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## Afghan War Could Spill Over Into Central Asia

Tom Gjelten

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During the months-long debate over U.S. policy options for Afghanistan, critics of the war effort questioned whether the global fight against al-Qaida really depends on what happens in Kabul and Kandahar. Recent developments in the region, however, have raised the opposite question: Can the war in Afghanistan be contained in that country?

"You have global problems in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. All is connected, and especially with Central Asia," says Jean-Louis Bruguiere, a European Union envoy on terrorism. Bruguiere's concern, shared by U.S. intelligence officials and other analysts, is that the conflict in Afghanistan could spread to its Central Asian neighbors — Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Until now, Central Asia hasn't been associated much with the Afghanistan war. But Bruguiere highlights what he calls an "arc of conflict" encompassing Pakistan, Afghanistan, the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and Russia.

"And beyond Russia, we have Europe," says Bruguiere, a former investigative magistrate in France and the author of a new memoir, *What I Could Not Say*.

### A New Domino Theory

The concern about a widening Afghan war stems from growing international collaboration between radical insurgent groups that had previously focused on their home countries. One example: the Afghan Taliban's alliance with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU.

IMU militants are now in Afghanistan, fighting as part of the Taliban-led insurgency there. The group originated to the north in Uzbekistan. But the IMU apparently has a broader vision these days.

"It really does seem to be the central focus point for people who advocate overthrowing the regimes of Central Asia by force of arms," says Paul Quinn-Judge, Central Asia director for the International Crisis Group.

It's largely because of the IMU's alliance with the Taliban, he says, that the fighting in Afghanistan could spill across borders to the Central Asian countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. It's a scenario that suggests a latter-day version of the domino theory.

"If the Taliban can consolidate themselves in northern Afghanistan, that's already going to be an excellent jumping-off point for the IMU and for other Central Asian Islamists. If the Taliban took over in that part of the region, I think it would be a very disturbing development for most of the countries of Central Asia," Quinn-Judge says.

The IMU has been around for more than a decade. But David Sedney, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for South and Central Asia, recently told a Senate hearing that Islamist groups such as the IMU have in recent months emerged as a more serious threat in several Central Asian countries.

"Local governments in the region share our concern about extremism. This issue has figured much more strongly at the end of this year than it did at the beginning," he said.

### **Limited Options For U.S.**

One new factor is that some U.S. military supplies for Afghanistan are now brought in overland on road and rail lines across Central Asia, via what the Defense Department calls the Northern Distribution Network. Quinn-Judge says the establishment of the network tied Central Asian governments directly to the Afghan war effort for the first time.

"In the mindset of the Taliban and other Islamist movements, Central Asia is now part of the general theater of war," he says.

A complicating factor is that many of the Central Asian governments are authoritarian. Corruption and human rights abuses are rampant, and those problems have fueled the opposition in those countries, including the Islamist movements. And now the United States needs those very governments to help with its effort to resupply Afghanistan.

"The damage it's going to do to American prestige in the region is enormous, and the help it gives to radical movements is also significant," Quinn-Judge says. "Now these radical

movements can say, 'This is further proof that the Americans are backing these local thugs. The Americans have their own ulterior motives.' "

U.S. officials recognize the problem, but their options are limited. "The Department of Defense's primary goal in Central Asia is to support the war in Afghanistan," Sedney noted.

Worrying about those Central Asian countries is secondary.

The problem is that if the Taliban take over in Afghanistan, radical Islamist movements such as the IMU could gain a valuable foothold and be positioned to carry their fight to neighboring Central Asian countries. But ramping up the U.S. war effort to defeat the Taliban could pull Central Asian countries into the conflict anyway.