

The Dark Side of the West's Global War on Terror

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Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand: A British Ambassador's Controversial Defiance of Tyranny in the War on Terror* (Mainstream Publishing Company Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 400

Craig Murray's study of relations between Washington, London and Tashkent is both timely and useful in furthering our understanding of the darker side of the West's Global War on Terror. The book is a product of the author's diplomatic experience in the highly important capital of Central Asia -Tashkent - at a very crucial period of British and American engagement in the region. Although the author's principle focus is on the British policies, he has succeeded in critically examining the actions of his masters in London in the larger context of the war on terror. Ever since the US and its allies embarked on the war in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan has been at the centre of Western strategy in both Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. The author's principal purpose, it appears, is to expose the hypocrisies of the Western statesmen, especially those of Blair and Bush. Murray powerfully demonstrates the gap between what Western powers preach about human rights and democracy and what they actually practice. For instance, while Bush and Blair were demonstrating their concern and commitment for the people of Iraq by bombing their country, they didn't think anything was amiss in reinforcing the brutal regime of Islam Karimov in Tashkent. The Western allies awarded financial assistance, military and political support despite the fact that Karimov's government did not tolerate any political opposition to its policies and put up torture chambers for opposition leaders and human rights activists.

At the core of Murray's book rests this simple pronouncement: by turning a blind eye to Karimov's egregious human rights violations and

suppression of political dissent, both Washington and London have shied away from the very values they professed to promote – democracy, respect to human rights and a liberal economy system. In fact, the author questions the rationale of unremitting economic assistance and political support to Tashkent by Washington and London. Ostensibly, the assistance was meant to beef up Karimov's regime in its fight to suppress the forces of religious extremism mainly Hizb-u-Tahrir (HuT) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) which is now known as Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT).

The allies' willingness to prop up Karimov can be partly understood when placed in the context of the larger necessities of the war on terror. With religious extremism and terrorism acquiring global dimensions and the emergence of Afghanistan as the epicentre of extremism and terrorism, a global effort to fight this threat became inevitable. Such an effort needed coordination and cooperation of all the states of the region and beyond. Uzbekistan extended full support and cooperation to *Operation Enduring Freedom*. Since Uzbekistan was facing challenges in Ferghana Valley and in other parts of the country, Tashkent's support was understandable. Uzbekistan also provided airbase facilities to the US at Karshi-Khanabad (K-2) which housed two full squadrons of American air force with an additional 2000 foot soldiers. K-2 played an important role in *Operation Enduring Freedom*. In return, Karimov's government got financial, military and political support from Washington in promoting 'stability and safety' within the country.

The issue of religious extremism in Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has been undergoing radical change. However, the extent to which it has impacted varies significantly. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, Islam was historically less politically vital than elsewhere. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, on the other hand, are the front line states. Both are geographically close to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their Islamic institutions are centuries old, and they have institutionalised relations that inextricably bind them to the Islamic cultures in the West and South Asia. The potential for an upsurge of extremist Islam is more likely in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan than in other Central Asian Republics. In the context of changing geo-political configurations in Central Asia, the issue of 'Religious Extremism' gains priority. However, the author overlooks this reality, which in contrast scholars like Alexey

Malashenko, Scholar-in-Residence and Program Co-chair on religion, society and security at the Moscow Center of the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, insightfully provide. Malashenko writings such as *Islam in Central Asia* (Garnet Publishers, U K, 1994), *Islamic Factor in the Northern Caucasus* (Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 2001), *Islam in the Post-Soviet Newly Independent States: The View from Within*, (Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 2001) are seminal work on the threats from religious extremists to the security of Central Asia.

Uzbekistan has been witnessing clashes between secular and extremist forces since its independence from the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991. Murray believes that political deprivation, the deteriorating economic conditions, rampant corruption, a sharp drop in living standards, mass unemployment, and failures on the part of the Uzbek government to address these problems have enabled religious extremism to prosper. One may, with important qualifications, agree with this generalisation. However, one finds it difficult to explain the ambitious agenda of Hizb e-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Turkestan in terms of socio-political-economic deprivations. These radical groups wish to resurrect an Islamic Caliphate, by undermining the secular fabric of the country and also challenging the secular constitutional system that is in place at the present. The author holds Uzbek intelligence agencies responsible for the suicide attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara during March 29–April 1, 2004 which killed 51 people and injured more than 100. However, he does not provide any convincing argument in support of his assertion. On the contrary, there is persuasive information/evidence that the protesters in Tashkent received active support and guidance from forces outside of Uzbekistan which are inimical to the present ordering of the political system. The territory of the neighbouring countries was used for planning and execution of suicide attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara. *Jamoat* (splinter group of HuT) was held responsible for these attacks by the Uzbek government.

Murray seeks to demonstrate the vested interests of the Karimov family in the economic and business policies of his government. The study clearly shows that the Uzbek economy is to a large degree structured to benefit Karimov's immediate family members and close associates. The author highlights the bankruptcy of collective farm system prevalent in Uzbekistan and its negative impact on the Uzbek people. He further questions the plea put forward by the US Department of State and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) for supporting and rewarding

the economic reforms undertaken by Karimov government. Murray is convinced that unless the Uzbek government liberalises the economy, respects human rights and gives due space to the opposition parties and tolerate dissent, Western aid and assistance is undesirable. The author's views are both credible and unimpeachable. Murray has been more consistent and honest than is former masters in Whitehall. It is important to note that the author took the unusual step for a diplomat, when in October 2002, he pronounced publicly on the absence of what he called a 'functioning democracy' in Uzbekistan. That controversial speech at the Freedom House, an American NGO, in Tashkent set him on a collision course with both London and Washington. One US diplomat in Tashkent is reported to have remarked after the event, "Murray is finished man here".

The book, in spite, the occasional outbursts of the author, clinically provides an insight into the sheer incompetence of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and MI6 in assessing and managing the fragile and complicated situation in one of the most important Central Asian Republics (CARs). MI6's overdependence and unverified reliance on CIA's assessment and information about the various terrorists and religious extremist groups/parties/organisations active in and outside Uzbekistan is one of the primary concerns of the author. The author tried hard to convince the Central Asia section of the Eastern Department in the FCO (through numerous telegrams and diplomatic dispatches) that Uzbekistan has not moved an inch away from the Soviet legacy. The author is of the firm opinion that the US Administration in its blind effort to garner support of Muslim countries in its war on terror turned a blind eye to the worsening situation in Uzbekistan. Murray evidences his observation by citing the case of Muzaffar Avazov, who was reportedly tortured and boiled to death in August, 2001 by the security services of the Uzbek government. The book documents a series of human rights violations by the Uzbekistan security forces in Ferghana (Abdusalom Ergashev), Andijon, Namangan (Erk activists), Bukhora, Samarkand (Prof Mirsaidov whose grandson was killed after his meeting with Craig Murray and Simon Butt, a high ranking official from Eastern Department of the FCO), Jizzak (Bakhtiyor Homroev), Kashkadarya (Atayev) and Tashkent (Muzaffar Avazov) to name some. The book's title seems to have been drawn from the murder of Prof. Mirsaidov's grandson. These violations were questioned by the author himself by attending trial cases in the provincial courts and

advocating for the rights of ordinary citizens. He raised these matters in his meetings with the local governors and was supported by the western NGOs (Soros Foundation), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and European Union in some cases. The author emphasises that such summary trials combined with deteriorating economic conditions, increasing corruption and lack of democratic space have helped terrorism and extremism to grow and sustain. Murray's, ambassadorial tenure is littered by his disagreements with the Eastern Department of the FCO, on large and small policy issues mainly concerning the promotion of human rights (p. 253). The book documents many of these official communications which add authenticity to the author's claim of London's complicity in addressing the issue of human rights.

The British intelligence, not being able to have enough human intelligence resources in Central Asia, heavily depends on US intelligence for information regarding the terrorist organisations. The author disputes the authenticity of US information which, he alleges, for sound reasons, is sourced from unreliable Uzbek sources. However, this view was neither shared nor was it convenient to his bosses in London; however correct the authors assertions may have been. The FCO dismissed it as an insignificant rumbling of a tired and frustrated diplomat. After all the partnership between the British and American intelligence agencies was time-tested and above suspicion! It is important to note here, the historical background to this arrangement. The US-UK intelligence sharing agreement was firmly cemented by the British Prime Minister Churchill and American President Roosevelt. It stipulates that the CIA and the MI6 exchange information on similar lines as the US National Security Agency and the UK General Communication Headquarters.

Adding further to the grievances of his superiors was the author's contention that the global war on terror was not fought for either eliminating the scourge of terror or for the enlargement of freedom and democracy but for the benefit of the corrupt American Republicans greedily eyeing the advantages of controlling oil fields and boosting the weapons industries (p. 159).

Be that as it may, the book, however, fails to dwell on many important and connected issues. For example, it does not enlighten the readers about the external dynamics associated with the terrorist and extremist groups' active in Central Asia in general and Uzbekistan in particular. Nor does it

delve into the ideological and financial supply lines of these organisations/parties/groups. Also, the failure to draw the connection between narco-trafficking and extremist ideology is noticeably missing in the book. The author has shown a tendency to make broad generalisations which are not based on either fact or experience. Murray claims that “Observing the ritual of prayer five times per day is discouraged by government mosques, as is fasting in Ramadan...state religion does not fulfill the spiritual need of the pious” (p. 82). This seems to be an extrapolative leap from insufficient data. This Reviewer spent three years (1998-2001) in Uzbekistan and travelled extensively within the country (visited 90 districts out of 160) but did not come across any such restrictions. Murray’s plea that women in Uzbek society are still living in dreadful conditions (p. 147) draws attention to an important issue by pointing out the extremities than an a balanced statement of fact.

The book is a scathing rebuke on the “diplomatic silence” adopted by the Western powers to the corrupt and dangerous regime in Tashkent and the ease with which they are led by the nose by Karimov. The book is neither a self-presentation nor a righteousness account but a candid observation of a perceptive diplomat trying to make the higher-ups view things in the right perspective and set policy accordingly. None of the representative from European Union, EBRD, US, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), India and others took the view that there was an overriding obligation to tell the truth about the corrupt and ideologically bankrupt Uzbek government, as Craig Murray has done.

Notwithstanding some of the weaknesses, the book remains a brave attempt at chronicling the lies and half truths employed by the Western statesmen in their war on terror. Hopefully, Murray’s bold account will give courage to many more public servants to speak the truth.

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