, which both published articles on Uzbekistan discussing Andijan in advance of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events, but none of them were remotely based in fact.

The first, by Reid Standish in *Foreign Policy*, commented that, “with an ailing economy and governments tumbling around him, Karimov responded in the harshest way in the city of Andijan. On May 13, 2005, after months of protests against the government, the Uzbek military sent in its troops and opened fire on protesters, killing hundreds — thousands according to some accounts — including women and children.” Basing its report on “a survivor of Andijan,” it added that “the military sent in (armored personnel carriers) to block off all the escape routes from the main square ... ‘There were all types of people in that square: women, children, young people. Most didn’t make it out alive.’”<sup>116</sup>

On April 2, *Foreign Policy* published Umar Farooq’s article about Uzbekistan, where it alleged that, “In May 2005, in the eastern city of Andijan, soldiers carried out what at the time was one of the bloodiest government massacres in modern history. After a handful of armed locals freed 23 businessmen from prison, soldiers opened fire on thousands of demonstrators, killing around 600 civilians.”<sup>117</sup>

In a March 30 *Foreign Affairs* article entitled “Karimov’s Crumbling Kleptocracy,” authors Alisher Ilkhamov and Jeff Goldstein write that

The protests, which began peacefully, erupted into violence when a group of gunmen stormed the prison holding the accused. More than

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<sup>116</sup> Reid Standish, “Central Asia’s Chess Master: How Islam Karimov’s Wily Diplomacy Has Cemented His Power,” *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2015.

<sup>117</sup> Umar Farooq, “Dispatch. The Hunted,” *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2015.

10,000 Andijan residents took to the streets to vent frustrations about Karimov's regime and economic policies, and an armed convoy responded by shooting indiscriminately into the crowd, resulting in hundreds—or perhaps thousands—of deaths. Many of the dead were buried in mass graves, or were thrown into the Karasu River. [...] With no genuine registered opposition parties and rampant torture throughout the nation's law enforcement system, Uzbekistan is among the most repressive countries in the world, appearing as a perennial fixture on Freedom House's *Worst of the Worst* list.<sup>118</sup>

In a terse 88-word press release, the U.S. embassy in Tashkent noted the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Andijan: "13 May 2015 – Today marks the tenth anniversary of the tragic events that occurred in Andijan, Uzbekistan on May 13, 2005. The people of the United States extend our deepest sympathy to the families of all those who lost their lives or suffered as a result. The United States continues to urge Uzbekistan to uphold its domestic and international obligations on human rights and religious freedom. Long-term stability and security cannot be achieved without respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."<sup>119</sup>

In contrast, one of the more cautious and evenhanded recent articles about Andijan came from *Vatican Radio*. In its March 30 article discussing Uzbekistan's forthcoming presidential election, after its unnamed author wrote of Karimov's virtual certainty to win, it was added:

However he also faces a troubled security situation in neighboring Afghanistan, and needs both Russian and Western help. The United States installed a military base in the country after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. But it was forced to abandon that facility in 2005 as relations between the countries soured following a violent government crackdown on rioters in the Ferghana Valley city of Andijan that is believed to have left hundreds dead. ... Rights activists and reporters note

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<sup>118</sup> Alisher Ilkhamov and Jeff Goldstein, "Karimov's Crumbling Kleptocracy," *Foreign Affairs*, March 30, 2015.

<sup>119</sup> U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "U.S. Embassy Statement on the 10th anniversary of Andijan Events," Press Release, Tashkent, May 13, 2015.

that almost all Western media have been barred from reporting inside the country since that time. Independent journalists and activists face sustained harassment, and reported torture and imprisonment.<sup>120</sup>

The tenth anniversary of Andijan did not pass unnoticed. RFE/RL published an article whose opening paragraph began, “On May 13, 2005, the Uzbek military and security forces put down a revolt in the eastern city of Andijon by using deadly and indiscriminate force. Hundreds and possibly more than 1,000 people were shot dead in just a few hours. The event has been characterized as a massacre, and for the past 10 years the Uzbek government has ignored international criticism of its handling of the crisis.”<sup>121</sup>

Much of the text consists of an interview with Human Rights Watch Central Asian researcher Steve Swerdlow, who argues that:

our research and the research of local human rights defenders and others that have looked at Andijon found no evidence that [on] that day in the central square, Babur Square of Andijon, that the protesters were pursuing that agenda of establishing an Islamic caliphate. In fact, our research showed that while, of course, there were armed elements in the crowd and there were events that led up to the mass protests on May 13 in which crimes were committed, regardless of that the massive protest that occurred on May 13, which included thousands of residents of Andijon, was really focused on the citizens airing their grievances about corruption, poverty, and human rights abuses, and they actually expected that Uzbek officials, maybe even Karimov himself, would address that crowd that day.<sup>122</sup>

Also embedded in the article is a URL link to an article by RFE/RL’s Bruce Pannier, who also conducted the interview, “Andijon: What Happened And Why.” Midway through the article states, “It was a massacre,” and concludes that “many

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<sup>120</sup> “Uzbekistan President Victory Expected Despite Political Uncertainty,” *Vatican Radio*, March 30, 2015.

<sup>121</sup> Bruce Pannier, “HRW’s Swerdlow: Uzbekistan In ‘Category Of Its Own’ On Human Rights,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 13, 2015.

<sup>122</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Uzbekistan: Decade of Impunity for Massacre,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1RNLAYEkQI>

who were there that day say hundreds of people and possibly thousands were killed during the early evening of May 13."<sup>123</sup>

RFE/RL was hardly alone in commemorating the anniversary of Andijan. The Institute of War and Peace Reporting, for whom Bukharbaeva was project director at the time of Andijan, as of early 2016 hosted 811 articles mentioning events in the city. On May 13, 2015, the tenth anniversary of Andijan, *Foreign Policy* published an article by Louise Arbour, president of the International Crisis Group, who at the time was UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Arbour writes that "ten years ago, Uzbekistan's security forces shot dead hundreds of unarmed people demonstrating for greater economic and political freedom in the eastern city of Andijan. ... The Andijan massacre of May 13, 2005, belongs to a shameful global list of missed opportunities for justice and accountability. World leaders by and large did little to censure the government of President Islam Karimov. Tashkent's dictator stared them all down — and the world blinked."<sup>124</sup> Arbour continues, "The report by my office in the immediate aftermath concluded that 'consistent, credible eyewitness testimony strongly suggests that military and security forces committed grave human rights violations in Andijan,' even a 'mass killing.' The report was based on interviews with eyewitnesses in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where some of the survivors had fled immediately after the violence." Arbour castigates Western governments by noting, "In short, the Uzbek government got away with mass murder because, as is often the case, interests prevailed over principles, and the world was willing to forget the victims in order to work with the killers. It's the worst lesson possible for aspiring tyrants."

Human rights organizations also used Andijan's tenth anniversary to mobilize. On May 13, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)<sup>125</sup> wrote a "Joint NGO letter on Uzbekistan to the Permanent Representatives of member and observer states of the UN Human Rights Council." The letter argued that "13 May 2015 will mark the tenth anniversary of the massacre at Andijan ... hundreds

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<sup>123</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Andijon: What Happened And Why," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 12, 2015.

<sup>124</sup> Louise Arbour, "Uzbekistan's Deadly Decade," *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2015.

<sup>125</sup> Its 178 members include Amnesty International, the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, the Uzbek Alliance for Human Rights, and the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights.

of largely peaceful protesters were killed by Uzbek government forces indiscriminately in the eastern city of Andijan. The violence drove hundreds of people across the border into Kyrgyzstan. In the decade since, the Uzbek government has refused an independent investigation into the massacre, and continues to persecute anyone suspected of having witnessed the atrocities or attempting to speak about them publicly."<sup>126</sup>

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting, whose reporters were present in Babur Square, also noted the anniversary. John MacLeod, IWPR's managing editor, wrote that "after shooting down protesters in 2005, Uzbekistan's government concluded that repression works, that historical truth can be suppressed, and that no one will really care in the long run." As for the number of casualties MacLeod writes, "The government claimed the number of dead was under 200, most of them armed militants or people they killed. The best independent estimates put the number of civilian dead on May 13, 2015 at several hundred, although one police officer speaking soon after the event told IWPR he understood the figure was far higher. He said casualties were on such a massive scale because of the use of armoured vehicles fitted with powerful machine guns. Human rights activists on the ground gathered up numerous spent shell casings from the weapons, unmistakable because of their huge size." Lest anyone miss the import of the article, it also contains two pictures of the Uzbek embassy in London, with its fence and first floor street facade heavily splashed with red paint, with "killers" and "700 killed" among the graffiti.<sup>127</sup>

The U.S. Congress also marked the Andijan anniversary. On May 13, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs stated in a press release that "Uzbek government forces opened fire on thousands of demonstrators assembled to protest government corruption, repression, poverty, and official injustice. Hundreds of men, women, and children were killed. To this day, the government of Uzbekistan has denied all

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<sup>126</sup> International Federation for Human Rights, "Joint NGO letter on Uzbekistan to the Permanent Representatives of member and observer states of the UN Human Rights Council," May 13, 2015.

<sup>127</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting, John MacLeod, "Andijan Remembered," *RCA Issue 759*, May 13, 2015.

responsibility for the killings and has blocked calls for an independent investigation."<sup>128</sup> The Commission also held a "Capitol Hill Briefing: Human Rights in Uzbekistan" on May 21. Appearing were Human Rights Watch Central Asia researcher Steve Swerdlow, Kayum Ortikov, "torture survivor from Uzbekistan, former security guard at British Embassy in Tashkent," and his human rights activist wife Mohira Ortikova; Amnesty International USA International Advocacy Director T. Kumar and United States Commission on International Religious Freedom senior policy analyst Catherine Cosman were also present.

On May 12, the *New York Times* published an op-ed article by "writer, researcher and critic" Sarah Kendzior. "Uzbekistan's Forgotten Massacre" begins, "On May 13, 2005, military forces dispatched by the government of Uzbekistan fired on a massive protest in the city of Andijon, killing hundreds of Uzbek citizens." As for the casualties, Kendzior wrote, "Human rights activists put the death toll at more than 700." Kendzior continued, "The Andijon massacre was Uzbekistan state business, and anyone who dared promulgate a version that contradicted the official narrative faced arrest or exile."<sup>129</sup> After listing a number of Uzbek dissidents who died outside the country with an implication that the Uzbek government was behind their deaths and enumerating closed websites Kendzior concludes, "Today a new website, Virtual Uzbekistan, is attempting to curate what Andijon materials remain. It faces an uphill battle since the disappearance of so many websites has led to materials being lost. As a new generation of Uzbeks grows up in a highly regulated media environment in which a narrow version of history is taught, Andijon falls into the category of forbidden folklore, a rumor that the government can dispel as online evidence vanishes."

The disappearance of articles on the internet, even those relating to Andijan, can disappear for more prosaic reasons than malevolent cyberspace activity by Uzbek authorities. In June 2005, this author wrote an article for the International Relations and Security Network (ISN) in Zurich, entitled "Events in Andijan anything

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<sup>128</sup> Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, "Co-Chairs Commemorate 10th Anniversary of the Andijan Massacre in Uzbekistan," May 13, 2015.

<sup>129</sup> Sarah Kendzior, "Uzbekistan's Forgotten Massacre," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2015.



but black and white." The article began "Nearly everything about the unrest in Uzbekistan's eastern town of Andijan is in dispute, from the number of deaths and the identities of those killed, to who fired the first shot." That article has disappeared from the "Security Watch" section of the ISN website, even though it contains 55 other articles with the word "Andijan."<sup>130</sup> It is unlikely that Uzbekistan's cyber police have extended their influence into the Alps.

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<sup>130</sup> See website at: <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services.html>

## **Underestimating the Challenge of Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia**

As studies by Polat, Hartman, and others have shown, the Uzbek government initially assumed that the uprising in Andijan was the work of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or similar jihadi groups. As would become clear later, this was not the case: instead, the perpetrators belonged to an Islamic grouping that the Uzbek government had tolerated and even praised, and whose radicalization appears to have occurred very fast in the face of the imprisonment of many of its members in a local dispute with the governor of the province.

A decade after the tragic events in Andijan, in a world subjected to daily news about car bombings, beheadings, and murder across the Muslim world, events in Andijan have acquired a deeper, different context than they had a decade ago. In 2005, a lack of foreign journalists on the ground in Andijan combined with subsequent Uzbek government media restrictions in the tragedy's aftermath served to create an atmosphere where objectivity was in increasingly short supply. This caused many Western media outlets in the absence of all the facts to gradually judge the events there in an increasingly harsh light where increasingly lurid accounts were met with stout denials. Accordingly, the blame for the absence of a full accounting of events in the Ferghana Valley even now can be apportioned between the Western media's rush to judgement, compounded by the Uzbek government's hesitant, but subsequently increasingly strident and nationalist response.

Missing in nearly all the initial and later accounts of events in Andijan from the outset was a balanced perspective of the genuine concerns of the Uzbek government about potential extremist implications surrounding the Andijan unrest, which manifestly involved armed men having taken civilian hostages following lethal raids on Uzbek security forces. At the time of Andijan, three of Uzbekistan's

neighbors had suffered from Islamic extremism. In Afghanistan, a civil war erupted in 1979 that continues to this day. Tajikistan in the aftermath of the 1991 breakup of the USSR descended the following year into a civil war between the government and Islamic militants, which ended in 1997, leaving 50,000 dead and more than a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Kyrgyzstan also suffered from militant unrest, where militants basing themselves in the south of the country mounted attacks into Uzbekistan. Most notable was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), formed in 1998 by Tahir Yuldashev and former Soviet paratrooper Juma Namangani, ethnic Uzbeks from the Fergana Valley, with the objective to overthrow Karimov and to create an Uzbek Islamic state under Sharia. The IMU now has a presence in all three nations.

Namangani became involved in the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war and fought alongside the Islamic opposition there with a small force that had followed him from Uzbekistan. On February 16, 1999, six car bombs exploded in Tashkent in an attempt to kill Karimov, killing 16 and injuring more than 100. Karimov blamed radical Wahhabi Islamists, and the IMU in particular. Namangani was killed in November 2001, leaving Yuldashev in charge, who in turn would be killed in August 2009. After retreating from Kyrgyzstan in late 2001 to Afghanistan, the IMU was decimated by air attacks in Operation Enduring Freedom. The IMU nevertheless remained focused on Uzbekistan. The year before Andijan, in 2004, a series of terrorist attacks took place in Bukhara and Tashkent, which were claimed by the IMU.

This reality of regional Islamic radicalism and the Karimov government's concern about it is lacking in nearly every account of the Andijan tragedy. The few times when Uzbek government concerns about Islamic extremism were addressed outside of specialist literature, it was usually downplayed and portrayed as an attempt by Uzbekistan to wheedle more aid out of foreign governments and the U.S. in particular in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. As for the IMU, in subsequent years it reinvented itself as an ally of al-Qaeda and the Taliban and continues its campaign to overthrow the Karimov regime. The IMU now has an internet presence through its website, [furqon.com](http://furqon.com).

The reach of the IMU has expanded since then. IMU leader Bekkay Harrach, who was also known as Al Hafidh Abu Talha al Almani, was killed while leading a suicide squad assault on Afghanistan's Bagram Airbase on May 19, 2010. The IMU also claimed it carried out the May 29, 2013 suicide assault on the governor's compound in Panjshir in concert with the Afghan Taliban. In ongoing evidence of its regional stretch, in 2014 the IMU claimed that it carried out the June 9 suicide assault on a terminal at Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, Pakistan, that killed at least 18 Pakistanis, including 11 security personnel, and 10 jihadists.<sup>131</sup>

The IMU has been growing from strength to strength in Afghanistan. The day before the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Andijan, RFE/RL reported that Kabul-based Center for Conflict and Peace Studies researcher Hekmatullah Azamy, after numerous conversations with Afghan officials, estimates the number of IMU fighters now fighting in Afghanistan to be 5,000-7,000.<sup>132</sup> Beginning in autumn 2014, Afghan officials increasingly saw the IMU as responsible for fierce battles and increased violence in the provinces of Zabul, Baghlan, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Takhar, Faryab, Jowzjan, and Badghis, the latter six bordering Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The IMU's alliance with the Taliban allowed the militants to develop sanctuaries in northern Afghanistan. Most ominously, Azamy noted that over the past several years, the IMU had become an umbrella organization for Jundallah, Junad al-Khalifa, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Islamic Jihad Union, which support its goal of destabilizing Central Asian governments starting with Uzbekistan—eventually aiming to replace them with an Islamic regime.

On July 22, 2015, the Governor of Kunduz, Mohammad Omar Safi, admitted that besides the Taliban and IMU, ISIS, Pakistani Jundullah, and other militant groups now operate in his province, which shares a frontier with Tajikistan.<sup>133</sup> The same day that Safi spoke, the Afghan defense ministry's spokesman, Dawlat Waziri, stated that four out of every 10 armed insurgents are foreign militants, who in-

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<sup>131</sup> Zahir Shah Sherazi, "Zarb-i-Azb: The 'War of Survival,'" *Dawn*, July 14, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Abubakar Siddique, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Overshadows Afghan Battlefield," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 12, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> "Militants creating safe haven in Afghan border regions," *Shamshad TV*, July 22, 2015.

clude Uzbeks, Pakistanis, Uyghurs, Chechens, Tajiks, and Arabs fighting in different Afghan provinces.<sup>134</sup> Two months earlier, a group of Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan, claiming to be from the IMU, posted an internet video of members beheading an Afghan soldier before announcing that it was pledging allegiance to the terrorist organization calling itself the Islamic State. In making the announcement, Sadulla Urogenji said that the IMU no longer views Taliban leader Mullah Omar as leader, since he has not been seen since October 2001 and consequently, "according to Shari'a, Omar can no longer be regarded as 'Amir al-Mu'minin.'<sup>135</sup> Because of this, Urogenji said that the IMU was recognizing the authority of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi. If Urogenji's assertions prove accurate, then the IMU has affiliated itself with the most powerful extremist Islamic faction in the world today, one that claims obligatory theological sovereignty over every true Muslim.

The IMU's seventeen-year-long Central Asian peregrinations—from Uzbekistan through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan, then Pakistan before returning to Afghanistan—began after its failed bid for power in the Ferghana valley in the early 1990s. However, the government crackdown, the end of the Tajik civil war, and massive U.S. air attacks on their positions in Afghanistan pushed the IMU down first into Tajikistan, and then into the Pakistani Federal Administered Tribal Areas. But the Pakistani military's operation against the IMU, Operation Zarb-e-Azb in June 2014, had the unintended consequence of sending IMU militants back in large numbers to Afghanistan's border with Central Asian states. In a discussion in Washington in mid-2015, Afghan Member of Parliament Shinkey Zehin Korakhil commented that Afghan officials had a good idea what would happen when Pakistan started its Zarb-e-Azb military offensive in North Waziristan in 2014: "When Pakistan forced them out from the periphery, where else

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<sup>134</sup> "War with unknown ending," *Mandegar*, Kabul, July 22, 2015, p.6.

<sup>135</sup> "Commander of the Faithful" is the Arabic styling for "Caliph." "Uzbek Group In Afghanistan Pledge Allegiance To Islamic State," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 30, 2015.

could they go?"<sup>136</sup> This has led Uzbek militants to also reestablish their presence in post-Soviet Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan.<sup>137</sup>

Uzbek militants have divided into several organizations over the years. The IMU's decision to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi in 2015 led it into a serious conflict with the Taliban, which ended up reducing the organization's stature. Yet many Uzbek militants had already begun to flock to Syria, where the established two separate entities: Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Imam Buhari Brigade (IBB). These organizations have proven highly active within the umbrella of the Al-Qaeda-aligned Nusra Front, and have rejected pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In fact, analyst Jacob Zenn argues that the IMU's pledge was a result of the movement being "starved of recognition and funds that were diverted to Syria from Afghanistan and of support from al-Qaeda's senior leadership, which was being decimated by U.S. airstrikes in Pakistan and was relocating from Pakistan to new theatres, such as Syria."<sup>138</sup> Thus, while the IMU may be in decline, the Uzbek extremist and terrorist groups as a whole have not.

The U.S. government has belatedly begun to address IMU extremism—which was first raised as a topic of concern by the Karimov administration two years before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. On July 20, 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that 56-year old Irfan Demirtas, aka Nasrullah, a dual Dutch-Turkish national, made his first appearance in the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia on a federal indictment charging him with terrorism offenses arising from his support of the IMU.<sup>139</sup> When Demirtas's indictment was announced, Assistant Attorney General for National Security John P. Carlin said, "According to the allegations in the indictment, Demirtas provided material sup-

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<sup>136</sup> "Central Asian Militants Return To Northern Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 3, 2015.

<sup>137</sup> "Seventy people detained in north Tajik region for involvement with banned sects," *Avesta*, July 16, 2015.

<sup>138</sup> Jacob Zenn, "The Decline of the IMU: What Next for Central Asia's Jihadis?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 4, 2016.

<sup>139</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Press Release. United States: Facilitator and Fundraiser for Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Extradited to United States to Face Terrorism Charges," July 20, 2015.

port to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a designated foreign terrorist organization, through his fundraising and recruiting activities.”<sup>140</sup> Demirtas was charged on December 8, 2011, in a sealed four-count indictment for activities from January 2006 through May 2008, during which time the indictment charged him with providing material support to terrorists, which carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison; providing material support and resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization (maximum penalty of 15 years in prison); receiving military-type training from a foreign terrorist organization (10-year prison sentence), and using or carrying a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence, which carries up to a mandatory 30-year prison sentence. In January 2015, Demirtas was arrested in Germany and subsequently extradited to the United States because of his role as the European-based fundraiser and recruiter for a designated terrorist organization that directly worked against U.S. forces and its allies in Afghanistan.

Closer to home, on July 13, 2015, the terrorism trial of Uzbek national Fazliddin Kurbanov opened in Boise, Idaho. Kurbanov was arrested on May 16, 2013, after a federal grand jury in Boise returned a three-count indictment charging Kurbanov with one count of conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, one count of conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists, and one count of possessing an unregistered destructive device; a federal grand jury in Salt Lake City further returned an indictment charging Kurbanov with one count of distribution of information relating to explosives, destructive devices, and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>141</sup> Less than a month after the Boston Marathon bombing, FBI agents raided Kurbanov’s Boise apartment, where they found chemicals, bomb-making components, and seized numerous hard drives, computers, and phones.<sup>142</sup> The Utah indictment alleges that Kurbanov intended that the videos, recipes, instructions, and shopping trips be used to make an explosive device for the “bombings of a place of public use, pub-

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, “Boise Man Arrested; Terrorism Charges Filed in Idaho and Utah,” May 16, 2013.

<sup>142</sup> Katie Terhune, “More charges for Boise terrorism suspect,” *KTVB*, December 2, 2014.

lic transportation system, and infrastructure facility." Assistant U.S. Attorney Aaron Lucoff read to the jury one intercepted e-mail, "It's going to be like Oklahoma City, right?" Kurbanov's IMU contact asked, to which Kurbanov replied, "Yeah, yeah, maybe more."<sup>143</sup> As for a possible target, Kurbanov allegedly told the FBI source during a secretly-recorded conversation, "For me the best ... a military base. If I have all the stuff... Like bomb, like this and this one. I want to kill a lot of military... ." <sup>144</sup> Authorities said Kurbanov "had an unwavering commitment to kill personnel at a military base or civilians at crowded Fourth of July celebrations in downtown Boise." He was sentenced to 25 years in prison in January 2016.<sup>145</sup>

While the IMU issue was frequently derided as an attempt by Karimov's government to win sympathy and funding in the West, recent events indicate that now even the U.S. government is starting to pay close attention to it. Given the benefit of hindsight, the durability of IMU-derived radical organizations and their shift from Pakistan to northern Afghanistan in provinces abutting Uzbekistan, the concerns of the Karimov government first raised more than a decade ago about Islamic terrorism should not have been so cavalierly dismissed. Indeed, it was in this context that Tashkent's reaction to the armed uprising in Andijan was formed.

Concerns about the possible broader impact of Islamic radicalization of Central Asia and its implications for Uzbekistan were noted even within the country before Andijan. Validating Tashkent's concerns about Islamist activity in the Fergana Valley a year after Andijan, Anna Matveeva, a visiting fellow with the Crisis States Research Centre at the London School of Economics (LSE) wrote, "Islamist cells were known to have existed in the Andijan province of Uzbekistan well before the May 2005 uprising. They occasionally clashed with police and special forces when their strongholds were raided, and were able to inflict casualties

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<sup>143</sup> John Sowell, "Terrorism trial: Boise resident planned 'major attack,' prosecutor says," *The Idaho Statesman*, July 14, 2015.

<sup>144</sup> Katie Terhune, "Prosecutors: Boise terrorism suspect wanted to target military base," *KTVB*, January 5, 2015.

<sup>145</sup> "Idaho Terrorist Sentence to 25 Years in Prison," *Boise State Public Radio*, January 7, 2016.



and kill a number of commanders. The Islamists possessed military-style weaponry, had a degree of training, and refused to surrender alive or give information under interrogation and torture. Most were young Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the Ferghana Valley, but there was no evidence of involvement of foreigners from outside Central Asia."<sup>146</sup>

Ironically, the year before Andijan, even Bukharbaeva acknowledged the government's concerns about rising extremism, writing in April 2004,

Four days of violence in Uzbekistan last week have shaken the central Asian state to its core. It is not the first time the country has seen clashes involving Islamist militants, but previously they were confined to border regions [...] These attacks – shootings, gunfights and, reportedly, suicide bombings, with 47 dead – came out of the blue [...] The attackers demonstrated they had the capacity and nerve to strike at the heart of the country. They made Karimov look vulnerable and encouraged him to become more repressive, alienate more people, and heighten tensions. As an exercise in creating instability, that's a dangerous start.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Anna Matveeva, "Violent Valleys: Islam Threatens Corrupt Secularism," *The World Today* 61, no. 7, July 2006: 23-24.

<sup>147</sup> Galima Bukharbaeva, John MacLeod, "Comment & Analysis: Neighbourhood watch: Attacks by Islamist militants in the previously 'safe' haven of Uzbekistan are likely to unsettle both the region and its western friends," *The Guardian*, April 7, 2004.

## Conclusions

Of all the areas of dispute over what happened in Andijan, the most contentious is undoubtedly the number of fatalities. According to official figures, 187 people, including law enforcement personnel, were killed in the violence. Local eyewitnesses and independent human rights groups say the real number of dead was far higher. As noted, Muhammad Solih, founder and leader of the Erk political party, estimated more than a thousand casualties, while the Hizb ut-Tahrir subsidiary 1924.org claimed that 20,000 died. While such a number was clearly absurd, it resonated in cyberspace as black propaganda both against the Karimov regime and for its replacement with a caliphate, a possibility that seems less farfetched in light of the rise of the Islamic State.

A decade after Andijan, high casualty figures continue to be reported as fact despite a lack of corroborating evidence. On May 15, 2015, Turkey's *Daily Sabah* newspaper reported, "Uzbek security forces fired machine guns into the crowd above the square without warning ... as many as 1,500 people were killed in the Andijan Massacre."<sup>148</sup>

In reality, no person or organization has advanced definite proof of any kind that challenges the Uzbek government's number of 187 dead beyond unconfirmed accounts of unnamed eyewitnesses. As with the death of Shelkovenko, where torture was alleged until independent forensic evidence disproved the charge, so with Andijan the Uzbek government has again been judged guilty without corroborating evidence, with Western governments and NGOs summarily dismissing the government's version of events. Similarly overlooked in most Western accounts is the organized violence that preceded the Andijan tragedy – the mili-

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<sup>148</sup> "Muslims jailed on political charges in Uzbekistan draw worldwide condemnation," *Daily Sabah*, May 15, 2015.

tant gunmen in the square and their violence the night before have been air-brushed out of most Western accounts. The most careful subsequent studies of Andijan—such as those by Polat and Hartman—largely support the ballpark range of the Uzbek government’s number of fatalities.

One of the few news agencies to not inflate Andijan’s casualty figures with time is the BBC, which reported on March 31, 2015, the Uzbek government’s “overall toll” of ca. 190 deaths, including those killed by the insurgents.<sup>149</sup> Most Western news agencies have continued to go with more lurid figures while continuing to overlook or downplay the fact that the night preceding the events saw insurgents shortly attack a police post, kill officers and seize submachine guns, grenades, and pistols from the post’s weapons depot, and subsequently assault a military base, shooting five servicemen, acquiring more weapons, after which they stormed Andijan’s central prison and released hundreds of high security prisoners.

Materials to dispute the Uzbek government’s numbers, such as the list compiled by Ozod Dehqonlar members that counted “at least” 745 dead have not been released. The credibility of other sources, such as purported former SNB officer Ikrom Yakubov’s figure of more than 1,500 dead, has failed to stand up under scrutiny. Other sources, including Bukharbaeva and Murray, have seen many of their statements refuted by documentary evidence, and have offered differing figures at differing times; surely all their variants cannot be correct.

It should be noted in closing that on March 22, 2015, RFE/RL Uzbek service Ozodlik Radiosi reported that according to a January report from London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), at least 500 ethnic Uzbeks are currently fighting for ISIS, the most from any post-Soviet Central Asian nation.<sup>150</sup> Of the post-Soviet nations, the ICSR report estimates the most ISIS volunteers as coming from Russia (1,500), followed by 360

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<sup>149</sup> “Timeline: Uzbekistan - A chronology of key events,” *BBC News*, March 31, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> “Узбекистан лидирует в регионе по числу боевиков в рядах ‘Исламского государства,’” [Uzbekistan leads the region in the number of fighters in the ranks of the “Islamic State”] *Озодлик радиосу* [Ozodlik], March 22, 2015.

from Uzbekistan, 360 from Turkmenistan, 250 from Kazakhstan, 190 from Tajikistan, and 100 from Kyrgyzstan.

The reality of the tough geopolitical neighborhood that Uzbekistan inhabits has been downplayed in a rush to judgement over Andijan that continues to this day. What has changed since Andijan is that the effects of Islamic militancy are now too obvious to be ignored, and the human rights records of their regimes is horrifying, to say the least. In such environments the political stability provided by less than democratic regimes should not be so casually dismissed. Fear of Islamic militancy was an element in the Uzbek government's reaction to events in Andijan that was swiftly discounted and dismissed, but upon reflection ten years on, should be woven into any future narrative, however misguided the Uzbek government's reaction might have been.

Two tectonic plates clashed over Andijan—Western insistence, led by human rights organizations, on the magnitude of the tragedy in a context largely devoid of analysis of Uzbekistan's earlier problems with Islamic militancy, and the Uzbek's government's stalwart defense of its version of events. A decade of divergence has left the reality of events in Andijan a decade ago missing as two opposite versions of the dreadful events of that day a decade ago continue to battle for primacy in cyberspace. The fact that the U.S. government is now moving directly against the IMU is a belated tacit acknowledgement that Uzbekistan's government grappled with Islamic militancy predating Andijan, where actions and video taken by the militants led the government to assume the worst.

It seems fitting to conclude with Polat's observations in his monograph: "Both the West and Uzbekistan are equally culpable in perpetuating the mythology about what actually happened in Andijan on that terrible day. If Washington is truly committed to combating fundamentalist terrorism, it should release all of its intelligence on the events of that tragic day. Similarly, Tashkent should unveil all of its information, whether it supports its assertions or not, and both sides should allow the ultimate verdict to be rendered in the court of informed public opinion. To do any less is to dishonor the memory of those who died on that sultry day two years ago."

## Author Bio

John C. K. Daly received his Ph.D. in 1986 from the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London. While at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, where he is currently a Nonresident Senior Fellow, in 1999 he founded *The Cyber-Caravan*, which continues today as *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. Dr. Daly's work has appeared in *Silk Road Reporters*, Jane's Defense Group's *Islamic Affairs Analyst*, *Caspian Crossroads*, ISN, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Dr. Daly has been a commentator on current events for CNN, the Hudson Institute, the Middle East Institute, National Public Radio, Al-Arabiya, Press TV, and Radio Free Asia, among others.