

Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment

Shirin Akiner

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Introduction

S. Frederick Starr

During May 12 -13, 2005, terrible events occurred in the Uzbekistan's city of Andijan, accompanied by a great loss of life. At that time a band of heavily armed men stormed a national jail in which some of their friends were being held, releasing their friends and also several hundred other inmates, many of whom had been sentenced for capital crimes. The attackers killed some sixty people in the process, including prisoners who, out of fear for their lives, tried to return to the jail. A large crowd assembled and within hours armed security forces fired into it, killing a large number of persons.

Beyond these bare facts, nearly everything concerning the Andijan events is surrounded by controversy. What was the background to the attack? Were those held in jail honest local businessmen or corrupt rent-seekers funding Islamic extremism with profits from illegal deals with the previous administration that had been exposed by a new governor? Did troops fire on a mixed crowd consisting of those who stormed the jail, released prisoners, and local supporters, or on a passive crowd of innocent bystanders? How many were killed: fewer than 200, up to 1,500, or more?

The mass of conflicting evidence on these basic points has not prevented "experts" in many countries from sharing with the public their seemingly firm conclusions on the matter, and from demonizing any other "experts" who may have reached contrary conclusions. Nor has it prevented policy makers in all the world's major capitals from adopting a pose of certainty and, on the basis of that pose, advancing muscular new policies.

Thus, the United States and Europe have systematically discredited the Uzbek government's version of what happened and relied instead on the testimony of human rights activists and partisan journalists, many of them with long histories of opposition to the government of Uzbekistan. Conversely, Russia, China and most of Uzbekistan's regional neighbors have discounted the activists' accounts as biased, and relied instead on the

government's testimony, even though the government's record of opposition to independent and Islamist forces on its territory is equally long.

To date, there is no evidence that either the U.S. or Europeans, on the one side, or Russia, China, and Uzbekistan's regional neighbors, on the other, have at hand any intelligence information not available to the enquiring public. As of this writing, the CIA's only report on the incident covers only background circumstances and stops before the assault on the jail. Russia still has intelligence assets on the ground in Uzbekistan but neither Russia nor China has released a single fact not already in the public realm.

Convinced in the truth of its assessment, the U.S. is considering curtailing or closing its base in Khanabad, Uzbekistan. Convinced in the truth of their assessment, Russia and China are proposing to extend their security and military presence in the region, while asking the U.S. to set a deadline for full departure, including from Afghanistan. In short, both sides are proposing major policy shifts on the basis of untested and highly controversial evidence.

One thing is certain: one or both of the prevailing narratives of the Andijan events must be wrong. 175 deaths caused by both sides (the Uzbek government's approximate total, often repeated in Moscow and Beijing) is not the same as the 325 dead from among the assembled crowd claimed by the *New York Times*, or the 800, 1,500 or several thousand dead claimed by human rights activists. Foreign fighters were either among those who assaulted the jail, as Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs has claimed, or they were not. And so forth.

The obvious question is why the differences have not been settled by a high-level international fact-finding commission, drawn from public citizens and experts with a proven record as dispassionate observers? Such a proposal was made by both the European Union and United States but the government of Uzbekistan summarily rejected it.

Tashkent's rebuff of this proposal seems the height of irrationality, and self-defeating besides. Nonetheless, this decision has a certain logic. A year ago an Uzbek citizen, 35 year-old Andrei Shelkovenko, who had been imprisoned for Islamic extremism, died while in police custody. Human Rights Watch and other organizations immediately disseminated reports asserting categorically that he had died under torture. Most western papers carried these reports. Meanwhile, however, another international group on the

ground in Tashkent, Freedom House, proposed to the government of Uzbekistan to establish a non-partisan commission of international experts to look into the charges. The Uzbeks accepted. A commission was formed, among its members being the Chief Forensic Pathologist of the government of Ontario and three-times U.S. Ambassador Victor Jackovich. The commissioners were given full access to evidence, including to Shelkovenko's body, which had to be recovered from Human Rights Watch, which had illegally hidden it in order to "protect the evidence."

The commission found absolutely no evidence to support the claim that Shelkovenko had died under torture and much evidence that he had long suffered from a life-threatening medical condition. Yet not one major western paper that had carried the earlier story published an update or revision. For its part, Human Rights Watch attacked the commission as a gang of Uzbek toadies.

This, for better or worse, is the likely reason for which Tashkent now rejects calls from Brussels and Washington for an international commission. But it is proceeding with a commission of its own, comprised of people from eight countries, including China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The presence of India, Pakistan, and Iran on this list should have caught the attention of the State Department but it apparently did not. So far the U.S. and Europe have refused to participate in this body. Under the circumstances, it is a foregone conclusion that western capitals will consider the findings of this commission suspect.

Similar controversy now rages around the nature of the government of Uzbekistan under President Islam Karimov. Some see it as filling its jails not with extremists but "especially pious Muslims," in the words of the U.S. Department of State, and thereby "making enemies of the state," to cite a report by the International Crisis Group. Others see Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the chief object of prosecution by the Uzbek government, as violently anti-Semitic and note that it is banned not only in Uzbekistan but in most Arab countries and Germany. In a different vein, the International Center for Prison Studies, points to Uzbekistan's shrinking number of inmates, now barely a third the number per 100,000 population as are held in Russia, and to the fact that 498 investigators from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and 192 prosecutors faced disciplinary penalties in 2003 alone.

Again, both sides of this controversy cannot be right. But our concern here is less with the larger picture than with the quality of evidence on which each side bases its assertions about the events in Andijan. Does the presentation conform to normal rules of journalism, i.e., multiple sourcing, etc.? Is there some protection against possible bias by a given source or author, even when that person may claim to have been an eye witness? Does an account rely excessively on anonymous sources, giving the diligent reader no opportunity to verify independently a particular point of evidence? And are loaded words like “alleged” used against claims by the other side, while reserving phrases like “evidence of an eye-witness” for one’s own side?

Conflicts between what actually is and what we perceive, or think we perceive, are as old as Plato’s *Dialogues* and as modern as today. Thus, during the Vietnam War the American press generally described the 1968 Tet offensive as a decisive victory for the Viet Cong. Only a decade later did former *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reporter Peter Braestrup examine the evidence in his two volume study, *Big Story* (1978), and conclude that militarily Tet utterly failed, yet the Viet Cong nonetheless won a decisive victory in the propaganda war fought over it. Image, as Daniel Boorstin predicted in his 1961 classic, *The Image*, proved more real than reality.

Which brings us to the present report. Prior to Dr. Shirin Akiner’s account, the most comprehensive review available was that of John Daly, entitled “Events in Andijan Anything But Black and White,” and issued by ISN Security Watch on 8 June, 2005. As noted above, no western intelligence unit has conducted a close analysis of the evidence and released its findings to the public. Under the circumstances, anyone who makes a good-faith effort to ferret out and evaluate the evidence deserves our attention, respect, and gratitude.

The report which follows is the work not of an activist, journalist, or pundit but of a scholar, who for thirty years has been actively engaged in the study of Uzbekistan and Central Asia.

Dr. Shirin Akiner is a Lecturer in Central Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and an Associate Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Her seven books, many articles, and frequent BBC commentaries on the region are notable for the directness with which she presents her findings, even when they may cause

displeasure within the country in question, as has sometimes occurred. Unlike many widely-cited “experts” on the Andijan events, she speaks and reads both Uzbek and Russian. Dr. Akiner has no relationship to the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. But on the basis of her writing she shows every sign of being that *rara avis*, a careful and thorough scholar who is cautious in her conclusions but open to whatever findings her research may bring forth. Finally, it is important that Dr. Akiner was *not* an eye-witness to the Andijan events. Indeed, two of the truths that one can take from her report are that eye-witnesses can only be at one place, and by no means all their claims can be treated at face value.

Let it be stated bluntly: this report is by no means the last word on the subject of what occurred in Andijan. The author herself would make no such claim. Further evidence may cause us all to revise fundamentally our understanding of the Andijan events. It is, rather, an attempt to move the discussion away from uncritical polemics and towards a precise and rigorous reconstruction of events on those fatal days in May.

Dr. Akiner’s study sets a standard that any subsequent analysis must meet or surpass if it is to be credible. In the meanwhile, the pages that follow should remind those on all sides of the polemic of the need to exercise caution before reaching sweeping conclusions, on the value of tentativeness in the face of uncertainty, and on the importance of thinking *before* one acts, rather than after.

S. Frederick Starr

Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program

1. Executive Summary

I was the co-director of a NATO Advanced Research Workshop (ARW) on “Global Security Challenges in Central Asia: Impact of Aggressive Religious Extremism and Terrorism on Central Asian States”, to be held in Tashkent 26-28 May 2005. The event was aborted on 18 May, following the decision of NATO Council to ‘postpone indefinitely’ this undertaking. The decision was taken in reaction to reports of violence in Andijan on 13 May.

Canceling the project at this late stage meant that there were organizational details which had to be resolved in person. Accordingly, I went to Tashkent 21-29 May (using the air ticket that had been purchased previously) to attend to these matters. When I was in Tashkent, I made time to visit Andijan. This report is based on my findings there.

My main reason for going to Andijan was to try to understand what had happened on 13 May, as I found the media reports confusing and inconsistent. I had good access in Andijan and was able to visit important locations (e.g. hospital, prison, cemeteries) and to speak to a wide range of people. I do not pretend to have definitive answers, but my tentative conclusions are as follows:

- The death toll was *probably* closer to the government estimate (i.e. under 200 deaths) than to the high estimates (1,000 and above) given in media reports.
- The action was initiated by armed, trained insurgents, some of whom came from outside Uzbekistan.

I did not find indications that the action was driven by religious or socio-economic demands. It seems likely that the motive was political, intended as the opening phase of a coup d'état, on the lines of the Kyrgyz model. The choice of 13 May was, I believe, significant: it was a Friday, the main day of public prayer, and the insurgents appear to have believed that they could rally popular support by linking their action to a religious cause, underlined by the freeing of imprisoned members of the banned Islamist Akromiya movement. This did not in fact happen. I suspect that this incident was not an isolated occurrence, but part of a power struggle that will continue for some time to come.

The international reaction to the Andijan violence was largely shaped by sensational media reports which portrayed the incident as the deliberate massacre of innocent civilians. Very little mention was made of the fact that the insurgents were armed and that they had quite clearly planned the event as a military operation.

In Uzbekistan, some people supported the condemnation of the government by Western sources, but others (from a variety of backgrounds) felt that it was unjustified and opportunistic. It is likely that Uzbekistan will now review its foreign policy priorities. The result will probably be greater emphasis on relations with Russia and China, possibly also with other countries such as Iran and India. It seems likely, too, that participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will receive new impetus. Internally there will probably be a crackdown on human rights activists and NGOs.

2. Report on Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005

2.1. Chronology of events

The following account is compiled from information given to me in Andijan on 25 May. A note on my sources is given in section 2.2 below. Andijan, a provincial capital, has a population of some 300,000. The action took place between the prison, which is situated on the edge of the town, and the central square. The two locations are linked by a wide road (Navoi Street), along which are situated the main administrative buildings, including the Department of Internal Affairs, the Procurator's Office, the Municipal Police Headquarters and the Office of the National Security Service.

2.1.1. First phase: one version

This account was given to me by a witness (HR1) who lives near the prison, in a flat with a balcony looking out on to one of the two roads leading up to the prison. He stated that the action began at 22.50 on 12 May. He said that he had seen 50 armed men drive up to the prison, traveling in 15 or so ordinary passenger cars. At 23.10, he recalled, there was shouting and shots were fired. Local inhabitants came out on to their balconies and called to each other in confusion. At least one person went out on to the street but was told by armed men not to approach any closer. No one knew what was happening. Almost immediately, a large army truck (Ural/ZIL-131) drove up to the prison and rammed the gate half open. As I saw for myself, the metal gate was fairly flimsy; there were no special security features. Some obstacles (pits with metal poles sticking out of them) have now been added inside the compound, behind the gate. HR1 did not mention a gun battle outside the prison, but other witnesses (see below) did. I myself saw numerous bullet marks on the walls and the gate.

When the insurgents entered the gaol, they began to break down the doors to the cells where the prisoners were held. They then gathered the prisoners near the refectory and gave arms to some of them. People in the flats heard women's voices shouting 'freedom, freedom' (I personally did not find this part of the narration very convincing – the tone of delivery made it sound rather like a film script). The women are said to have run down a back path and then disappeared from view. More prisoners followed, running in

slippers (*tapochki*). Meanwhile, on the street leading to the prison, according to this narrator, men in camouflage uniforms were taking up positions – about 50-60 in all. A little later a yellow Moskvitch 412 carrying 3 passengers drove by going towards the prison; the armed men shot and killed the passengers. The same scene was repeated some 20 minutes later. HR1 commented that it ‘looked like in a film’. He thought the camouflage clothing looked like ‘spetznaz’ uniforms, but when pressed, he agreed that he did not have a clear view since it was dark and they were under the trees, some way from his balcony. Moreover, that type of clothing can readily be bought in the bazaar, so this in itself is not reliable evidence of the men’s status.

HR1 commented that later, when other armed men passed beneath his balcony, he heard them speaking in various dialects. Some were from Andijan, but others were from Tashkent, Bukhara and, he thought, Kyrgyzstan. This point was made to me by various other witnesses. Some thought they detected a Tajik accent among some of the insurgents. There was also a comment (Hos1 in particular) that a couple of the insurgents spoke Russian among themselves, but that they were not Russians and their use of the language was faulty. The assumptions (as stated to me by these witnesses) were either that this was their only common language or that they did not want to be understood by others.

2.1.2. First phase: other versions

All the other accounts, including those from the prison staff, specified that the action began at around 12.30 am. A number of things seem to have happened in quick succession. According to MK1, a resident of Gumbaz mahalle, it was at this time that they heard shouts and shots. Some local people came out to see what was happening, but the head of the mahalle committee (neighborhood organization) told them to stay calm and go back inside their houses. During the night he learnt that insurgents had tried to take the army post that is located in the middle (residential streets on either side) of his mahalle; however, 300 troops are stationed there and they were able to repulse the attack. Either just before or just after this – exact timing was not clear to me - insurgents attacked and took control of a police patrol post some 6-7 km away. Here they acquired weapons and ammunition. They then attacked a second, smaller base (100 soldiers) that was close by. The insurgents were dressed in uniform and the soldiers initially thought that

they were comrades from another unit – so opened the door to them. In the ensuing struggle three soldiers were killed and several others wounded. From this point onwards all the witnesses I spoke to described the same sequence of events as set out above. However, there was a discrepancy in the timing, since HR1 insisted – I pressed him several times on this – that the prison was stormed at around 11.30 pm, but everyone else placed this event at around 1.00am (i.e. 1 hour 30 minutes later than specified by HR1). I could not get any explanation for this divergence.

At the gaol, as noted above, prisoners were freed from their cells. The prisoners I spoke to later (Pr1 and Pr2), as well as prison officers, stated that they numbered around 500. Some 200 others, housed in a different part of the building, were left behind. The assumption was that either there had been no time to free them or that they had simply been forgotten in the general confusion. Three prison guards were killed and several others wounded. According to an account given to me by one of the prisoners (Pr2), the insurgents shouted ‘Allahu akbar’, ‘Jihad’. They recognized a cellmate of his who was an Akromiya member. They greeted him and gave him a weapon. The other prisoners in his cell were forced out into the prison yard – some tried to hide under their beds but were dragged outside. Those who continued to resist were killed by the insurgents, including two of Pr2’s cellmates. Their corpses were piled into the boot of a car and later thrown down in front of the Hokimiyat (Mayor’s Office) in the centre of the town.

2.1.3. Second phase

All the witnesses that I spoke to agreed that after the prisoners had been freed, they were surrounded by the insurgents and forcibly marched down the main road towards the building of the National Security Service (SNB). Here they were made to stand as a human shield in front of the railings while the insurgents fired on the building behind them. There was a fierce gun battle which seems to have gone on for quite some time. One of the prisoners whom I spoke to later in the day (Pr1) explained that he saved himself by lying face down in the water channel that runs along the road. He stayed there until it began to get light at about 3.00 am. He then climbed out of the ditch and began to run. He was from Tashkent and did not know which way to go. He eventually turned up at their airport. By this time the insurgents had moved on. Pr1 thought that the insurgents had taken the building, but

this later proved not to be true. Estimates of total losses among insurgents and SNB men at this point in the day varied from 20-50.

2.1.4. Third phase

By about 4.00 am the insurgents reached the main square and took the Hokimiyat, which was almost deserted save for the night watchman. They also threw Molotov cocktails into the cinema and theatre in the main square (I do not know exactly when this happened), setting them alight. I saw these buildings from the street; the windows had been broken and the outer walls showed signs of serious fire damage. At some point the insurgents also set fire to passenger cars that were standing in the square. All the accounts that I heard agreed on these points. There was also agreement that the prisoners were lined up against the railings, again acting as a human shield. The insurgents stood guard over them. The bodies of those that had been killed in the prison were thrown down in front of the railings.

2.1.5. Fourth phase

By about 8.00 am people were beginning to gather in the square. No one had any idea of what had happened and some people entered the building to go to work. They were taken hostage. Soldiers and others were also taken hostage. They were tied up and some were badly beaten. Others were mutilated and shot; one man had both his ears sliced off and another had his eye poked out (account given by hostage – Hosi). These descriptions were graphic and seemed to describe actual incidents. Comments that the insurgents had molested and raped some of the female hostages, however, seemed to me to be vague and unconvincing.

Reinforcements had by this time been flown in from Tashkent. They do not appear to have entered the square but to have stood some distance off, across the main road. Meanwhile, a crowd was gathering in the square, in front of the Hokimiyat. The word that was used by HRI to describe most of bystanders in the square was 'gawker' (*zevak*). I could not find anyone who heard slogans or protests of a religious nature. Equally, no one appears to have heard any economic or political protests. However, one witness recalled that the insurgents harangued the crowd about the government's brutality and pointed to the corpses that they had brought with them as evidence of this. While this was going on, a prisoner (Pr2) whom the insurgents had thought to be dead regained consciousness. He recounted his story to me

himself. He told me that he called out to the crowd to save him, telling them that it was the insurgents, not the guards, who had tried to kill him. An insurgent aimed a gun at him and was about to shoot him. Pr2 was a remand prisoner and so was wearing his own clothes. Thus, it was not obvious to the crowd that he was from the gaol. An old man pushed to the front of the crowd and asked why the insurgents were killing the youth. He then grabbed hold of Pr2 and pulled him to safety. Other people carried the young man to the cinema, where his wounds were treated by the ambulance brigade (before leaving the prison he had been shot in the back of his right shoulder by the insurgents). When Pr2 was well enough to walk, he went home to his parents, who live in Andijan.

2.1.6. Fifth phase

President Karimov flew to Andijan on 13 May and spent some hours in the town. However, no one I spoke to commented on his visit. During the morning negotiations were opened with the Minister for Internal Affairs, Zakir Almatov. Talks between the government and the insurgents continued throughout the day but were inconclusive. Some accounts indicate that the insurgents put forward specific demands, others speak of vague, preposterous statements. The authorities, apparently in an attempt to avoid bloodshed, offered them a safe passage to the Kyrgyz border. According to HOSI, who was held within the building, and also to some witnesses who were outside (including HRI), the insurgents began to slip out of the Hokimiyat building at about 4.00 pm, dividing into three groups so as to be less noticeable. The majority seem to have escaped successfully by about 5.00 pm. Later that afternoon the authorities announced through loud speakers that they were going to storm the building and ordered everyone to leave the square. The roads out of the square were not blocked off, so it would have been possible for civilians to leave.

According to HRI, at 6.30 pm an armoured vehicle (BTR) drove up to the Hokimiyat without firing. A little later, according to this version, a second armoured vehicle approached the building and troops travelling in this vehicle opened fire on the people in the square. There is some indication that they were responding to shots fired from the crowd. There also appears to have been a fierce exchange of fire when the troops entered the building, indicating that quite a few insurgents were still there. Several of the latter were killed, but some – including two, identified by HOSI as Gulyom and

Aziz, who had allegedly tortured people inside the Hokimiyat - were taken prisoner. When I went to Jizzak (a town south of Tashkent and west of Andijan) a few days later, another human rights activist (HRJ) told me that he heard gun shots while he was speaking to someone in Andijan by telephone. He specified that this was at 5.00 pm. When I pressed him for more detail, he admitted that he did not know who was firing the shots, but his perception was that they possibly came from the crowd - but his reply was vague and he had clearly not thought about this before.

2.1.7. Sixth phase

By nightfall on 13 May the government troops had regained control of the town. In all, they captured about 100 insurgents, and seized some 300 firearms and over 200 grenades. According to some witnesses the town soon returned to normal, but according to foreign reports, there was a large protest meeting on 14 May.

Over the next few days most of the prisoners who had been freed from gaol returned voluntarily to captivity (nearly 500). To my knowledge, no Akromiya members returned. Several of the insurgents are said to have moved to Korasu, a town that straddles the river that marks as border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. There they mingled with other refugees who were also trying to cross into Kyrgyzstan (estimates of numbers differ widely). Eyewitness accounts confirm that among the refugees there were many young men who were carrying firearms. In the following days there were reports of demonstrations in Korasu. These appear to have been provoked by the closing of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. This action was greatly resented for two reasons: one was that it halted cross-border trade - the mainstay of the local economy - the other that it separated families who had households on both sides of the river. I did not visit Korasu myself, so can only report these comments at second hand. In Tashkent the general opinion was that within a few days the Korasu demonstrators had been peacefully dispersed. Some (estimates vary) of those who had fled to Kyrgyzstan subsequently returned voluntarily to Uzbekistan.

2.2. Sources

During my visit to Andijan I spoke to some 40 witnesses. They included madrassah students and teachers; imams; local elders and members of

mahalle committees; cemetery keepers and gravediggers; doctors; prisoners and prison staff; bazaar traders; government officials and law enforcement officers; independent human rights activists; one hostage. These interviews took the form of informal conversations, though wherever possible I made notes as people were speaking to me. Thus, they were aware that I was not chatting idly to them. The conversations lasted between 20 to 45 minutes. Sometimes I spoke to people separately, sometimes with up to four other people present; in the madrassah I spoke to a class of about 15 students. In the prison I spent over an hour, in the hospital about 30 minutes. I have not mentioned any names in this report because I did not ask anyone for permission to do this.

The main witnesses quoted in the account above are:

HosI - Hostage

HRi - Andijan representative of a country-wide human rights organisation

HRJ - Jizzak representative of a (different) country-wide human rights organisation

MKI - Member of Gumbaz mahalle committee

PGI - Prison governor

Pr1, Pr2 - Prisoners

2.3. Numerical Estimates

In the media reports from Andijan there was a huge variation in estimates of numbers, so I tried to clarify the picture for myself.

2.3.1. *Crowd in Square*

Media reports spoke of 2,000-10,000. I paced out the square in front of the Hokimiyat and estimated that the area measured about 30 metres by 50 metres. At a tight squeeze, perhaps 3,000 people might be accommodated in this space. It is true that more people could have gathered along Navoi, the main street leading out of the square to the prison, but I did not hear any corroboration of this when I was in Andijan. It should also be borne in mind that in front of the Hokimiyat there were flowerbeds and also a couple of parked cars. The cars were set on fire by the insurgents (I saw the scorch marks on the stone) and no one would have been able to stand close to them.

A witness interviewed by the BBC claimed to have seen crowds occupying Navoi Street for a distance of 2 kms from the square. I am dubious about this: the witness did not apparently specify where he/she was standing, but it would be difficult for anyone stationed near the Hokimiyat to get a clear view along Navoi. Also, if the street had been packed with people for this distance they would probably have numbered more than 10,000 – and the town would probably have been brought to a standstill. No one mentioned that this had happened.

In the square, flowerbeds were not trampled and there were no signs that I could observe of recent replanting. There was also no sign of bloodstains on the pavement. Of course there might have been a massive clean-up operation after the disturbances, but I neither heard nor saw anything while I was in Andijan that confirmed that this had happened. Some foreign media reports state that on the morning of 14 May there was a large rally in the square – indicating that the area was clear and open to the public. If there had been a clean-up operation, it would have had to have taken place during the night of 13-14 May, as government troops only gained control of the Hokimiyat at about 7.30-8.00 pm. As I saw for myself, it was already deep twilight by this time in the evening, so any such operation would have had to be conducted in the dark.

2.3.2. Number of Insurgents

No one had a clear idea as to how many insurgents there were. The description of the number of cars that approached the prison at the start of the attack indicates that at this stage some 50-60 insurgents were involved. Descriptions of other stages of the operation suggest that there were more groups elsewhere in the town. At a very approximate guess, the total number was 150-200 (official sources suggest 200). Around 50 seem to have been killed, and another 100 arrested (though possibly not all of these were involved in the action). The remainder escaped, apparently to Kyrgyzstan.

2.3.3. Death Toll

This is the most controversial and disputed feature of the Andijan violence. Estimates have ranged from around 170 (government sources) to 3,000 (media reports). Attempting to triangulate the available evidence, I visited three cemeteries (the central cemetery and two neighborhood cemeteries) and spoke to the cemetery keepers and grave diggers to check how many burials

they had had over the past week (Muslim graves are more complicated in structure than Christian graves and time and skill is required to prepare them). I then walked through the cemeteries looking out for newly dug graves. I found that the average number of new graves in the places that I visited was 8 (10, 10, and 4). There are in all some 20 graveyards in Andijan. At a rough estimate, this gives a figure of 160 burials in the last few days. There are approximately 10 more graveyards in the vicinity of the town. I did not have time to visit these locations myself. However, an independent witness (a reputable Uzbek scholar who has been working on Islamic groups in the Ferghana Valley for many years) visited Andijan shortly after 13 May and did walk round these cemeteries; he concluded that in all a further 40 burials probably took place during this period, mostly on 14 May. He revisited Andijan on 23-24 June (the period of the 40th day mourning rites, which in this area regarded as a key milestone – see below) and confirmed to me his estimate of around 200 deaths in total. I also talked at some length to imams in the various mosques, asking them how many times they had led funeral prayers (*janaza namaz*) in the entire month of May. Information on this and other clerical activities is recorded and collated by the religious authorities, so the figure they gave me – 300 – was for the whole town for this period. Out of this number, around 100 deaths were the ‘expected’ monthly norm. Again, this indicated that the government estimate was fairly realistic.

Human rights organizations (through representatives in Tashkent as well as Andijan) claim that large numbers of dead were buried secretly in communal graves outside the town. I tried to press various individuals on this, but I was not impressed by their replies – the more I asked for detail the more impatient and vague they became. HRI, who was in general a very precise witness – almost too precise for credibility perhaps (see timings of assault on prison given above) – claimed that ‘over a thousand people had been killed by the government’, but seemed to be relying uncritically on rumour and speculation. One piece of evidence that he found very convincing was that he had been told by some people who had gone to the morgue to collect a relative that they saw the doctor there writing out a certificate (*protocol*) marked ‘no. 1007’. He took this to mean that this was the 1007th victim of the violence. However, even granting that this was indeed a death certificate, without knowing the system of recording deaths in the morgue – the date at which they started this series of certificates – this number is, on its own,

fairly meaningless. There were similar details which, it seemed to me, he believed because he wanted to believe them, but which could as easily have been interpreted differently.

Another way I tried to verify the death toll was by going around the mahalles and asking the aksakals (elders) how many families had lost relatives over the past 10 days. They gave figures that ranged from 3 to 10. They often specified names and professions; some of those who had died were Akromiya members, some were policemen, some were ordinary bystanders – but all were ‘our children’, each grieved over. In Uzbek society great importance is attached to mourning ceremonies. There are several stages in this process, all of which have a communal, semi-public element. After the funeral, which has to be performed within 24 hours of death, the first major obligation is that a bench must be placed in front of the house and close male relatives, dressed in special robes (*chapan*), must hold vigil there for three days. On the 7th day there is a memorial meal to which friends and relatives are invited; a similar event is held several more times, notably on the 20th day, 40th day, and again after a year. It is a matter of family honor and conscience that all the proper rites be observed. Thus, if there had been a large-scale massacre (e.g. 1,500 deaths), not only would the whole town be traumatized, but there would be signs of mourning on every street. It would be immediately obvious which families had lost kin. I know of no reports that indicate that there was such mourning. On the contrary, I saw people going about their daily business as usual, laughing and joking in a relaxed way. When I put this point to human rights activists, they replied that people were afraid, that life must go on, and so forth. Yet even during the 1930s, at the height of the Stalinist terror, virtually everybody adhered to these funeral traditions. It is hard to believe that an exception would have been made on this occasion. Moreover, if people had been forcibly prevented from observing the conventional mourning rites it would probably have provoked a major public outcry.

There are a few other points of that are worth considering. One is the number of injured people: a week after the event, government sources stated that around 250 people were still receiving hospital treatment. Bearing in mind that not all the injured required hospital treatment and that some would have recovered during the week, this figure suggests that the total number of wounded would have been somewhere in the range of 500-600. If the death toll were in the range of 170-200, this would represent

approximately 1 dead to 3 wounded – a credible ratio of fatal to non-fatal casualties if the operation had been conducted by trained troops (and there are reports to suggest that this was indeed the case). My visits to the morgue and to the local hospital suggested a similar picture.

Some media reports suggest that the dead were taken to a school in Andijan. When I asked human rights activists for more details, they were evasive. *This does not mean that the report that corpses were taken to a school in Andijan is necessarily false*, but personally I did not find the answers of these particular individuals wholly convincing. Also, it must be borne in mind that the daytime temperatures were by this time close to 30°C. Thus, by the following day the smell from the decomposing bodies would have been overpowering. Moreover, the school year was still in progress (term ended in the last week of May), so either alternative arrangements would have had to have been made for quite a large number of children to go to school elsewhere, or a massive decontamination job would have had to be conducted over the weekend. Even if all the equipment were on hand and in good working order (which is by no means certain), it would have taken a large team of trained personnel to carry out the work in such a short period of time. During my discussions in Andijan there was no mention of children being sent to another school neither did anyone allude to a major decontamination exercise. This question – the practical consequences of the school being used as a temporary morgue – was also not addressed in any of the media reports that I have seen. Yet it is an issue that has a direct bearing on estimates of the death toll.

There are other practical details that need to be considered. In order to understand the logistics of the operation it is important to know whether the troops were conscripts or professionals, how well trained they were, what sort of weapons they were using - and how well-maintained those weapons were. If the troops did not have a high level of discipline and were not well trained, it is likely that the ratio of dead to wounded would be very much higher than suggested above. In this case, for every one fatality, there would probably have been at least 5-6 seriously injured people. If these casualties were numbered in thousands, it would be very difficult to conceal them – not least because of the impact on the work force.

Another way of trying to gauge of the scale of the operation is to seek out the impact on the environment – for example, the numbers and location of bullet marks on surrounding buildings and on the monument in the centre of the

square. I did not see any such marks in this area (by contrast, I did note many bullet marks on the prison wall) and I have not heard mention of such damage in any of the media reports. The numbers of spent cartridges would also give some idea of the intensity of the attack. If the government troops had raked the area with automatic fire for any significant period of time there would have been quantities of empty casings lying around. No matter how swift and efficient the clean-up operation, some of the spent cartridges would surely have escaped notice and been found by the local population. This does not appear to have happened.

Finally, some commentators have taken the fact that government estimates of the death toll were revised upwards during the week as a sign of a cover up – yet it could be argued that this actually lends more credibility to the official version, since it would have been surprising if, in the immediate aftermath of the violence, when everything was still fluid and confused, the government had been able to give precise, final figures.

All of the above is circumstantial evidence and *does not prove anything*. However, it seems to me to be sufficient to indicate that the *higher estimates need to be considered more critically*. At present we have little more than the claims of interested parties to support these figures.

2.4. Prison

2.4.1. Prison Regime

The Andijan prison was one of those visited by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Theo van Boven. His photograph hangs in the entrance corridor to the administrative building. He is said to have singled out this place for particular criticism. I saw some parts of the prison as I walked from the outer gate to the office where I had meetings with some of the prison staff and some of the inmates. I do not know what would have happened had I asked for more extensive access. My impression was that it would probably have been granted. However, my aim on this occasion was not to investigate life in prison but to try to understand what had happened on 13 May. I spoke to two prisoners – I set this limit myself because I had other people I wanted to see in Andijan and I knew that I had limited time before my return to Tashkent. I saw the prisoners in the presence of the governor, because I was not intending to ask them anything that I felt might be confidential.

The first prisoner whom I saw (Pr1) was in prison for the second time. He had been sentenced in 2003 under article 97, charged with murder; the tariff for this crime is 20 years. He seemed to be in reasonable physical condition and to comport himself in a self-confident manner, at times arguing with the prison governor. I was curious as to why he had returned voluntarily to prison, when he already knew what conditions were like and knew, too, that even if his case were to be reviewed, he would still have to serve at least 8 years. He gave two reasons: one was that he wanted to be able to go back to his family eventually; another was that in prison he was receiving useful vocational training as a tailor. I asked him about this at some length. He spoke with enthusiasm and some detail about the work team that he and his cellmates had set up. Sewing machines are supplied by a German charitable organization.¹ The clothes that are made by the prisoners are delivered to a representative of this organization based in Andijan.

It may well be that this was all a fabrication, but the circumstantial detail sounded convincing and the prisoner clearly had some idea about tailoring and dressmaking. He also said he had started to learn English. I immediately switched into English. This embarrassed and confused him at first; however, after I repeated a few simple questions, he began to stumble through some answers. Again, this may all have been a charade, but to me, from my own experience as a teacher, his level of English was consistent with his account of receiving lessons for some 9 months. I have quoted his account of the events of 13 May elsewhere in this report. Regarding his return to prison he explained that, after escaping from the insurgents he and two cellmates tried to find the office of the representative to whom the clothes that they made were sent – as he was from Tashkent, this was the only address that he knew in Andijan. He did not find the office, but instead ended up at the airport. On 15 May, he decided to give himself up.

The second prisoner was younger and very nervous. He had been shot by the insurgents and was still bandaged; he seemed to be in pain. He was from Andijan and was awaiting trial under article 163 (theft). It was his third time in prison. He was in a cell with 10 people. He was terrified by the insurgents and tried to hide under the bed when they broke in. When they were forced out into the yard he saw a dead guard. He recalled seeing passenger cars

¹ I did not write this down immediately, so I do not have the correct title, but it is apparently an initiative that has been undertaken by an association of German universities. It would be relatively easy to check this detail.

(Nexia, Matis and Damas) on the street outside the prison. The insurgents asked if he had served in the army – he said no. They did not give him a weapon. He stated that he started to run away and they shot him in the back. Two of his cellmates were shot dead.

Again, this account could have been fabricated for my benefit, particularly as it was recounted in front of the prison governor. However, it included several details that I was able to verify from other sources – and I do not think he could have known that I would be able to do that. Also, even if both prisoners had been briefed in advance of my visit, they would not have had very long to prepare such complicated stories, since the time that elapsed between my request to speak to prison inmates and the time at which I turned up was not very long – in all about 1 hour 30 minutes. The most interesting thing for me in these meetings was that both prisoners had had previous experience of life in gaol, yet they both chose to return. This suggests that the regime was possibly not as gruesome as some reports have suggested.

2.4.2. *Number of Inmates*

Media reports spoke of 2,000 to 4,000 prisoners in the Andijan prison. I do not know where these figures came from. The prison is situated on the edge of the town and encompasses a fairly small area. It does not look like a high security establishment. As I saw for myself, the buildings within the compound – administration, refectory, dormitory etc. – are only a few stories high and not very broad. It is extremely unlikely that thousands of people could be held here. The official figure is 734, of whom around 400 are on remand and 300 have already been sentenced (NB I may have got these figures the wrong way round – I did not at first understand the terminology here). Everything that I saw on my visit to the prison indicated that this figure was credible.

2.4.3 *Prisoners' Actions:*

One of the most curious aspects of the Andijan events is the conduct of the prisoners. By their own account, several of them did not want to leave their cells when the insurgents broke down the doors and they did not want to take the arms that they were offered. One could regard this *post factum* claim as an attempt to show themselves in a better light. However, there are other factors to be taken into consideration. It is known that some of the prison

guards were shot dead by the insurgents. The governor of the prison (PGI) told me that he himself was threatened by the insurgents but that he ‘was saved by his prisoners’. This may or may not be true, but the fact is that he is alive: had the prisoners wanted him dead they could probably have ensured that he was killed in the 30 minutes or so when the insurgents had control of the goal. More significantly, almost all the ‘liberated’ prisoners voluntarily returned to custody within 48 hours.

2.5. Correlative Factors

Many commentators speak of the ‘causes’ of the violence in Andijan. However, as an analytical category, causality is one of the most difficult and disputed philosophical/scientific concepts. This is not an academic paper,² so I shall not labour the point further. Yet it is important to note that we do not have anything remotely approaching a critical mass of objective research to be able to trace with any certainty a deterministic relationship between one set of circumstances and another. For this reason I prefer to think in terms of correlation, which indicates linkage, but leaves open the nature of that linkage (causal, coincidental, indirect etc.). Below I discuss some of the correlative factors that might have contributed to the violence in Andijan.

2.5.1. Economic Factor

Much attention has been focused on the economic situation in Andijan and several reports speak of high levels of poverty. This is misleading. Poverty can be assessed in various ways: by absolute standards – income, access to welfare and public services etc.; by comparative standards – the situation in one place compared with that in another; and by perceptions – how people assess their own situation. In Central Asia in general, it is extremely difficult to get a clear idea of people’s economic status, since there are many informal sources of income and assistance (e.g. exchange of goods, services and facilitating favors), which supplement formal earnings. Thus, although wages are low, this does not necessarily mean that there is great deprivation. In Andijan, whatever indicators are used, it is clear the economic situation is considerably better than in many other parts of Uzbekistan. Agriculture and light industry are well developed; private enterprise is beginning to make an

² These points are discussed further in my paper *Causality, Conflict and the Conceptualization of the Tajik Civil War*, forthcoming shortly in print in a collected volume of papers on the Tajik civil war, to be published by UN University of Peace.

impact. Walking around the streets, looking in shops and cafés, talking with traders in the bazaar, my impression was that the town was relatively prosperous – people had money to spend and were spending it on quite a wide range of services and consumer goods. This is not to say that everyone is doing well. There are certainly people in low-paid jobs – including teachers and other professionals – who do struggle to make ends meet, but they do not appear to constitute the majority in Andijan.

However, there is undoubtedly discontent here, and indeed elsewhere in Uzbekistan. There are three main grievances. One is endemic corruption: bribes have to be paid for virtually every service. Secondly, there is great dissatisfaction over the conduct of local officials: some are clearly abusing their position, while others are incompetent and unnecessarily obstructive. Thirdly, the legal system is regarded as corrupt and inefficient: people contrast this with the Soviet era when, they say, it was possible to go to the courts and know that your case would receive fair and prompt attention.

For reasons such as these, there is a significant level of dissatisfaction throughout society. This is a factor that could be mobilized by opposition forces of any persuasion. Yet it does not appear to have played an active role in the Andijan incident. People might, on an individual basis, complain about particular injustices or grievance, but the crowd that gathered in the square on 13 May does not appear to have advanced any specific demands or complaints. Rather, it was the insurgents who seem to have been the driving force on this occasion. Yet surprisingly (or so it seems to me), despite the fact that they had before them an audience of several thousand, they did not make any political or religious appeals, or articulate any ideological stance. Their negotiations with the government authorities seem to have been primarily concerned with whether or not they would be allowed a free passage out of Andijan. From the accounts that I heard, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the onlookers supported them – I have the impression that at least some people were bemused by the situation and were waiting to see how events would turn out.

2.5.2. Religious Factor

Another issue which has attracted much speculation is the role of religion, and specifically the nature and strength of the Akromiya movement. This movement takes its name from its founder, Akrom Yuldashev, a native of

Andijan. Yuldashev was formerly a member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir,³ but is said to have quarreled with one of the leaders and to have set up his own group in 1996/7. As far as I could gather, its activities and support base are now mainly restricted to Andijan, although reports in the late 1990s suggest that at that time there were branches in several other towns in the Ferghana Valley. Yuldashev was arrested in 1998, charged with having narcotics in his possession. He was amnestied later that year, but in 1999, following the bomb attacks in Tashkent in February, he was re-arrested and sentenced to 17 years in prison, accused of complicity in acts of terrorism.

Yuldashev's primary aim, as is evident from his work 'Road to Faith', written in 1992, is to bring people back to Islam. He presents his ideas in a simple (some would say simplistic) manner. Uzbek scholars of Islam⁴ find fault with his teachings on three main points. Firstly, his lack of formal religious education results in misinterpretations of key texts. Secondly, he propagates heretical beliefs – for example, he is said to instruct his followers that because they/we are living in a time of *jahiliya* (pre-Islamic ignorance), they can drink alcohol and take narcotics; the only precept that they need to hold fast to is belief in the oneness of Allah and the uniqueness of Muhammad as His Messenger. Thirdly, it is claimed that he has drawn up a phased system of training for his followers to prepare them for their mission to establish an Islamic state (caliphate) in the Ferghana Valley. This is the view of the Akromiya that I heard widely expressed by madrassah students and teachers.

Defenders of the Akromiya claim that Yuldashev is only concerned with spiritual matters and that he is therefore not a threat to the state. The pivotal concept here is 'threat'. If Yuldashev's movement is viewed through the prism of the potential to mount an active militant challenge to the government, then it is very unlikely that it does pose a threat. If, however, the ideological aspect is taken into consideration, there is, in my view, a very

³ Islamist group, founded in Jerusalem in the early 1950s, banned in most parts of the Muslim world and in most Western countries, though not UK; it spread to Uzbekistan in early 1990s. Information about this movement (pro- and anti-) is widely available on the Internet, also increasingly in articles and book publications.

⁴ Supporters of the Akromiya often dismiss the opinion of such scholars as though they were ignoramuses; in fact, as foreign Muslims will testify, they have a thorough grounding in Islamic studies and in classical Arabic. Thus, from this stand point, they are certainly competent to comment on the nature of the Akromiya's teachings.

real possibility that the Akromiya – and other radical Islamist groups – do pose a substantial challenge not only to the incumbent government, but also to the way of life that at present prevails in Uzbekistan.

This way of life is still largely secular, but it is changing. In recent years the government has poured increasing resources into promoting Islamic education. The Islamic University in Tashkent is the best of these establishments, but it is by no means the only one – I have visited several state-supported madrassahs (religious colleges) in recent months, including some on this trip. They are proving to be very popular with the general public and all have long waiting lists. The struggle that I observe is not between secularism and Islam, still less between democracy and autocracy, but *between different visions of Islam*. That is where the lines are being drawn: the Akromiya and others like them espouse one interpretation of Islam, the Uzbek authorities another. Thus, for the latter, it is not only the person that holds the gun who constitutes the threat to the state, but the ideological teachers and the political masters who prepare that person to pick up the gun in order to change the nature of the state.

In Andijan, the Akromiya movement appears to be quite small. However, it uses an interesting, and apparently successful, approach to attracting new followers. According to local people (a number of different witnesses gave me roughly similar accounts), the wealthier Akromiya members had set up small businesses (bakeries, sewing circles etc.) and sought workers from among the young male population. Those who were accepted were required to attend ‘study groups’ after working hours.⁵ It was these businessmen who were targeted by the law enforcement authorities and arrested in 2004. Their trials were drawing to a close on the eve of 13 May and it was expected that sentences would soon be pronounced. As I mention elsewhere, local attitudes toward the Akromiya were often negative, especially among madrassah students and teachers. However, I did find that some members of the public (e.g. MKI, a former Communist Party official whom I judged to be in his late 50s), spoke well of them and were inclined to feel that they should be left alone to carry on their businesses and to pursue their socio-religious activities in peace.

⁵ This is reminiscent of the approach used by the Turkish movement led by Fethullah Gülen, active in Uzbekistan in the 1990s; however, there do not appear to be any direct links between these organisations.

There are reports (government sources but also some independent accounts) to suggest that on Thursday 12 May, Yuldashev's father and brothers went around the houses of people they knew telling them to come to the main square the next day as 'prayers would be read in front of the Hokimiyat'. The significance of that day was that it was a Friday – the main day for communal Muslim prayer. However, in the event prayers were not read in the square. Also, the only mention that I could find of any religious content to the insurgency was the account (given by prisoners and prison staff), that after the gaol had been taken, the attackers were heard to shout 'Allahu akbar', 'Jihad'.

2.5.3. *Political Factor*

This, it seems to me, is the most nebulous aspect of the Andijan episode. No claims or demands of a specifically political nature appear to have been made. However, it seems fairly clear to me that the insurgency was an attempted coup d'état. Who carried it out, why, and with what – If any – Internal or external support is a matter for speculation. The Uzbek authorities are now carrying out investigations, but, rightly or wrongly, many will doubt the veracity of their findings.

2.6. Tentative Assessment of events of 13 May

Everything that I heard and saw during my visit to Andijan on 24-25 May convinced me that there are many unanswered questions regarding the violence that erupted in that town 12 days earlier. My tentative conclusions (supported by the accounts of all or most of the witnesses), are the following:

- *This was not a spontaneous demonstration but a carefully prepared attack.* This is indicated by the professional way in which the operation was carried out. It is also worth noting the speed with which the incident made headline news on many international networks – possibly an indication that it was not entirely unexpected (see section 3.1 below). In London, in late April and early May, I myself was aware that there was an expectation in some quarters that 'something was about to happen' in Uzbekistan.
- *This was not a demonstration mounted by peaceful civilians, but an action undertaken by armed men with some degree of military training.* The Uzbek government has given details of

substantial finds of weapons and ammunition on the insurgents (over 200 automatic rifles, 100 pistols and 230 grenades); the Kyrgyz government, too, has confiscated arms from some of those who fled across the border (according to official sources, some 70 weapons were found and returned to the Uzbek authorities).

- During the day there were several fierce gun battles, *resulting in the deaths of around 40 servicemen and a similar number of insurgents* – this gives an idea of the scale of the operation.
- The action was planned for Friday with, I suspect, *the aim of linking it to a religious protest* – or even uprising; however, this did not materialize.
- The attack on the gaol was very likely intended to free the Akromiya adherents, but *there was probably an expectation that the prisoners would join forces with the insurgents*; this did not happen. On the contrary, many of the prisoners had to be forced to leave the gaol; almost all returned voluntarily after a day or two at large.
- *Some of the insurgents were local, but many were from elsewhere in Uzbekistan and some were from Kyrgyzstan and possibly other CIS states (Tajikistan was mentioned once).*
- There were reports that considerable amounts of money had been discovered on some of the insurgents (the sum of US\$ 30,000 had allegedly been found on one of them). *Rumours relating to external funding for ‘dissident’ activities in both Kyrgyzstan and to Uzbekistan have been circulating for some time.* This is in no way proof, but the circumstantial evidence inclines me to believe that it might well have been the case here.

Inconsistencies, uncertainties and ambiguities include the following:

- *Estimates of numbers* – prison inmates, crowd in square, death toll. Numbers varied widely, but I felt that, as far as I could check details, the lower (government) estimates were the most credible.

- Some media and human rights activists claimed that there was a big demonstration in the main square on 14 May. All accounts agree that the government troops only regained control of the situation on the evening of 13 May, when it was already dark (after 8.00 pm). If the square had been awash with blood and hundreds of corpses piled up all over the place, I did not see *how it could have been cleaned up overnight, in the darkness*. Yet the following morning people appear to have been able to enter the square freely and to hold another meeting there.
- There seems to be a discrepancy in the government account of *where and how the wounded were treated*. An official spokeswoman announced recently that some 257 people were still being treated in hospital. I was told that there was only one general hospital in Andijan and that is the one that I visited. It has 250 beds and on the day that I was there it seemed to be half empty. The other hospitals in Andijan, so I was told, are specialist units – maternity, psychiatric, cancer. There is a large polyclinic in the centre of town that I did not visit. It is conceivable that some of the wounded were being treated there, but there was no indication that this was the case. Thus, it is not clear where the wounded were tended.
- One account (HR1) spoke of two armoured vehicles taking part in the storming of the Hokimiyat that began at 6.30 pm; according to this version, troops in the second vehicle suddenly opened fire on the crowd. I had no confirmation or denial of this from other sources. I am left with a query as to whether or not this is what actually happened. And if it did, *were the troops deliberately provoked (by elements in the crowd?) into opening fire?* Throughout 13 May, foreign media reports had been intimating that there had been a violent clash between government troops and ‘innocent bystanders’ – but during the day most of the bloodshed had in fact been between the troops and the insurgents. Towards evening, when it was clear that there was not going to be a popular uprising, might there have been an attempt to ‘manufacture’ a newsworthy incident? *I do not know*, but this needs to be investigated further.

- The authorities are said to have announced over loudspeakers that they were about to storm the Hokimiyat and that people should vacate the square forthwith. I am curious as to *why a substantial number decided to remain*. They were not taking part in negotiations, nor were they putting forward their own demands. There are no suggestions that the roads leading to the square were blocked, so they appear to have made a deliberate choice to remain. *I do not know* if they were coerced into this by armed insurgents within the crowd, but this, too, requires further investigation.

When I returned to Tashkent I discussed events in Andijan with a number of people – at a rough estimate, some 30 individuals – in ‘brainstorming’ groups and singly. They were of different nationalities (Uzbek, other CIS and Western), all drawn from what might be called ‘the thinking public’. Explanations as to who instigated the insurgency may be summarized as follows:

- Some 24 people (various backgrounds) believed that the insurgency had been instigated and funded by Western powers, not necessarily working through official channels but possibly (and more probably) through NGOs. This opinion coincided with a very clear fall in confidence in the West, especially the USA.⁶ The general sense was that it was an attempt to replicate the ‘coloured’ revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.
 - About 3 people (mostly CIS) thought it possible that Russia had had a hand in the insurgency, possibly as a means of frightening President Karimov. This argument was not substantiated by more than a ‘gut feeling’ as to how Russia ‘always’ acts.
 - About 2-3 people (mixed group) thought it possible that President Karimov himself might have engineered the insurgency in order to give credence to the threat of terrorism and Islamic radicalism. Again, the reasoning was that ‘this is the way he works’.
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- 1 person (CIS) suggested that the Taleban might have been involved; another was partially inclined to support this view.
- 1 person suggested that drug traffickers and other criminals might have been behind the operation, two others were partially inclined to support this view (mixed group).

3. Reactions and Consequences

3.1. Media Coverage and International political reaction

I followed the international media coverage of the Andijan events fairly closely during the week 13-21 May. I was struck by the way this item was covered, particularly on UK-based networks. I am told (though I have not yet checked this out personally) that the first report was headlined at 5.00 am on the BBC World Service.⁷ This would have corresponded to 10.00 am in Andijan. From the outset, the event was presented as a popular uprising. Yet at this point what had actually happened was that a group of insurgents of unknown origin had attacked government buildings. Throughout the day, and then over several following days, the story was built up into a ‘massacre of innocent civilians’, a slaughter of peaceful protestors; the estimates of the death toll leapfrogged from 200 to 1,500 and above. From the news wires that I saw, however, it was clear that no one had much idea of what was going on. I found little attempt at critical evaluation of the sources that were used. I suspect that if the chronology of the reports was examined it would reveal that at least some journalists were expecting an ‘incident’ and had a preconceived idea as to how it was going to develop. The initial expectation – and this is certainly the way in which it was described – was that this was going to be a repeat of the Kyrgyz experience.

The information that was presented seems to fall into two categories. One category was ‘live action’ - recordings of sounds and comment from the street: however, these sound bites tell us what individuals saw happening around them, but they rarely tell us who was responsible for any of the actions – i.e. were the insurgents doing the shooting or were government troops doing the shooting? We know – and this is beyond dispute – that the insurgents were armed and that they did engage in several gun battles. Yet there was almost no mention of this in the reporting. The other category was the ‘explanations’ given by apparently objective local residents. Yet these were almost entirely people who were actively opposed to the government. Of course their testimony is important, but it was hardly unbiased. As I

⁷ I heard the first report at 7.00 am that morning on a BBC domestic radio channel.

found myself when I visited the region, they clearly had their own agendas (see section 3.2 below).

The way in which the Andijan events were covered by the media had a major impact on public opinion in the West.⁸ Politicians were increasingly outspoken in their condemnation of the Uzbek government and this in turn became part of the story. Comparisons with Kosovo and Tiananmen Square were rapidly incorporated into the narrative and became part of imagery. Yet there was still no clear picture as to what had actually happened. Matters were not helped by the fact that the Uzbek authorities provided very little information. In the West, this was immediately seized upon as evidence of guilt. In Tashkent, however, there was anger – and not just among government officials – over accusations that were regarded as unfounded and unjust. When I arrived in Tashkent I was surprised to hear how afraid some (educated) people were – they believed that all the talk of Western states wanting to ‘do something’ about Uzbekistan was leading up to a repeat of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, here, too images from other places and other times became part of the discourse.

3.2. Impact on Uzbek Domestic Affairs

The most obvious internal reaction to the Andijan incident has been a crackdown on oppositionists, human rights activists, NGOs and foreign volunteers. This was predictable, but also understandable. There are some sincere and brave people in Uzbekistan who do try to work within their own societies to improve conditions, to redress injustices and to fight abuses of all sorts. For many, however, to be dubbed a ‘human rights activist’ has become a sort of profession – a means of earning a living. Very often they are supported by external funding – in some cases of quite considerable proportions. I found very little solidarity among them. They themselves frequently accuse each other of not being ‘genuine’, of making a business out of the information they provide to foreigners. Certainly, those who have good relations with foreign patrons will receive substantial benefits, including travel abroad.

What I found most disturbing about this type of involvement was the way in which not just a financial dependence was created but also a sort of

⁸ For an excellent recent study of implicit media bias see G. Philo and M. Berry, *Bad News from Israel*, Glasgow University Media Group, Pluto Press, London, 2004.

psychological dependence. When I asked these activists if they had tried working with local authorities to resolve particular issues they dismissed this idea as quite unrealistic. However, when I pressed them further, it emerged that some of them did try to work through their problems within their own communities – and achieved some successes.⁹ But such endeavors lack the glamour and excitement of press releases and meetings with foreign diplomats and correspondents. The activists who had followed this path seemed to regard this aspect of their work as something rather private and did not readily volunteer such information. Nevertheless, in the longer term, it is surely only by working within the system, from the bottom up, that real change will be achieved. Moreover, it has to be an Uzbek effort – if there is foreign involvement, such projects will be compromised not only in the eyes of the government, but also the general public.¹⁰ I have for sometime observed growing signs of anti-Western xenophobia. Some of the (so-called) human rights activists are fuelling that sentiment, albeit inadvertently.

I am not suggesting that there are no causes for concern in Uzbekistan. On the contrary, as I point out above (section 2.5.1), there are serious socio-economic problems and these in turn are fuelling discontent and anger towards the government. Most of these problems could be resolved fairly rapidly, if there was the political will to do so. If this does not happen, a coalition of social, political economic and religious grievances will surely emerge. This volatile compound could readily be manipulated and used as an ideological weapon by those who seek to challenge the present regime.

I see signs that the Uzbek government is making some attempt to address these issues, but I am not convinced that there is as yet a sufficient sense of urgency. Consequently, I think there is a real danger that there will be more outbreaks of violence. In the worst case scenario, there will be prolonged

⁹ For example, in February 2005, local farmers in the Jizzak region had several violent clashes with local officials who had illegally confiscated their land. Eventually, after several weeks of protests and fights they did succeed in getting the local hokim to admit that these officials had acted unjustly. Compensation was agreed; the hokim then killed an ox and invited everyone to a ‘plov of reconciliation’.

¹⁰ I was surprised to learn of the frequency of the meetings between human rights activists and Western diplomats – it appeared to be a routine event. To put their activities into perspective, I asked the activists to consider how, during the Cold War, Western governments would have regarded frequent contacts, underpinned by transfers of money, between Soviet diplomats and ‘troublesome’ local groups (e.g. British coal miners); or today, if Iranian diplomats were to have similar relationships with Muslim groups in Western countries, how might this be regarded? This was a novel perspective for them. However, it does help to shed light on the reactions of the Uzbek authorities in what is, arguably, an analogous situation.

conflict. If this were to happen, in my opinion it is the Islamist groups who would be best placed to take advantage of this situation. This is not because of their current strength or appeal, *but because they have goals, commitment, leadership and organization.* The strategy of the Uzbek government to combat this potential threat is more flexible and imaginative than is immediately apparent: on the one hand there is suppression, but on the other, promotion of an 'educated' vision of Islam.¹¹ It is impossible to predict the outcome – the struggle may go on for several years before it is resolved one way or another. This, it seems to me, is the main source of instability in the region – and in a situation such as this, external intervention could do more harm than good.

3.3. Impact on Uzbek Foreign Policy

The international reaction to the Andijan violence has done nothing to improve the domestic situation and arguably has made matters worse. The manner in which politicians who had very little knowledge of what was happening on the ground harangued the Uzbek authorities and publicly threatened serious 'consequences' was not helpful. It has made the latter less inclined to cooperate than might otherwise have been the case. There is a saying in Uzbek that if you want to criticize your daughter-in-law – don't. Instead, criticize your daughter in the hearing of your daughter-in-law – the message will be understood and heeded. On this occasion, if international concerns had been expressed more diplomatically, they might have had some effect, even though it might have taken a while for this to become apparent. Now the Uzbek government has been pushed into a corner and it will be difficult to find a way out of this situation. This does not automatically mean that there will be a lasting rift between Uzbekistan and the West – there are, after all, aspects to the relationship that serve Uzbekistan's national interest. However, matters could deteriorate rapidly. An official investigation has been launched into possible sources of external support for the Andijan insurgency. If it is revealed that there was indeed Western involvement – whether state or private – the reaction is likely to be extremely hostile. That could have damaging long term implications.

During the past year there was already evidence of a realignment in Uzbek foreign policy, entailing a rapprochement with Russia and China and a

¹¹ See further Akiner, S. 'The Politicisation of Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia', *Religion, State and Society: the Keston Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2003, pp. 97-122.

corresponding cooling of the relationship with the West. In the wake of the Andijan events these trends have been given added impetus. Russia is seen as a more reliable and steadfast partner than the West. However, there are limiting factors. One is the recognition, in Tashkent as in Moscow, that although Russian interests and capabilities in Central Asia are substantial, they are by no means boundless. Also, Moscow seems to have learnt from the Ukrainian experience that it is not wise to be too closely associated with anyone faction. Thus, although Uzbek-Russian relations will probably strengthen, there is likely to be an underlying element of wariness and restraint on both sides.

China is undoubtedly the rising star. It will play an increasing role in the region: that is understood in all the Central Asian states. However, it will take several years for China to realize its full economic and political potential. Thus, today is a period of laying foundations and building trust. President Karimov's state visit to China (25-29 May) was planned some while ago, but the fortuitous timing gave the Chinese leadership an excellent opportunity to demonstrate support for their guest. Symbolically this was very important – and both sides are likely to remember it as a gauge of solidarity. However, there will probably not be a significant qualitative shift in the relationship in the immediate future: both sides will proceed cautiously, pursuing their own objectives. On a multi-lateral level, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization seems set to gain greater prominence. It will be interesting to see how its institutions develop in the coming year. Looking further afield, Uzbekistan might now seek to cultivate Asian neighbors more energetically. Displeasure with the West could persuade some policy makers in Tashkent to pursue closer ties with Iran. This is an evolving process and it is far too soon to do more than to point to possible future directions.

Within Central Asia, the Andijan incident has prompted the neighboring states (including Turkmenistan) to show solidarity with Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan in particular has shown a willingness to cooperate with the Uzbek government – or at least, not to adopt an overtly hostile stance, or to make statements that might be taken as provocative. Undoubtedly, this stems in some measure from concerns that the unrest might spread across the border, leading to regional destabilization. There are also worries about the reaction of transborder Uzbek minorities, especially in the Osh area. A large influx of refugees, militant or not, could upset the delicate power balance

there. Thus, as the security threat has become more obvious, so the Central Asian states have drawn closer together. It is of course too soon to say whether this trend will last, but as of now it seems to have some impetus.

3.4. NATO Advanced Research Workshop in Tashkent

I was informed of NATO Council's decision to abort the Advanced Research Workshop (ARW), planned for 26-28 May, on Wednesday 18 May, five days after the violence in Andijan. The Uzbek side, however, remained committed to the meeting. All the officials I spoke to in Tashkent regarded what had happened in Andijan as a tragedy. After 13 May they were even more eager for the ARW to go ahead so as to be able to discuss how better to respond to such situations (there was a whole session in the ARW program devoted to this topic). The news that the ARW was to be 'postponed indefinitely' was understood – as I had warned the NATO Public Diplomacy Division that it would be – as cancellation. More seriously, it was regarded as a mark of bad faith on the part of NATO. As one official put it to me, the NATO PFP program emphasizes the need for trust, yet there was no evidence of trust on this occasion – the Uzbek authorities were condemned without being heard.

The subject of the ARW - *Global Security Challenges in Central Asia: Impact of Aggressive Religious Extremism and Terrorism on Central Asian States* - was highly sensitive. I worked very hard to convince my Uzbek partners that it was important not only to hold this event, but to allow different points of view to be expressed – even those that they did not necessarily like. Eventually, they came round to my way of thinking. They secured clearance for the ARW at the highest level. The event generated a great deal of interest. This was reflected in the huge amount of effort and expense that my colleagues in Tashkent devoted to preparations for this undertaking. It was also to have been an important outreach experience: special arrangements were made for students and civil servants to hear the discussions and to make some contribution of their own.

When the ARW was cancelled, everyone involved on the Uzbek side was angry and disappointed over the waste of time and resources. However, the fall-out did not end there: students from four universities had been invited to attend the ARW and in all these institutions senior academic staff had to explain to the students what had happened. Parliamentary deputies, too, were to have attended the ARW; when they learnt that it was not to take place

they raised the matter in committee meetings. Thus, ripples from this event reached out far beyond the immediate circle of organisers and participants. In the process, NATO's image was certainly not enhanced.

In government circles, the cancellation, or more precisely, 'indefinite postponement' of the ARW was regarded as symptomatic of a deeper malaise in the relationship between NATO and Uzbekistan. The crucial issue is the nature of that relationship: is it to be a neo-colonial master-servant relationship, or is it to be a genuine partnership of equals? Is there to be dialogue, or monologue? Is there to be mutual confidence, trust and respect, or is this a one-way street? I did not get the impression that this reaction was a momentary matter of hurt pride. On the contrary, the weight that was attached to these questions can be judged by the fact that First Deputy Foreign Minister Ilkhom Nematov, who is in charge of NATO affairs, met with me for almost two hours to discuss the situation; I also had a long meeting with Gulnara Karimova, the President's eldest daughter, who heads a policy think-tank attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It is very clear that the NATO-Uzbekistan relationship has been harmed. It is unlikely that drastic action will be taken by the Uzbek side, but certainly a line of thinking has been set in train that could have far-reaching consequences. If NATO wishes to try to arrest or reverse this process, a determined effort will have to be made at the most senior level to re-engage with Uzbekistan. Moreover, the concerns mentioned above – regarding mutual trust and respect – will need to be addressed consciously and actively.

4. Background Information

4.1. The Author

I have been visiting Uzbekistan and other parts of Central Asia on a regular basis for over 25 years. Throughout this period the focus of my professional life has been research on this region. As will be seen from my biography (see section 5), I teach university courses on Central Asia and have produced a substantial body of scholarly publications on regional issues. I speak good Russian and have some knowledge of the Central Asian languages. I used to speak Uzbek fairly fluently, but am now out of practice and prefer to speak Russian. My comprehension of spoken Uzbek is about 70 per cent (depending on dialect and topic). I come from a mixed Asian/Muslim - European/Christian background, with very distant roots (dating back some 500 years) in the Andijan region. Most Central Asians regard me as 'belonging', although it is fairly obvious from my clothes and general demeanor that I am a foreigner. When asked, I always explain my origins.

4.2. Practicalities

On 13 May Andijan became headline news. I gave several media interviews on the situation, mainly for British channels (domestic and international), but also for other networks such as Canadian, Australian and Turkish. I found the press reports confusing and not very convincing.

At this point, I was still scheduled to host a NATO-funded Advanced Research Workshop in Tashkent on 26-28 May (see section 3.4). This had been planned many months in advance. However, on 18 May, following a decision taken by NATO Council, I was instructed not to proceed with the event. It was not easy to bring the project to a halt so abruptly at this late stage. Consequently, it was necessary for me to go to Uzbekistan, as previously planned, on 21 May, to finalize organizational issues and to make arrangements to take care of the participants who had already set off for the seminar and could not be intercepted en route.

When I arrived in Tashkent I set about closing down the project. This required some time, so while waiting for various matters to be resolved I decided to visit Andijan. I took this decision on the spur of the moment. My

co-director of the ARW, knowing from past experience that I would not be deterred, helped me to make arrangements.¹² It was not a government-sponsored excursion, but official permission for the visit was no doubt sought - and granted within an hour.¹³ Everyone urged me to fly to Andijan, as by road the journey takes about six hours in each direction. However, I insisted on driving because I wanted to see conditions along the way. Thereupon one friend lent his car and two young teachers from the Islamic University (where the ARW was to have been held) volunteered to drive me. Ravshan Alimov, former Director of the Institute of Strategic Studies (whom I have known for some 12 years), came with me, partly because he wanted to make sure there were no problems on the way, partly because he, too, was eager to see the situation for himself.

The first night we spent in a government guest house in Namangan, courtesy of a contact in the local administration. The second night we spent in Andijan in a hotel that was fairly basic in its facilities. We ate in local cafés along the way. My companions insisted on covering these (fairly modest) costs. This is partly a matter of Uzbek hospitality, partly a gesture of thanks for the help I try to give to visitors to my university.

4.3. Ferghana Valley

The road from Tashkent to Andijan is quite good, but there are numerous road blocks along the way at which documents and vehicles are checked. There were no great queues at these points, but they are certainly a hindrance and an irritation for travellers. I personally did not see bribes being demanded, but many people have told me that this is common practice.

One of the epithets commonly applied to the Ferghana Valley (by myself, among others) is that it is 'densely populated'. However, this description is *only valid in comparison to other parts of Central Asia*, where population

¹² I have travelled quite considerably in Central Asia, always preferring to go by road. Once I strayed into a restricted zone; as a result, I became *persona non grata* and was refused entry visas for two years.

¹³ I have since been told that I was the only foreigner who was given permission to travel to Andijan at this time. In fact, an American student of mine was travelling in the Ferghana Valley during the week of 15 May in the company of Uzbek friends. They suggested that he go to Andijan, but he opted to go to Termez instead as this fitted better with his schedule. He reports that that their car was stopped at road blocks several times but after their documents had been checked they were allowed to continue their journey. Thus, there does not appear to have been a blanket prohibition on travel in the area.

densities are considerably lower.¹⁴ In fact, the countryside is strongly reminiscent of the emptier parts of the Auvergne. One can drive for miles without seeing anything other than fields and small clumps of trees.

The villages that we passed through were neat, with whitewashed houses and small outer gardens; the main gardens, as is usual in Uzbekistan, were within the courtyards and could be seen only when the gates were open. There was quite a lot of agricultural activity in the vicinity of settlements. The main crops were cotton and wheat; herds of plump cattle (mostly dairy cows, I think) grazed along the verge and in adjacent fields.

Namangan is the capital of the Namangan province (*viloyat*) and has a population of approximately 320,000. We spent some time going around the town and, on the surface at least, life was bustling - trade in the shops and bazaar was brisk, and the cafés and restaurants were full. Before leaving Namangan we visited a madrassah (in December 1991 this had been the main base of Tahir Yoldashev and Juma Namangani, leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and a school. My aim was to get some sense of the atmosphere. In both places activities were proceeding in routine fashion. I had the opportunity to walk around and talk to teachers and students for as long as I wanted. The answers were, as was to be expected, fairly standard.

In the madrassah, the issue that interested me most was how much people know about the Akromiya and what they thought of it. Their answers indicated a perfunctory knowledge of the teachings of the movement. They condemned it as heretical because it preaches a simplified approach to Muslim observances. They categorically denied that there were any supporters of the Akromiya in Namangan, describing the movement as an Andijan-based phenomenon. This reaction was predictable, but their comments seemed to me to be sincere.

Obviously a fleeting visit such as this does not give an insight into underlying problems. Yet as Oscar Wilde observed, only a fool does not pay attention to first impressions. Thus, I noted that there were no outward signs of chronic poverty or any other form of deprivation. There were no young people aimlessly hanging around the streets. I did not judge Namangan to be a very prosperous place, but it also did not appear to be suffering from acute economic depression. This does not mean that one could or should assume

¹⁴ The population density in Andijan province is about 390 people per sq km; in Khorezm, it is about 150 people per sq km.

that the local people are necessarily content. On the contrary, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that throughout the region there is a high level of anger and dissatisfaction. It seems likely that this stems not so much from absolute facts and figures, but rather from the way in which people perceive their situation. This in turn is influenced by hopes and expectations of what life *should* be like, as well as by the frustration and despair generated by grappling with corrupt and obstructive officials (see section 2.5.1).

4.4. Andijan

We left Namangan at about 9.00 am on Wednesday 25 May and arrived in Andijan at approximately 9.40 am. At the border of Namangan province we were met by the deputy governor (*hokim*) of the Andijan province. He had been informed of my visit and he told me that he had been asked to help me see and do whatever I wished. He remained with us for the rest of the day. During that day I worked solidly for over 12 hours, interviewing people, walking around the town, visiting key locations. My companions and I left Andijan at 4.30 am the following morning and, driving without stopping, were back in Tashkent by 9.30 am on 26 May.

Andijan, like Namangan, is a provincial capital with a population of around 300,000. There were road blocks around the perimeter where we had to show our papers, but within the town cars and people moved around freely. The police presence on the streets (unarmed, as far as I could judge) was not obtrusive – less than in Tashkent, it seemed to me. The economy, both in the town and in the countryside, appears to be more buoyant than in Namangan. One reason for this is that there are several joint manufacturing enterprises with Korean partners, including the automobile assembly plant UzDaeWoo, currently expanding production. I noted signs of civic pride here that were not in evidence in Namangan. One example of this is that that all along the open highway there are well-tended flowerbeds. At the very least, this shows that the local government is able and willing to allocate funds for the upkeep of public spaces. The streets were clean and the standard of public amenities was good. Food stuffs in the bazaar were plentiful and cheaper than in Tashkent. I spoke to several traders and asked about the structure of their businesses. Estimated levels of profit varied from stall to stall (3,000 to 10,000 *som* per day, roughly equivalent to US\$ 3-10, depending on product), and from day to day, but on average seemed satisfactory.

On the morning of 25 May, as we neared Andijan, I gave the deputy hokim a list of requests for interviews and places I would like to visit. I did this on the spur of the moment and no one could have known in advance what I was going to ask to see as I did not know this myself. The list included meetings with doctors, members of local neighborhood committees, law enforcement officials, independent human rights activists (I came prepared with names and telephone numbers given to me by human rights activists in Tashkent), imams, and madrassah students; I also asked to visit the main cemetery as well as smaller local cemeteries, and the prison. All my requests were granted and I was given as long as I wished in each place. I was able to speak to people alone when I wanted to do so. At the very last minute I added a request for a visit the morgue. This was also granted, though my meetings in the prison took so long that by the time we reached the morgue (5.45 pm) the medical staff had left. However, I banged at the gate until it was opened and I was able to gain access to the courtyard. This allowed me to get some idea of the size and capacity of the building.

I wrote notes on these meetings as they happened. I also asked individuals at various times to draw sketch maps in my notebook of places where particular incidents occurred. In all, I spent 12 hours interviewing people and checking out locations around the town. At a rough estimate, I spoke to some 40 people. I do not exclude the possibility that they were not all telling the truth – or not telling the whole truth – but it would have been very difficult to coordinate a total fabrication on the spur of the moment, not knowing in advance where I was going, what I would want to see, or what ideas would suddenly occur to me to follow up.

In section 2, I give a chronology of the events of 13 May, collated from the accounts that were given to me in Andijan on 25 May. I have not given a full transcript of my conversations during that day, as it would take too long to write up and at this stage such detail is probably not essential. However, throughout the day I tried to be as precise as possible, fixing times and positions, and drawing a distinction between eyewitness accounts and second-hand reports. I am not a trained investigator. I am perfectly prepared to believe that there were things that I did not notice, questions that I did not think to ask. Yet it is also true that I have been traveling to Central Asia for many years and, as part of my academic research, have always kept extensive records of my visits. Thus, I am used to observing and reflecting on what I observe.

4.5. Jizzak and Tashkent

In order to get a different perspective on events in Andijan, on Friday 27 May I went to Jizzak, a small provincial capital located to the south of Tashkent (about 3 hours' drive away). No official clearance was sought for this and I do not think it was needed. I left early on Friday morning and arrived in Jizzak soon after 9.00 am; I spent the morning there, then returned to Tashkent for meetings in the afternoon. To make the trip I borrowed a car and driver from my co-director of the ARW; I was accompanied by an Uzbek friend who works for FAST, a Swiss-funded Conflict Early Warning project. My main meeting here (almost 2 hours) was with a founder member of the opposition party *Birlik*,¹⁵ who is also a local representative of a nationwide human rights organization. He had been in telephone communication with Andijan during 13 May and I was interested to hear his comments. In general his account coincided with the narratives of other witnesses, but he did add some confirmation regarding the timing of certain incidents.

In Tashkent, I followed up on my visits to Andijan and Jizzak in meetings with people who had relevant experience. These included more human rights activists, clerics, independent scholars and researchers, also government officials and parliamentary deputies. Most of these conversations were held on a one-to-one basis. Some of the people I spoke to here were from the Ferghana Valley, though currently working in the capital. The particular issues that interested me in these meetings were the views of the 'engaged public' on the events in Andijan and the international reaction to these events. I also tried to explore if and how attitudes to the role of Islam had changed in the light of these developments. I have incorporated into this report some of the opinions that were expressed during these conversations.

4.6. Access

I had a high degree of access and official cooperation during my visit to Andijan and as a result, I was able to see and do a great deal in a relatively short period. Inevitably, one must ask oneself why this was so. I cannot know for sure, but it seems to me that the crucial factor was probably trust. My work is well known - my published writings are readily available and I have often spoken at international conferences and seminars. I do not

¹⁵ Founded in 1989, banned after independence. The Uzbek authorities have repeatedly refused to grant it registration, hence the party is unable to take part in elections.

dissemble – even when my views are unpopular – but equally, I try to be objective in analysis and constructive in criticism. At times I have been out of favor with the authorities in various Central Asian states; at other times they have sought my opinion.

On this occasion, I imagine that senior officials felt that it would be useful to have an outside assessment of events in Andijan. They knew that I would be persistent in my questioning, but also even-handed. There was no request or expectation that I would write this report or give any interviews relating to my visit. It was only when I returned from Andijan that I began to feel a moral obligation to put my impressions on record. I was prompted to do this because I felt very strongly that much of the media reporting on the Andijan events did not correspond to any reality that I could verify during my visit. *My aim here is not to convince anyone that my version – or the government's version – of events is correct, but to highlight the fact that there are ambiguities, discrepancies and inconsistencies in all the reports.* If we accept uncritically the testimony of those whom we approve of, while ignoring the testimony of others, we become protagonists, not researchers.

4.7. Interview on Uzbek TV

My companions on the journey to Andijan were themselves surprised by how greatly the situation there seemed to differ from what they had learnt through the press (these were mainly individuals who had access to foreign media reports). One of them suggested that I give a television interview about my impressions. I thought about this for a while and then agreed to do it, since I strongly believe that important issues such as these need to be debated in an independent, open manner. The way to encourage this, it seems to me, is to set an example oneself.

The response to the interview revealed a sharp polarization. Some people – many of no particular political affiliation – appreciated my attempt to give a balanced assessment of events. Others indulged in vitriolic (and libelous) attacks on me as a person – but ignored the questions that I raised. I can understand how strongly they feel about the situation. However, as a scholar, the best service that I can render to the region is to try to maintain an independent stance. From the transcript that I have seen of my appearance on Uzbek TV, the interview seems to have been broadcast with only one significant cut, relating to economic problems (see section 2.5.1 above). This was regrettable, but does not undermine the validity of the rest of the

interview. However, the interview has been widely reported under the headline ‘Academic supports Karimov’. This is the cry of the ideologue: in other words, ‘you are either with us or against us – and if the latter, your views cannot be taken seriously’.¹⁶ This is the very antithesis of intellectual inquiry. My argument was – and remains – that in any field of research we need to set out with an open mind. In the case of the Andijan violence, the first priority is to establish what happened – this requires a full and scrupulous account of events, not edited highlights; the second priority is to establish who the main actors were. It is only then that we can attempt to analyze the dynamics of the situation.

I am an academic, not a political campaigner. I have written this report not because anyone asked me to do it – and certainly not because I have nothing else to do with my time – but because I think it is important to show some of the complexities and uncertainties that I see in Central Asia today. It is easy to pass judgment – but not at all easy to bring about positive change. The situation is immensely fragile and could be destabilized very rapidly, bringing devastating pain and loss to many. *I think there is a real danger that Western governments could become involved in a regional power struggle without fully grasping the nature of the role that they are playing, or understanding the likely endgame.* 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.

¹⁶ I must admit to a certain sense of *déjà vu*. In the early 1980s I wrote a book entitled ‘The Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union’. It was a straightforward reference work – but it attracted furious criticism because it did not subscribe to the prevailing view of a ‘Muslim threat’ to the Soviet Union. Since then, it has been translated into several languages and remains a useful research tool. I do not say this in a spirit of self-congratulation, but simply to stress that the more objective the research, the more it is likely to retain validity in the face of changing fashions and preoccupations.

Biographical Note

Dr. Shirin Akiner is Lecturer in Central Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where she convenes and teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on Central Asian history, politics and religion, and supervises doctoral dissertations. She is also an Associate Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London. She has long first hand experience of the region and travels regularly to all the Central Asian countries.

She has presented papers at international conferences and seminars in over 30 universities and learned societies, in some 20 countries (in Europe, Asia and North America). She has also made presentations at numerous high-level seminars in leading think tanks, government bodies, and international organizations in the UK and abroad. In recent years these have included: Tokyo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the aegis of the Prime Minister), Washington DC (Woodrow Wilson Center), Ottawa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the aegis of the Foreign Minister), Moscow (MGIMO), Tehran (Institute of Political and International Studies), Abu Dhabi (Emirates Research Center), Tbilisi (under the aegis of the President of the Georgian Republic), Stockholm (Institute of Foreign Affairs), Rome (NATO Defense College), Izmir (OECD, Ministers of Transport), The Hague (Clingendael, Institute of International Relations).

Dr. Akiner has authored seven monographs, including *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union* (KPI, London, 1983, 1987); *Central Asia: New Arc of Conflict?* (Royal United Services Institute, London, 1993), *The Formation of Kazakh Identity* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1995), *Minorities in a Time of Change: Prospects for Conflict, Stability and Development in Central Asia* (Minority Rights Group, London, 1997), *Tajikistan: Reconciliation or Disintegration?* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2001); also over 25 scholarly articles on such topics as Islam, ethnicity, political change and security challenges in Central Asia. She has edited nine volumes of collected papers, including a major work on *The Caspian: Politics, energy and security* (RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2004). Her work has been translated into French, German, Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Russian.

Dr. Akiner has acted as consultant for award-winning radio and television documentaries on Central Asia, including *Kazakhs of Xinjiang* (ITV, 50

minutes); *Man Without a Horse* (documentary on Turkmen refugees from Afghanistan, BBC TV₁, 50 minutes); *Gift of God* (documentary on the Aral Sea, BBC TV₂, 60 minutes); *The Crescent and the Star* (30 minute documentaries on four Central Asian republics, BBC TV ₁). She is a frequent contributor to BBC World Service (radio and television), Deutsche Welle and other European networks (French, Dutch, Hungarian, Portuguese etc.); also to Canadian, US, Middle Eastern and Far Eastern media networks.