

**CRACKS IN THE MARBLE:
TURKMENISTAN'S FAILING DICTATORSHIP**

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CRACKS IN THE MARBLE: TURKMENISTAN'S FAILING DICTATORSHIP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More than a decade after their independence, each of the Central Asian states is on its own particular path of political and economic development. While most have achieved at least partial integration within the international community, one stands out as an exception: the remote former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan, on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea.

The isolation of Turkmenistan results from the increasingly authoritarian and idiosyncratic policies of President Saparmurat Niyazov, who has ruled since independence in 1991. Having declared himself *Turkmenbashi* (Head or Father of All Turkmens), he has taken sole personal control of political and economic resources, and built up a personality cult to match that of Iraq's Saddam Hussein. But he now faces growing internal and external opposition and the country an uncertain future.

Under Niyazov's repressive rule, alternative political parties have been outlawed, there are no free media outlets, access to the Internet is severely restricted, and non-official religious groups are persecuted. Constant changes in personnel by a leader concerned about any opposition and his idiosyncratic management style have made state institutions increasingly dysfunctional. Private business and foreign investment have dwindled, unable to operate in an unpredictable and corrupt environment, and forced out of lucrative sectors by Niyazov-controlled companies. Grandiose marble buildings dominate the capital, Ashgabat, funded by the potentially lucrative oil and gas sector. But poverty and unemployment have reached mass levels.

Too often the international community has simply not taken Niyazov seriously, treating him as a rather

bizarre eccentric, who creates revolving statues, or renames months after himself. The reality is much more sinister and dangerous. Turkmenbashi's continued rule is not merely a somewhat comical despotism but a serious threat to stability in the whole region. The frequent assessment that the regime is unpleasant but fairly stable needs review. Internal and external opposition to Niyazov continues to grow. The prospects for a peaceful transition are very poor, and will only worsen.

There are five main sources of conflict that could, if not dealt with properly, accelerate Turkmenistan's disintegration:

First, *the underground political struggle within the country*, which could lead to a change in regime and an unpredictable transition. There is a growing opposition in exile, albeit severely weakened by internal divisions and the arrest, inside Turkmenistan, of one of its leaders that followed an apparent attempt on President Niyazov's life on 25 November 2002. But there are also forces within the country itself that could challenge Niyazov. This political struggle involves the Presidential Guard, which is closely associated with Niyazov; the intelligence service (the KNB), which was severely purged in 2002; army officers, who are increasingly disinclined to support the regime; and finally the people, who have begun to voice their opposition more publicly.

Secondly, *serious economic problems*. Turkmenistan holds some of the world's largest reserves in oil and natural gas and has built its economy almost entirely on those two commodities. The revenue is directly under the control of the president, and little trickles down to the population, which increasingly lives in extreme poverty. Grandiose construction projects in

Ashgabat give an impression of prosperity that does not reflect the deep poverty and economic despair of most of the population.

Thirdly, *the increasing weakness of the state*. Weak and dysfunctional states provide opportunities for widespread corruption, and allow criminal and terrorist groups to act with little hindrance. Turkmenistan has become a major drugs transit state, with the connivance of the authorities, including President Niyazov himself. The government's close relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, combined with corruption in the security forces, has reportedly allowed Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters to escape from Afghanistan across the border. Further decline will merely increase the risk of Turkmenistan becoming a failed state that poses a serious threat to regional and international security.

Fourthly, *the destruction of society*. A decade of Niyazov's dictatorial rule has left society with little hope. Poverty, unemployment, and collapse of the education and health systems have dramatically degraded living conditions, as reflected in reduced life expectancy and widespread prostitution and drug consumption. The cult of personality has largely replaced regular education, with schoolchildren brought up mainly on Niyazov's own quasi-spiritual guide, the *Ruhnama*. A further decade of his rule will produce a dangerously isolated and uneducated generation, unable to comprehend the challenges of a changing world and increasingly sucked into a vicious circle of drugs trafficking and abuse, and organised crime.

Fifthly, *the clan and ethnic divide*. Turkmens are a nomadic nation that never experienced statehood before the twentieth century, and loyalty to regionally-based clans is still strong. Niyazov's policy of divide-and-rule has exacerbated differences among the various clans now competing for political or economic power, and there is a danger of conflict. Minorities, particularly the 10 per cent of ethnic Uzbeks, face permanent discrimination. This increases tension domestically and with neighbouring Uzbekistan.

Given the nature of the Turkmen regime, political prognoses are highly problematic. Niyazov holds significant levers of power, political, security and economic, and could stay in control for several years. But the now widely observed economic decline, growing dissatisfaction in society, and wider opposition both inside and outside the country, make

him much less secure. The danger of a palace coup, or an open explosion of popular frustration, perhaps aided from abroad, cannot be discounted. The alleged assassination attempt in November 2002 may have been a reflection of these growing tensions.

The international community has little leverage, but if nothing else, interested states should be prepared for a possible transition that may not be peaceful. There is no provision for a normal succession, and the prospects of violent conflict in the case of disputed succession are real. A collapse of the state into violent conflict would have repercussions throughout this unstable region, including in Afghanistan.

If Niyazov remains in power, the international community needs to take a more active stance. There is little likelihood that systemic change can be produced by positive engagement but isolating Niyazov through sanctions or other external measures would only worsen the plight of the Turkmen people. There should be far more public pressure on the regime to fulfil its international commitments, an end to security assistance, and consideration of political factors in assessing government and IFI support for pipelines and other major infrastructure projects.

Turkmen society both within and without the country needs as much outside engagement as possible to stem the alarming social decline. This should include aid for a growing diaspora to ensure that Turkmen intellectual and cultural groups are preserved in exile, and to prepare opposition groups for potential return to government in the future.

In the long term, there is no other way to achieve systemic change and stop the dangerous spiral of decline than for Niyazov, one way or another, to leave. The regime will not improve with time, or soften under increased engagement. On the contrary, the longer it continues, the worse things will get, and the higher the likelihood the state will collapse from its own contradictions. Engagement with Turkmen society is crucial, but regime change and a managed transition should be the goal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the leadership of Turkmenistan:

1. Take serious steps to reduce the present level of human rights abuses including by releasing

- prisoners convicted for their political or religious beliefs or arrested because they are relatives of opposition members, and allowing international observers such as UN rapporteurs and OSCE representatives to monitor trials and prisons.
2. Permit political pluralism by:
 - (a) amending the constitution and authorising the registration of other political parties besides the National Democratic Party;
 - (b) allowing peaceful demonstrations and public expression of criticism;
 - (c) allowing the exiled Turkmen opposition to return and participate in political life, provided it seeks political power via democratic and non-violent means;
 - (d) conducting elections for both parliament and the presidency under international observation.
 3. Allow local and international media to operate freely, and improve access to media by:
 - (a) allowing registration of independent print and electronic media;
 - (b) allowing uncensored access to international electronic and print media, particularly Russian-language newspapers;
 - (c) guaranteeing the protection of all journalists and their right to inform; and
 - (d) providing uncensored access to the Internet;
 4. Strengthen civil society by providing a proper legal basis for independent NGOs, permitting the free flow of information and lifting travel restrictions on Turkmen and foreign NGO representatives.
 5. Reverse the decline in educational standards by:
 - (a) reintroducing an eleven- or twelve-year school curriculum and five-year courses in higher education; and
 - (b) ending the use of the Ruhnama as the key text for schoolchildren and students;
 6. Guarantee the protection of ethnic minorities by:
 - (a) recognising the educational, cultural, spiritual and political rights of ethnic minorities as described in treaties signed by the Turkmen government;
 - (b) inviting the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to visit and implementing his recommendations on legal and political changes necessary to protect minorities.
 7. Establish a sound economic environment by:
 - (c) creating a legal basis that protects and guarantees domestic and foreign investment;
 - (d) changing the Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund (FERF) from a personal presidential fund to a normal budgetary mechanism, and establishing an oil fund for future generations; and
 - (e) privatising the oil and gas industry.
 8. Take effective measures to fight drug-trafficking and end the involvement of official structures in the drug business.
 9. Tackle drug abuse by introducing new therapy programs and youth education, and providing young people with economic, cultural, and educational alternatives to the drug culture;
 10. Fulfill international commitments by cooperating with the decision of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to send a mission of investigation to Turkmenistan with respect to human rights issues raised by fellow member states.
- To the exiled Turkmen opposition:**
11. Establish a viable common political platform based on:
 - (a) an agreed transitional government mechanism that incorporates representatives of all factions, including potential internal opposition groups;
 - (b) renunciation of any violent means to power;
 - (c) announcement of a common commitment to early elections, under international auspices, that will allow all political factions and regional interests to be represented in a new political system;
 - (d) an exit strategy for President Niyazov and his immediate collaborators; and
 - (e) guaranteed protection of foreign investment during and after the transition period.

To the international community:

12. Follow the lead of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and refuse any assistance to government or state institutions, instead targeting the private sector and NGOs for aid and assistance.
13. Address the regime's political, social and economic abuses in all appropriate international forums and organisations, including the UN Human Rights Commission at its annual meeting in February 2003, as well as the OSCE and the international financial institutions (IFIs).
14. Use available mechanisms under human rights and other treaties signed by Turkmenistan to put pressure on the leadership to improve its record, and in particular insist that Turkmenistan fully comply with its OSCE obligations by allowing special rapporteurs to visit and have full access to all persons and locations they require in order to report on human rights concerns raised by member states.
15. Assist in improving public access to information by
 - (f) extending and diversifying programs broadcast by the Turkmen services of international media outlets such as Radio Free Europe, BBC and Deutsche Welle; and
 - (g) funding measures that allow greater access to the internet, cultural centres and libraries.
16. Attempt to slow social and educational decline by:
 - (h) increasing grants for Turkmen students to study abroad, including those presently outside the country; and
 - (i) engage with the Turkmen diaspora in programs to help develop social institutions, media, NGOs and educational establishments outside the country.

To the U.S. government:

17. Make clear to the government that any international assistance (e.g. from the Asian Development Bank) for the Trans-Afghan pipeline will be dependent on substantial internal reforms at least of the economy and legal structure.

18. Suspend all assistance to the security forces, including border forces, until there is far better assurance through effective monitoring that they are part of the solution, not part of the problem, with respect to drugs, illegal arms and other smuggling.

To the Russian government:

19. Take the initiative with the U.S., the EU and the UN to establish a contact group to consult on how to avoid further humanitarian tragedy in Turkmenistan and to consider both a roadmap and an end game for regime transition.
20. Restate and guarantee the protection of Turkmen opponents of the regime living in Russia.

Osh/Brussels, 17 January 2003



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I. INTRODUCTION

Turkmenistan's image as a remote and little known country has changed only slightly since the nineteenth century. Until its conquest by Russia at the bloody battle of Goek-Tepe in 1881, it was hardly known to the outside world, except as an inhospitable desert stretch of the ancient Silk Road, punctuated by oasis communities whose inhabitants were Turkic-speaking tribes feared for frequent raids on caravans.

Much of the country is formed by the world's hottest desert, the Karakum, which stretches from the eastern shores of the Caspian, in the West, to the eastern border with Uzbekistan along the Amu-Darya River. To the south the border with Iran is formed by the Kopetdag mountain range. Most of the population lives either in the South, in and around the capital of Ashgabat, along the Caspian Sea, around the port of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), or in the Northeast around Dashawuz (where Uzbeks form a large proportion of the population).

This disparate territory reflected the limited sense of common nationhood among the Turkmen tribes. Its borders were drawn by the early planners of the Soviet regime, who created a Soviet Socialist Republic of Turkmenistan in 1924. The Turkmen SSR asserted for the first time the existence of a Turkmen nation in a defined territory but national identity remained superficial. Many Turkmen fled Soviet rule into Afghanistan and Iran, where a sizeable diaspora remains.

Despite Soviet programs of education, and industrialisation, the Turkmen SSR remained a provincial region known for its conservatism, strong traditions, and harsh climate. It provided

strategically important oil and gas that was sent to the rest of the Soviet Union; in exchange it was almost completely subsidised by Moscow. Most food products and basic goods were sent from other parts of the Soviet Union, and local industry was almost non-existent. Much agriculture was diverted to cotton, again aimed at export, with disastrous effects on the environment. Soviet rule also introduced a large ethnic Russian community.

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not lead, as many hoped, to democratic rule. Early attempts by Turkmen intellectuals to establish some kind of political pluralism were short-lived. Proto-political parties such as Agzybirlik soon disappeared as political life became increasingly dominated by the former Communist Party leader, Saparmurat Niyazov. He outlawed political parties except for the Communists, renamed the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT), and established himself not just as the dominant political force, but as the embodiment of all things Turkmen. Taking on the title of Turkmenbashi (Head or Father of all Turkmen) the Great, his rule became increasingly bizarre during the 1990s, developing a cult of personality to rival those of Mao Zedong or Saddam Hussein.

Many diplomats and international observers viewed this regime as unpleasant but essentially stable. This view began to change in 2002 as an increasing number of government officials defected and joined a growing opposition in exile. Within the country, popular support for Niyazov waned, with the first signs of popular discontent expressed in sporadic demonstrations. Purges of the security apparatus and of regional leaders created a new potentially powerful internal opposition.

On 25 November 2002 the troubled political currents seemed to surface in an apparent assassination attempt on Niyazov in Ashgabat. There is considerable uncertainty about what happened. According to the official version, several men fired shots at Niyazov's motorcade from a truck and two cars in central Ashgabat. Niyazov was unhurt and indeed apparently did not even notice the attempt, but some reports suggested that one or more guards were injured or killed.

Who carried out the attack is unclear. The official version is that leading opposition figures, including former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov and former deputy agriculture minister Saparmurat Iklymov, hired mercenaries to attempt the assassination. About 23 persons – including foreigners – were quickly charged with involvement in what was labelled a “coup attempt”. Subsequent arrests are believed to reach into the hundreds. Prosecutors asserted that Guvanch Djumaev, a prominent Turkmen businessman and former government official thought to be friendly with Shikhmuradov, was the ringleader. The government implicitly accused Russia, the U.S. and Uzbekistan of protecting the “coup-plotters” and also criticised Azerbaijan and Turkey.¹

Shikhmuradov himself was arrested by the KNB on 25 December and four days later made a publicly televised confession of his activities aimed at overthrowing Turkmenbashi and of his responsibility for the assassination attempt. A close look at the video suggests the former foreign minister may have been drugged prior to his television appearance.²

The government's account was so confused and contradictory that other versions quickly gained

wider acceptance. Opposition activists, such as Iklymov claimed that Niyazov himself planned the incident, as a way to assert his authority and increase repression against the opposition, perhaps in fear that a genuine uprising was imminent. Others have suggested that it was an attempt on his life by internal security forces, probably the KNB, who are increasingly disgruntled at their treatment.³

The truth is currently impossible to unravel but it is clear that the incident reflects growing political tensions and has added to the sense that the regime is in trouble and faces an increasing range of existential threats from both inside and outside the country. If Niyazov did stage the incident himself, it seems to demonstrate a high degree of concern over opposition influence.

The difficulty in establishing the truth extends to almost all other aspects of political life. The nature of the regime ensures that proper research is impossible, and the sources cited in this report reflect that difficulty. Many spoke to ICG only on condition of anonymity. The continued restrictions on foreign journalists ensure that little objective reporting emanates from the country. The lack of any semblance of a free press and strict controls on Turkmen academics visiting international conferences mean that information regarding the workings of the regime is rarely hard. Much is based on rumour and unsubstantiated allegations. With these caveats, enough evidence is available to understand the broad dynamics of the regime and the threat that it poses to internal and regional stability.

¹ See “Turkmenistan's Niyazov crushes opposition movement”, www.eurasianet.org, 7 January 2003. Foreigners arrested include a U.S. citizen, Leonid Komarovskiy, who has been denied consular access, as well as Russian (Chechens) and Turkish citizens.

² Why and when Shikhmuradov made what he must have realised would be a very dangerous return to Turkmenistan and the circumstances in which he was arrested remain unknown. According to a journalist interviewed by ICG in Tashkent in January 2003, Shikhmuradov, who holds a Russian passport, was trying to seek refuge at the Russian Embassy when taken into custody. According to a letter allegedly posted by his supporters on the Internet on 24 December 2002, one day before his arrest, Shikhmuradov explained that he returned to Turkmenistan to coordinate civil unrest and achieve a change of regime. See “Letter from Boris Shikhmuradov”, www.gundogar.org, December 2002.

³ For the argument that the assassination attempt was the work of disgruntled KNB officers, see Oraz Saryev, “Kto organizoval pokushenie na Turkmenbashi?” [Who organized the attempt on Turkmenbashi's life?], *Deutsche Welle*, 25 November 2002. For a useful summary of the various versions, see “Whodunnit? Hunt for culprits following assassination attempt becomes more and more curious”, *Central Asia Report*, 5 December 2002, vol. 2, N°45, at www.rferl.org. See also, Robert G. Kaiser, “Dribs and Drabs of Information Keep Turkmen Plot in Shadows: Leader Rounds Up Foes After Alleged Attempt on Life”, *The Washington Post*, 13 January 2003.

II. POLITICAL POWER

A. PERSONAL DICTATORSHIP

President Niyazov's domination of Turkmen politics can be explained by three main factors: his background in the Soviet political system; the political vacuum that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union; and most significantly, his use of brutal repression, economic control, and co-optation of opponents to oust potential contenders. But his rise has created strong enemies, both within the country and outside, and this political struggle is now coming increasingly into the open.

1. The road to power

Niyazov's background is not unusual for a Soviet bureaucrat on the edge of empire. Born on 19 February 1940 in Ashgabat, Saparmurat Niyazov grew up in a worker's family. His father died during World War II, and his mother and brother fell victims to the 1948 earthquake that destroyed half the capital city. He lived for a time in an orphanage and then with distant relatives, leaving him unable to weave together the family network that is customary for a successful Turkmen career. This difficult childhood goes some way to explaining his paranoia and instinctive distrust of those around him, some close observers claim.⁴

However, lack of family ties was in some ways an advantage in gaining promotion under the Soviet regime, which did not welcome strong links to clan structures and kinship groups. In 1962 Niyazov joined the Communist Party and went to Leningrad to study power engineering. Turkmenistan had a serious lack of qualified specialists, particularly after the 1948 earthquake, which killed 100,000 people. As a "national cadre" – an ethnic Turkmen with technical skills – he was rapidly promoted, working at a power station near Ashgabat and eventually climbing the Communist power ladders.

In 1985, he was appointed Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Turkmenistan. He was later elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, thus combining the highest state and party positions in the republic.

By January 1990, he had established himself as the undisputed ruler of the Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan by also becoming Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, the highest legislative body in the republic.

Niyazov made no accommodation to the political and economic reforms encouraged by Gorbachev's *perestroika* policy in the late 1980s. While other republics enjoyed new freedoms, Turkmenistan remained a bastion of Communist orthodoxy and one of the least developed republics by Soviet standards.

Turkmenistan was less ready than most republics for the collapse of the USSR in 1991. It was hugely dependent on subsidies from Moscow, and its leadership was used to fulfilling orders from Moscow, not developing independent policies. Independence was proclaimed on 27 October 1991, some time after all the other Soviet republics. There was little certainty about what an independent state of Turkmenistan might look like, and no real tradition to fall back on.

Nevertheless, with the collapse of Soviet power, Niyazov attempted to fill the vacuum with a newly found sense of nation- and statehood. Even before independence, Turkmen had been declared the state language. However, the lack of any national tradition of statehood allowed Niyazov to construct the idea of a Turkmen nation around his own personality. In the early 1990s, this was accepted and even welcomed by many Turkmen intellectuals because it was perceived as a necessary element of nation-building, akin to Kemal Atatürk's actions in Turkey in the 1920s. Among today's opposition groups are many who supported Niyazov as part of a search for independent Turkmen nationhood. As one opposition journalist remembers: "In the early 1990s I supported Niyazov strongly, and rejected Western criticism, because I thought he was on an historical mission".⁵

Nor was any particular concern expressed by the international community in the early days of the regime. In the West the unanticipated achievement of independence in 1991 was labelled a rejection of the Soviet system, and many took this as paramount to embracing democracy. In general, the West supported the new leaders of Central Asian states, employing standard human rights rhetoric but concentrating on buttressing their independence

⁴ ICG interview with Arkady Dubnov, journalist, Bishkek, September 2002.

⁵ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

from Russia and seeking access to Caspian oil and gas supplies. In the region, and particularly in Turkmenistan, democracy lacked substantial traditions, and while democratic institutions were rapidly created to legitimise the new system, they have remained to various degrees deprived of content and meaning.

2. The democratic façade

Niyazov has been particularly successful at using his authority and image to reduce democratic institutions to a mere façade. In June 1992 he was elected president with 99.5 per cent of the vote. There was no other candidate. On this occasion, he also declared himself Turkmenbashi. In January 1994 he polled 99.9 per cent in a referendum to extend his period in office. In December 1999 the *Halq Maslahaty* (People's Council) announced that Niyazov had been approved president for life. Modestly, he demurred, saying he would rule only until 2010, the date of his 70th birthday.⁶

According to the 1992 Constitution, Niyazov controls the executive: he is president and prime minister, and names all members of the Council of Ministers.⁷ His absolute power is demonstrated in sessions of that body that are broadcast live on television. Niyazov sits, admonishing government ministers, who stand trembling along the wall, taking notes with their heads bowed, clearly in fear of his questions. On a number of occasions, Niyazov has dismissed ministers on live television, promising they would never work in Turkmenistan again. Others have been fined for shortcomings, while the least favoured have been imprisoned.

Not surprisingly, officials are afraid to take independent decisions, a situation that seriously undermines the efficient functioning of the state. International delegations, diplomatic or commercial, recognise that they have to meet Niyazov in person to secure agreements; institutions, both national and local, lack any power to make and implement decisions. Moreover, the system has forced many qualified specialists to leave the country. There is no

possibility of a stable career for members of the political elite. Frequently, once an official has become influential, he or she is dismissed for fear of possible competition with Niyazov himself. Such purges have intensified since 2001, causing officials to refuse nominations at higher levels. As one former official noted: "People see what happens to heads of departments and ministers, who are dismissed and jailed for no apparent reason, and they don't want to take the risk".⁸

There is no legislative control over this one-man executive. Legislative power lies within two bodies created by the 1992 Constitution: the *Mejlis* or Assembly (50 seats, members elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms), which serves as the regular parliament, and the *Halq Maslahaty*, which gathers all leading officials and parliamentary deputies in an annual meeting.

Parliamentary elections are not in any sense competitive. The latest were held on 12 December 1999, without international observers. The only political party is the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) – the former Communist Party – headed by Niyazov himself. Opposition parties are outlawed, and all members of the *Mejlis* are members of the DPT pre-approved by Niyazov himself. The parliament meets only occasionally to accept laws already promulgated by the president. Following the 25 November assassination attempt, Niyazov announced early parliamentary elections for April 2003. This may be related to the effort to dismantle groups that might provide a basis of support for the now imprisoned opposition leader, Boris Shikhmuradov. The current parliament was formed when Shikhmuradov was himself a high-ranking official and before he went into exile.

The judiciary is wholly subservient to the regime: all judges are appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review. Justice is also largely the sole preserve of the president, who orders officials into exile, confiscates property, or orders summary imprisonment without due process. As one dissident puts it: "Niyazov displayed his understanding of justice by showing on live television how those suspected of economic crimes were shot on his orders".⁹

⁶ Bruce Pannier, "Niyazov named president for life", RFE/RL, 29 December 1999.

⁷ For a full outline of formal constitutional powers, see UNDP, "Descriptive report on governance in Turkmenistan", Ashgabat, March 2001. The report does not address the realities of governance, but does provide an overview of formal institutions.

⁸ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

⁹ ICG interview with Batyr Mukhamedov, Moscow, October 2002.

None of this democratic façade has any impact on real power, which resides with and flows from the president. Building a democratic system will be extremely challenging. Turkmen have only known a system where democratic structures are little more than a mask for one-person autocracy.

3. The cult of personality

This systematic accumulation of political power converges in the cult of personality that Niyazov has developed and that has intensified dramatically in the past two to three years. From the very beginning of his rule, Niyazov personalised his position, and gradually, this element has come to dominate and exclude all formal elements of procedure or constitutional process.

A giant golden statue of Turkmenbashi revolves slowly in Central Ashgabat, showing the way to the sun from dawn to sunset. His name and image are on each central square of major cities and large villages. Niyazov's portraits cover public buildings and large billboards across the country, but also are on books, newspapers, bottles of alcohol and food packaging. The slogan *Halq, Watan, Turkmenbashi* (the People, The Nation, Turkmenbashi) is everywhere. Several towns, including the former port of Krasnovodsk, have been renamed Turkmenbashi. Regions, asteroids, and plants have been named after him. Even television provides no escape: a golden profile of Turkmenbashi revolves constantly in the upper right-hand corner of the screen.

In order to assert his image as irreplaceable, he had thousands of portraits of himself with white hair replaced with one in which he sports newly dyed pitch-black hair, following a successful heart operation. According to one interviewee: "The KNB spread rumours in rural areas that Turkmenbashi is becoming younger every day, as his black hair shows, and that he has become immortal".¹⁰

Perhaps in reflection of his upbringing as an orphan, Niyazov has also formed a cult around his mother, Gurbansoltan Niyazov, who has the posthumous title of National Mother and Heroine of Turkmenistan. He has ordered the construction of a huge mosque in her honour at Kip-jak, the state-owned farm where he was born.

The culmination of this bizarre cult came in 2001, when Niyazov decided to codify the new ethics of the Turkmen nation in a spiritual guide, called the *Ruhnama* – or Book of the Soul.¹¹ This 400-page volume, allegedly authored by Niyazov,¹² provides answers to "all of life's issues" and is a compilation of Niyazov's personal history, folk sayings, and the history, philosophy and traditions of the Turkmen nation as interpreted by Turkmenbashi. The book has been declared on a par with the Koran and the Bible for its moral value, and has become a key element of daily life in Turkmenistan. In schools and universities, students spend hours studying and discussing the *Ruhnama* to become model Turkmen citizens. Similarly, every work unit must organise public discussion groups at least once a week to discuss and make us of the philosophy contained in the *Ruhnama*.

In August 2002, Niyazov took a step further towards immortality by ordering a new calendar. The presidential decree stipulates that January has been renamed Turkmenbashi, and September *Ruhnama*. April is named after his mother. Niyazov also announced plans to change the names of the days of the week.¹³

Essentially, what Niyazov has achieved is a state-imposed Turkmen identity centred on his own personal image. Lack of alternative sources of information and the ever-present nature of his personality cult ensure that for a portion of the population this cult of personality serves as an effective means of social and political control. But increasingly the personification of politics is rejected by the population, which no longer sees Niyazov as providing the economic and social guarantees that were part of the implicit social contract of the dictatorship. By presenting himself as the embodiment of the state and the future of all Turkmens, Niyazov is also becoming the personal focus for the growing dissatisfaction.

¹⁰ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

¹¹ Available in English translation at www.rukhnama.com.

¹² A first version of the *Ruhnama* came out in the 1990s, but was then removed from libraries and destroyed, apparently having been deemed not sufficiently centred on Niyazov himself.

¹³ Igor Sasin, "If it's April, it must be Gurbansoltan for Turkmens", Agence France-Presse, 9 August 2002.

4. Control over the media

This cult of personality can continue unchallenged because there is no opportunity for any possible public criticism of the president. While the constitution provides for freedom of the press, in reality there is no scope for independent expression of opinion in any media outlet. All media – print and electronic – are state-controlled and largely repeat the propaganda issued by the Presidential Office. Niyazov is the formal founder of all registered newspapers and personally names all editors, who must report to him. Russian and other foreign newspapers are no longer allowed. When not issuing government statements, the three state television channels broadcast concerts of Turkmen folk dancing and songs devoted to Turkmenbashi. Programs from Russia are scrutinised and censored, and are broadcast only 24 hours later.

Cable television – which provided affordable access to popular Russian channels – was banned after a Turkmen journalist fled to Moscow in July 2002 and showed footage of poverty in Turkmenistan. Satellite television, which is more costly and thus mostly accessible only to city dwellers with reasonable incomes, is still legal and has become the only source of information about the outside world, yet there are rumours that it, too, could also be banned.¹⁴

The only alternative sources of information are the Russian radio station Mayak, and the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe. The latter is a key source of information for the population, but according to Naz Nazar, head of the Turkmen service, it is becoming increasingly difficult to operate. “Our staff was under extreme pressure, and they all left after seeing their spouses lose their jobs and their children denied education. Our last contributor is denied accreditation, and is threatened by the authorities”.¹⁵

The sole Internet server is state-owned and strictly controlled. Internet-users report filters on opposition sites, and email is believed to be intercepted by the security services. There are a few Internet cafes in Ashgabat, but in most of the country there is little knowledge of what the Internet has to offer, and little access to any media except state television.

5. Repression and the security apparatus

Turkmenistan has maintained the Soviet tradition of strong state control over society. Freedom of movement is significantly restricted. All citizens are required to carry internal passports that note their place of residence and any movements into and out of the country. Under international pressure, the government officially ended the requirement for exit visas for Turkmen citizens on 1 January 2002, yet unofficial controls are still in place at Ashgabat airport, and some people have been prevented from leaving the country, despite having the correct visas and air tickets.¹⁶ Within Turkmenistan, traffic police and the army check cars every 50 to 70 kilometres and register the names, passport details and car numbers of all travellers, whether Turkmen or foreign. Increasing checks on foreigners entering the country were introduced in December 2002, and visas made even more difficult to obtain.

Social control and the overweening dominance of the cult of personality are only possible because they are backed by a huge security apparatus, which uses repression to block any opposition to the regime. The primary pillar in this security regime is the successor organisation to the Soviet KGB, still widely known by its Russian name, the *Komitet Natsionalnoi Bezopastnosti* (KNB), or Committee for National Security.

The KNB was given absolute power over other state institutions to carry out its work and enjoyed immunity, with no real accountability under the justice system, until March 2002. It is believed to employ up to 3,000 members and a much wider network of informers. Its methods of control include the collection of compromising materials on potential opponents and blackmail, but it also frequently resorts to harassment, abductions, imprisonment, torture and assassination by special agents.

The accumulation of compromising information is a regular procedure used to control all high-level state employees. Once an official has started to rise through the ranks, secret files which contain genuine or fabricated evidence of corruption, sex scandals, drug trafficking or consumption, are used to threaten any persons who need to be controlled or pushed towards decisions they refuse to make.¹⁷

¹⁴ IRIN, “Turkmenistan: Focus on Press Freedom”, 5 June 2002, at www.irin.org

¹⁵ ICG interview, Prague, September 2002.

¹⁶ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

¹⁷ ICG interviews, Moscow, August 2002.

The government denies that it holds political prisoners, but human rights groups have documented numerous cases of imprisonment on dubious charges.¹⁸ Many cases go unreported, or people are arrested on alternative fabricated charges, often drug-related, or on accusations of corruption. Until 1999, when a moratorium on the death penalty was introduced, there were frequent executions, often with little respect for any real judicial process. In the first eleven months of 1998, there were 678 executions.¹⁹ Since then, imprisonment in appalling conditions has been the norm; officials are often sentenced to internal exile.

The human rights record indicates that the regime can be sensitive to high-profile cases but it has largely managed to avoid scrutiny for the cases of common citizens who have no international reputation. Political activist and representative of the Agzybirlik party Nurberdi Nurmamedov, arrested in January 2000 and accused of murder threats and hooliganism, and Pirimkuli Tangrykuliev, another political activist who had been jailed in August 1999, were both released in December 2000 after making 'public confessions' on national television of their alleged crimes. Prior to the recent arrest of Shikhmuradov, the only high-profile political prisoner in jail was Mukhmatkuli Aimuradov, in prison since 1994.

Persons detained by the KNB are either sent to prisons or immediately to labour camps where mortality rates are extremely high. Prisoners in these camps are repeatedly beaten and tortured by guards and forced to carry out strenuous work in appalling conditions. Batyr Mukhamedov, a journalist who was imprisoned for 27 weeks in labour camps, described daily cases of abuse, including deaths caused by beatings with metal instruments.²⁰ An estimated 20,000 people – both criminals and regime

opponents – are imprisoned in camps, including camps for women and psychiatric hospitals.²¹

The Turkmen government frequently announces amnesties. In 2002, for example, it declared that 8,000 prisoners would be freed. Mostly these amnesties are for common criminals, rather than political prisoners, although it is hoped that some of the latter also benefit. The government has announced it will soon complete a new prison in the Karakum Desert, 50 kilometres north of Ashgabat, to host all prisoners.²²

Repression reached a new peak after the alleged assassination attempt on Niyazov in November 2002. There was concern that Niyazov would use the incident as a pretext to resume the death penalty.²³

The political repression has used the KNB as its main instrument. With the power struggle within the security services that seems to be emerging, it is not clear how much longer he can rely fully on its cooperation. The KNB's dissatisfaction with Niyazov is not primarily related to his repressive policies, however, but to the purges he has carried out against its leadership.

B. THE INTERNAL STRUGGLE FOR POWER

On the surface, the dictatorship has created stability but a struggle for power is going on behind closed doors. The situation is complex and difficult to assess from outside, but in broad terms it involves five main domestic forces. On the one hand, there is President Niyazov and his Presidential Guard, who now act as the main instrument of presidential control. Potential opposition within the elite is situated primarily in the ranks of the KNB, which is dissatisfied with Niyazov's purges of its leadership, and also among many regional leaders, who have been pushed out of their positions, or who resent the domination of other clans over politics and resources. The army seems to be hesitating in the middle. The people are growing increasingly

¹⁸ See Human Rights Watch, "World Report: Turkmenistan, 2002", at www.hrw.org.

¹⁹ Human Rights Centre, "Memorial", "Turkmenistan: gotovitsya reshenie ob otmene zapreta na smertnuyu kazn" [Turkmenistan: A decision is being prepared to end the ban on the death penalty], Moscow, 28 November 2002. According to Demir Allaverdiev, the head of the opposition group Democratic Movement of Power Structures of Turkmenistan, more than 300 people were executed in the two days before the moratorium took effect. ICG interview, Moscow, 3 November 2002.

²⁰ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002. See also Eurasianet, "Human rights group slams situation in Turkmen prisons", 26 July 2001.

²¹ This category includes religious prisoners such as Kurban Zakirov of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and former officials who lost their position. See Human Rights Watch 2001 report on Turkmenistan, www.hrw.org.

²² See "No Prisons in Turkmenistan?", *The Times of Central Asia*, 14 November 2002.

²³ Human Rights Centre, "Memorial", op. cit.

dissatisfied, and occasionally take bold actions of their own, but the majority remain passive and understandably afraid to challenge the system.

1. Niyazov

Despite growing evidence of internal opposition, Niyazov still maintains control over all significant levers of power. He can still carry out repressive measures through his loyal Presidential Guard, which now runs the KNB. His control over society and the economy ensures that he can buy the loyalty of regional elites, if necessary, although economic problems may be lessening his ability to do so. Given the evidence of his rule so far, there is very little likelihood that he would turn to reforms as a way of regaining legitimacy or rebuilding popular support. His only option is to continue along the present path, increasingly relying on repression to retain power.

There is practically no prospect that Niyazov would give way to a successor, even one chosen by himself. His general paranoia towards potential successors ensures that all potential leaders have been exiled, sidelined, or imprisoned. Despite the law passed on possible presidential elections in 2010, there is no hint of a chosen new leader. According to the law, candidates must have lived in Turkmenistan for ten years prior to the presidential ballot, a restriction that rules out the exiled opposition.

There is also no real prospect of a dynastic succession. Niyazov seems to have denied any political future to his immediate family. His son Murat lives in semi-exile in Western Europe and has been apparently asked by his father to stay away from Turkmenistan. Known for his weakness for European casinos, he deals with the Turkmen oil and gas business from his residence in Austria. Murat has never been mentioned by his father as a possible heir, although the possibility cannot be excluded given his connections and presumed wealth. Niyazov's daughter Irina lives in Moscow and Western Europe with her Jewish-Russian mother Muza and plays no known political role.

Discussion of succession is made the more real because of increasing indications that Niyazov's health is deteriorating. At 62, he suffers from severe blood-circulation disorders that require a new and risky heart operation, which he refuses to undergo. The government officially denies this but rumours of

his worsening health are widespread and debated privately within Turkmen society.²⁴

His health is only one factor that prompts the opposition to say that "people in Turkmenistan realise these are the last days of Niyazov".²⁵ The growth of the internal opposition, particularly in the security forces, and the defection of a string of leading officials from the government, have deepened the sense that change may happen sooner rather than later. The assassination attempt in November 2002, whatever the true nature of the incident, also raises this possibility: either it is evidence of real opposition within the security forces, or it is evidence of growing anxiety by Niyazov, who may have created an artificial plot in an attempt to justify a further round of repression.

Unable to mask his deteriorating health completely, Niyazov now heavily relies on his Presidential Guard. Having alienated popular support, and having lost his trust in the KNB, he tries to play the two secret agencies against each other in order to keep control. The question is how long this game can continue to serve Niyazov's interests or whether it may yet turn against him.

2. The Presidential Guard

The Presidential Guard is an elite group of former bodyguards and security agents, estimated at around 3,000 personnel. Obsessed with security and fearing plots against his life, Niyazov has learned to trust only this institution, whose loyalty he has tested over many years.

The Presidential Guard is much more than just a bodyguard service. It reportedly has full access to political, economic and financial information, and is in charge of monitoring political and economic conflicts within society and within the elite. Its leaders report regularly to Niyazov on the political and economic situation. Its duties also include carrying out secret operations on Niyazov's personal orders. Completely linked with the president, the Guard is apparently disliked equally by both other security forces and society at large. It has spread its influence over alternative power structures, including the KNB, which is now headed by Colonel Batyr

²⁴ See Zamira Eshanova, "Turkmenistan: Rumours of Niyazov's ill health symptomatic of closed society", RFE/RL, 13 October 2002.

²⁵ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2000.

Busakov, a former deputy head of the Presidential Guard. The Presidential Guard itself is supervised by Akmurad Rejepov.²⁶

The Guard has no other option but to serve Niyazov, and it will be a key player in any transition scenario. Should Niyazov be removed, it is the most unpredictable and potentially the most dangerous because it is accustomed to functioning completely outside the law and has access to large resources. Any transition government should have a prudent strategy for integrating the Presidential Guard into new security structures, under proper control, or removing it from the political game altogether.

3. The KNB

Over the past two years, the KNB has undergone a dramatic change in its positioning on the political chessboard: from being a strictly pro-Niyazov security organ, it has emerged as the most serious potential challenger to Niyazov's power and future political viability.

The reason for this sudden change lies in Niyazov's reassessment of the KNB's role. Once seen as a mere instrument of power, Niyazov began to perceive it as gaining too much influence and independence. High and middle-ranking KNB officers are a capable force of well educated, well-trained personnel, with the potential to take a major part in governing the country.

Niyazov began his move against the KNB in March 2002, when he dismissed Mukhammed Nazarov, the organisation's head and hitherto one of his most loyal supporters. Nazarov was arrested and sentenced to twenty years in prison. A further 60 officers are also believed to be in prison, and some reports suggest that at least four officers have been executed, and 80 per cent of the leadership of the KNB has been affected by the purge. A new head was appointed, Colonel General Poran Berdiev.²⁷

This extraordinary shake-up of the KNB was publicly announced as an attack on human rights abuses committed by the organisation, its violations of the law in carrying out illegal house searches, and its alleged involvement in drugs trafficking.

Few observers considered that these were the real reasons, although the dismissals were noted as positive in the annual human rights report issued by the U.S. government.²⁸ In reality, Niyazov probably saw Nazarov as a potential threat. Sources suggest that the dismissal and arrest came after information reached Niyazov that Nazarov's colleagues toasted him as the future leader of Turkmenistan while Niyazov was away in Kazakhstan. According to this version, Niyazov returned immediately and dismissed the entire group.²⁹

Clearly the housecleaning did not end Niyazov's suspicions that the KNB was working against him. On 11 September 2002, the new KNB head, Berdiev, was also dismissed and replaced by Colonel Batyr Busakov, formerly Deputy Head of the Presidential Guard.³⁰ Niyazov reorganised the KNB, and renamed it the Ministry of National Security.

Despite Niyazov's efforts, the KNB still appears to represent a potential source of opposition. The purges have provoked widespread opposition, according to those with contacts in the security forces. One interviewee says:

The officers are extremely resentful because they are now falling victims to the system that they applied to society for years: arrests, torture, imprisonment, and confiscation of property. They realise that they have lost their protected position and now have nothing else to lose.³¹

According to another observer, "Many KNB agents have destroyed files, and refuse to follow orders from Turkmenbashi. Basically, the KNB is not functioning any more".³²

The KNB is a threat to Niyazov's position, not only because it is a strong, well-organised security force, but also because it has accumulated considerable information on Niyazov's unofficial practices which it may be able to use against him. Indeed, there is some evidence that such information is already being

²⁶ "Turkmenskie spetssluzhby" [Turkmen intelligence services], <http://www.agentura.ru/opponent/sng/turkmen/>.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸ Rustem Safronov, "Turkmenistan purge indicative of instability", Eurasianet, 12 March 2002; U.S. State Department, "Turkmenistan: Religious Freedom Report 2002".

²⁹ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

³⁰ Roger McDermott, "Shake-up at Turkmen Spy Agency hints at impending crisis", Eurasianet, 30 September 2002.

³¹ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

³² ICG interview with Vitaly Ponomarev, Moscow, October 2002.

leaked, particularly regarding Niyazov's alleged involvement in drug-smuggling.³³

However, according to opposition leaders, the KNB does not form a strong, coherent political group:

The power structures are not organised into a political force. Individual officers hold these attitudes, but this is not an organised movement. They want to be normal people, Niyazov forces them to do evil. They experience the hate of people, but they have no political face, it is simply a protest movement.³⁴

With internal or external leadership, however, the KNB is potentially a significant force. The now imprisoned opposition leader Boris Shikhmuradov, in particular, is believed to have wide contacts within the organisation. When he was in government, the KNB and the Ministry of Defence were part of his responsibilities. Another opposition leader, Avdy Kuliev, believes that Shikhmuradov retains ties and support also within the army.³⁵

Immediately after the assassination attempt on Niyazov, some observers suggested that the KNB might be involved.³⁶ Former KNB head Poran Berdiev was reportedly murdered on the same day, 25 November, perhaps lending support to the theory.³⁷ But the lack of professionalism demonstrated in the attempt tends to suggest that it was staged either by another group or by the regime itself.

The upper ranks of the KNB may well offer the basis for opposition to the regime from inside but if Niyazov is able to replenish its ranks quickly with younger outsiders, the attitudes of its ousted leaders could be slowly marginalised. Nevertheless, in any situation where the authority of Niyazov seems to be wavering, the KNB can no longer be relied upon to provide full support to the regime and may be

susceptible to influence from the external and internal opposition.

4. The Military

While the struggle between the KNB and the presidential guard is clearly critical for the future, the position of the army may also begin to play an important role. At present its position is far from clear, although there is certainly dissatisfaction within its ranks at purges of its leadership and its political status.

The army was always a key player in the Soviet structure. It seldom had a prominent political role but it provided social prestige for its members. After independence, the army gradually lost all the privileges it was accustomed to and fell into decline. Largely under-budgeted, it was unable to replace its ageing Soviet-era equipment and facilities. Officers were given low wages, and discipline problems have become the norm.

The army is in a crisis, with low morale and poor prospects. Given its accumulated frustration, it is looking for options to regain its power, bargaining in effect with both the President and his opponents. Niyazov's main concern is to buy the loyalty of officers. In order to do so, he has announced a raise in wages and promised a more professional force.

In reality, however, the conscript army is increasingly being used as free labour for the state. In August 2002, Niyazov announced that the 10,000-member Road Police would be replaced by serving soldiers. Soldiers have similarly replaced medical assistants. They are a much cheaper and more controllable labour force, and their use in this manner enhances the militarisation of society.

This deprofessionalisation of the military may have dismayed some high-ranking officers, although the additional opportunities for corruption and power may mitigate their dissatisfaction. Repression at the top will have tempered any outright opposition to the regime, and soldiers, like the security forces, are unlikely to form a coherent political group on their own. But the opposition is attempting to capitalise on this frustration within the ranks, and it claims to have support.³⁸

³³ See Rustem Safronov, "Turkmenistan's Niyazov implicated in drug smuggling", Eurasianet, 29 March 2002.

³⁴ ICG interview, Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, October 2002.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See fn. 3 above.

³⁷ After his dismissal in September 2002, Berdiev was appointed a regional head, but was arrested and imprisoned on 15 November 2002. "Poran Berdiev pogib nasilstvennoi smertiu" [Poran Berdiev died a violent death], Deutsche Welle, 29 November 2002.

³⁸ ICG interview with Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, 15 November 2002.

It is impossible to independently assess the attitudes of the military towards the opposition, but it does seem possible that it would prove less than loyal to Niyazov should an alternative leader appear. In this context, it seems possible that some elements would refuse to carry out orders for mass suppression of unarmed protestors – a situation the opposition is now trying to exploit for its benefit. By attempting to activate contacts with the military, the internal and external oppositions hope to secure another key player in its struggle against Niyazov.

5. The People

A proper assessment of popular attitudes and political beliefs is impossible in the present political climate. The population is often interpreted as politically passive, yet despite the repression of the KNB and the Presidential Guard, and the virtual closure of the country to the rest of the world, Turkmen society harbours small islands of public expression of discontent and protest. According to opposition leader Avdy Kuliev:

People in Turkmenistan are too often and too hastily labelled “passive” and blamed for political apathy. Yet more than a thousand protests have been organised in the past five years.³⁹

This may be an exaggeration but there certainly have been sporadic protests. One of the biggest was on 12 July 1995, when hundreds of people marched in Ashgabat to protest against increasing impoverishment and call for new parliamentary elections. At least 80 were arrested, although most were later released.⁴⁰

In 2002 several protests were reported. On 2 August, the opposition reported that 200 women gathered in central Ashgabat to protest against the government and condemn police and KNB harassment and arbitrary imprisonment. The immediate reaction illustrated why wider protest is unlikely: the police and KNB agents dragged the women into buses, emptying the square in ten minutes. The women

disappeared to an undisclosed destination, reportedly a labour camp.⁴¹

Despite such practices, there have been more and more isolated cases of rebellion, including the burning of Niyazov's portraits, and the blocking of roads,⁴² as people seem to reach the limits of their patience. In October 2002 leaflets were distributed in the city of Dashawuz calling for the people to “say no to Niyazov”.⁴³ Similar leaflets were earlier reported in Ashgabat. Some assert that the population is changing its attitudes as dissatisfaction grows: “There has been a change in mentality during the past year. People are discussing in private the demise of Niyazov and seem to fear the KNB less”.⁴⁴ Other writers suggest that socio-economic decline is taking its toll on people's patience.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the prospects for widespread political rebellion remain slim. The lack of coordination or potential leadership of protests ensures that demonstrations are impulsive and sporadic and rarely gather more than 100 people. The views of protestors may be widely shared in the population but few dare to demonstrate their discontent so openly. This situation could change if the regime itself seemed to be failing, or broader conflict broke out but it still is unlikely that popular protest will be the instrument that eventually brings down the regime.

Regional opposition is a potentially significant source of political leadership. A well-placed observer argues that one of the most significant bases for political opposition in Turkmenistan is among regional chiefs, or *hakims*, who were dismissed at one time or another by Niyazov:

They are, of course, traditionalists, and they have regional interests, but they are preparing ... They take seriously the image of Avdy

³⁹ ICG interview with Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, October 2002

⁴⁰ International Helsinki Federation, “Turkmenistan: Annual Report 1997”, at www.ihf-hr.org.

⁴¹ “Women protest rally reported in Turkmen capital”, www.gundogar.org, 2 August 2002.

⁴² See Nyazik Ataeva, “Niyazov critics flex their muscles”, Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 30 October 2002.

⁴³ Kurban Ashirov, “Novye listovki v Turkmenistane” [New leaflets in Turkmenistan], Deutsche Welle, 11 October 2002.

⁴⁴ ICG interview with Vitaly Ponomarev, Moscow, October 2002.

⁴⁵ Akhmet Salamov, “Sotsialnaya osnova vystrelov v Ashkhabade” [Social basis behind Ashgabat shooting], www.gundogar.org.

Kuliev and are close to him, but they will leave him sooner or later.⁴⁶

Again, on their own they will find it difficult to challenge the regime seriously, but they will be potential allies for any other opposition movement, and unlike some potential opponents of Niyazov, they often enjoy a degree of popular recognition and support.

Society has suffered the most under Niyazov. Having endured the successive abuses of the KNB and the Presidential Guard, it largely rejects the President and his clique and remains suspicious of attempts by the KNB to gain popular support. Many Turkmens have placed their hopes outside the country, with the exiled opposition. As one disgruntled resident admitted:

We are ready to fight Niyazov, but the initiative must come from outside, and must have the approval of Moscow or Washington.⁴⁷

These hopes may be misplaced, but there is now a dangerous mixture of deep dissatisfaction in society, a sense of helplessness, and a desire for external initiative and assistance.

C. THE EXTERNAL OPPOSITION

Although there is clearly considerable opposition to Niyazov within Turkmenistan, there is little possibility of overt political action. Instead, the entire open political opposition exists in exile, primarily in Moscow and Western Europe. Although its enmity to Niyazov is a uniting feature, it remains divided, revolving mainly around two leading figures: Avdy Kuliev and Boris Shikhmuradov.

Kuliev is the so-called father of the Turkmen opposition, a former Soviet diplomat and later Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, who now lives in exile in Moscow. Kuliev heads the United Turkmen Opposition (UTO), which he founded in 1992. The UTO groups together representatives of the first wave of political emigrants, who moved to Moscow and Western Europe in the early 1990s, many of them intellectuals or professionals, and few having

any government experience or significant financial backing.

The UTO includes ethnic Russians from Turkmenistan, ethnic Turkmens from Iran and Afghanistan, and members of the Agzybirlik and Turkmen Communist parties. It publishes its views in *Erkin Turkmenistan*, a news and opinion bimonthly directed by Kuliev and edited by the Turkmenia Foundation.⁴⁸ It does not have a detailed political program but calls for a new constitution, based on a parliamentary democracy.⁴⁹ Economically, the UTO supports a strong role for the state in a market economy, and a strong welfare state.

Kuliev left office in 1992, openly condemning Niyazov's personality cult and corruption. He has a reputation as a principled political figure, uncompromised by long-term association with the Niyazov regime. He describes himself as an atheist, an internationalist, and an admirer of Czech dissident-turned-President Vaclav Havel, and sees himself playing a similar role of intellectual-dissident for his own country.⁵⁰

His supporters praise his non-compromising stance, but political realities probably require a more charismatic personality to impose himself on other exiles, who do not overwhelmingly accept Kuliev as a leader. He also represents an older generation, less able to relate to newer potential political players. According to one younger exile, "Kuliev has not changed in the past ten years; he represents the traditionalists and is opposed to a younger, and modern opposition".⁵¹ Others assert that he retains popular support within Turkmenistan⁵² but it seems unlikely that he could survive long in any post-Niyazov power struggle due to a lack of a strong domestic base.

The other dominating figure of the exiled Turkmen opposition is Boris Shikhmuradov, a former top

⁴⁸ It is accessible on the Internet at www.erkin.net, including in an English version.

⁴⁹ "We are rewriting the constitution to empty it of any nationalistic ideology and to reach Western standards of democracy", ICG interview with Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, October 2002.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ICG interview, Moscow, November 2002.

⁵² "Should elections take place in Turkmenistan tomorrow, I think Kuliev would gain around 80 per cent of the vote because people remember him as a 'clean man'", ICG interview with Batyr Mukhamedov, Moscow, October 2002.

⁴⁶ ICG interview with Shokhrat Nadyrov, Moscow, 14 November 2002.

⁴⁷ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

official in Niyazov's government who is now in jail for his alleged role in the 25 November 2002 assassination attempt.⁵³ Shikhmuradov was Deputy Prime Minister, and later Minister for Foreign Affairs, but in 2000 Niyazov demoted him, apparently seeing him as a potential competitor. Shikhmuradov was consequently appointed to lower positions, such as special envoy for Afghanistan, and afterwards Ambassador to China. He defected from his post in Beijing in 2001, launching a second wave of political emigration among top-ranking Turkmen officials. Among those who followed Shikhmuradov into exile were the ambassador to Turkey, Nurmukhammed Khanamov, the ambassador to the Arab Emirates, Pirjan Kurbanov, the minister-counsellor at the Embassy in the U.S., Chary Annaberdiev, and others.

These former officials make up the back-bone of the National Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan (NDMT), which Shikhmuradov established in November 2001. Many fell victim to purges, and seek revenge, often with a personal grudge against Niyazov.

Politically, the group has not yet put forward a coherent policy program and continues internal debates about the best way to regain power in Ashgabat. One leading member admitted that: "We have very different views on how to conduct political operations, therefore we want to come to a compromise before publicising our political agenda". But some of the chief elements of a program are in place. They seem to concentrate on rapid economic reform, including mass privatisation, as a first priority, rather than swift democratisation.⁵⁴

Given his upbringing in Moscow and background as a journalist and linguist, Shikhmuradov is perceived as more charismatic and able to persuade Western audiences than Kuliev: "Shikhmuradov is flexible, highly educated, very well connected in Moscow and never seriously criticised in the West," says an observer.⁵⁵ But his long service in the regime means he has little of Kuliev's moral authority, and there

seems to be only limited popular support for him within Turkmenistan.

The question now is to what extent the arrest of Shikhmuradov will affect the political credibility of the NDMT. So far it has remained silent on the possible consequences.

Besides those two key figures, there are several others who have somewhat different perspectives but are squeezed out by the rivalry between Kuliev and Shikhmuradov that dominates the debate over the political future.

Nazar Soyunov, a former Oil and Gas Minister who now lives in exile in Moscow, has distanced himself from both Kuliev and Shikhmuradov. Now working for the Russian Duma as an expert on Turkmenistan, he advocates strong involvement by Moscow at a political level to pressure Niyazov through gas exports.⁵⁶ He is a representative of the Yomud clan, which feels under-represented in the political structures, and emphasises the need for a parliamentary system guaranteeing equal access to power for all clans as the only way to ensure stability in Turkmenistan.⁵⁷

Khudaiberdi Orazov, a former head of the Central Bank and one of the most influential of the "nomenklatura" opposition, has set up a movement called Vatan, separate from the NDMT, although still sympathetic to its aims.⁵⁸ Demir Allaverdyev claims to represent law-enforcement agencies in exile through the Democratic Movement of Power Structures of Turkmenistan.⁵⁹

There are substantial differences between Kuliev's UTO and Shikhmuradov's NDMT. The former represents intellectuals and technicians who left Turkmenistan a decade ago and have no significant financial resources. Shikhmuradov's allies are former officials from within the system, who stayed in power for almost a decade and had time to build up their own personal fortunes. As one observer explains: "Most of the Shikhmuradov group are nomenklatura people who want to get back to power in order to have control over energy and cotton

⁵³ See Section I above.

⁵⁴ The NDMT seeks an eighteen-month transition period before elections would be held, during which time there would be widespread privatisation and, clearly, a division of property among the new ruling class. ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

⁵⁵ ICG interview with Sokhrat Kadyrov, Moscow, November 2002.

⁵⁶ ICG interview with Nazar Soyunov, Moscow, November 2002.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See www.watan.ru.

⁵⁹ See www.galkynysh.org.

resources in Turkmenistan".⁶⁰ Kuliev's supporters accuse members of Shikhmuradov's group of having benefited from and contributed to Niyazov's regime and consider that they have little legitimacy in fighting Turkmenbashi.⁶¹

Despite the mutual antagonism, there is a pragmatic realisation that the two groups need each other. Even though Kuliev recognises that association with Shikhmuradov could discredit him, he lacks his own funds to operate inside and outside Turkmenistan. Kuliev is confident in his image as an opposition leader who has not succumbed to corruption, and he believes he would get massive support from the people in any election, at least as a symbolic figure for a transitional period. As he explains himself:

I bring in my moral authority, and Shikhmuradov could bring his money – this way he could pay back what he stole as a top official during the last decade. We have no other choice because the West is not providing money.⁶²

Shikhmuradov is unlikely to win mass popular support in Turkmenistan – he is half-Armenian, which will play against him in Turkmenistan's increasingly nationalistic political arena – but could win over disgruntled economic elites inside and outside the country, as well as elements of the security forces and army.⁶³

Despite this potential alliance of interests, the two sides have failed to reach a united political platform.⁶⁴ In June 2002, the Turkmen opposition met in Vienna to seek a common front. A further meeting was held in November in Moscow. Shikhmuradov did not attend either, and no platform was achieved, although they did agree to further meetings of a "permanent working roundtable of the Turkmen opposition".

⁶⁰ICG interview with Vitaly Ponomariov, Moscow, October 2002.

⁶¹ "People in Turkmenistan laugh when they hear Shikhmuradov is now in the opposition because everyone remembers how as a deputy Prime Minister. He contributed to the jailing of many." ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

⁶² ICG interview with Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, October 2002.

⁶³ "With his program of economic transition, Shikhmuradov is trying to seduce economic elites and to convince them to co-opt him as a guarantor of their interests". ICG interview with Vitaly Ponomariov, Moscow, October 2002.

⁶⁴ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

Shikhmuradov's imprisonment is unlikely to bring cooperation. Kuliev stated following the arrest that "[Shikhmuradov's] opposition has lost the battle, which could mean the end of its active struggle for power".⁶⁵

To a certain extent the opposition-in-exile has indulged in romantic dreams of revolution without having a workable policy towards the Niyazov regime. Internal differences seriously weaken it, and it remains dependent on external support if it is to present a serious threat to Niyazov. There is little detail about what might happen should Niyazov die, and without preparation there is a danger that conflicts between the two groups would be continued within Turkmenistan, threatening the stability of any transition period.

Nor is there any strong concept of how the opposition-in-exile would relate to the internal opposition. Dictatorial regimes tend to create friction between those who stayed behind and those who fled the country, and there is no certainty that the returning opposition would be as widely welcomed as it believes in a post-Niyazov Turkmenistan. All these issues need to be addressed by the opposition before a transition period; otherwise, a stable transfer of power will be extremely difficult to guarantee.

⁶⁵ Avdi Kuliev, "Niyazov raspravilsja s nomenklaturnoj opoziciej" [Niyazov put an end to the nomenklatura-style opposition], www.erkyn.net, 2 January 2003.

III. THE ECONOMICS OF DICTATORSHIP

If government statistics are taken at face value, Turkmenistan has one of the world's most dynamic economies, with GDP expanding by 16 to 20 per cent in each of the past three years. Yet poverty is rising, and social discontent is growing. This paradox is explained by two factors. First, the economy is almost entirely dependent on gas and is recovering from a slump of around 25 per cent in GDP in 1997, when exports of that commodity were cut. Secondly, most profits from these exports pass into the private bank accounts of the president and his close colleagues, with little reaching ordinary people. The result is that living standards are in sharp decline, even as sharp rises in GDP are recorded. The prospects for this Soviet-style economy, in which there is very little private enterprise, are extremely poor, but revenues from gas in particular are enough to keep the regime afloat, at least in the short term.

A. THE THREE PILLARS: OIL, GAS AND COTTON

Turkmenistan ranks among the world's top ten countries in terms of proven reserves of gas and oil. Its proven gas reserves are estimated at 2.86 trillion cu m,⁶⁶ and there are possible additional reserves of 4.5 trillion cu m. Oil, gas and cotton exports are estimated to account for over 80 per cent of revenues.⁶⁷

Foreign investors were keen to become involved in the oil and gas industry in the early 1990s, but few managed to negotiate their way through Turkmenistan's bureaucracy. Some Turkish, Iranian and Western companies are present, but exploitation has been severely hampered by a difficult business climate and lack of export opportunities. With the exception of some swap deals with Iran, the only real export route is through Russia, and Turkmenistan's main partners for gas – Russia, Ukraine and Belarus – either pay below world prices or through barter arrangements.

These barter deals are not profitable for the state, or for any foreign investors, but they do allow huge scope for corruption and personal gain by officials. According to former oil and gas minister Nazar Soyunov:

The barter deals were not in the interests of the people or the government; they laid the basis for corruption, ... and they strangled at birth the first signs of Turkmenistan's transition to a market economy.⁶⁸

Given the fact that Moscow controls all export routes from the North, dependence on Russia is the biggest economic challenge for Turkmenistan. Russian energy giants such as Gazprom and Itera de facto rule over exports of Turkmen gas. In 1994, Russia refused to allow Turkmen gas to pass through its pipelines. The consequences were immediate as industrial gas production fell sharply. In 1995 Turkmenistan signed bilateral agreements with Russia, expanding economic and political cooperation and proclaiming the two nations "strategic partners" through 2000. But a new dispute on gas prices in 1997 again halted exports, leading to the massive GDP decline of that year.

In February 2001, the Turkmen government signed a new agreement with Itera whereby it was to sell Russia 10 billion cubic metres of gas in 2001. Russia announced it would buy up to 20 billion cubic metres by 2008,⁶⁹ but both sides remain unable to agree on a final price.⁷⁰ Turkmen gas is crucial to Russia as it directly supplies entire regions, such as the Southern Urals, and Sverdlovsk. Without it, those regions would have no energy at all, since Siberian producers want to sell their gas to the West for harder currency, and the government is not able to impose a balanced redistribution within Russia.⁷¹ Still, no long-term gas export agreement is expected in the near future, therefore maintaining uncertainty on the crucial northern export route.

The second largest importer of Turkmen gas, Ukraine, is also an unpredictable market. Kiev pays for half its gas via construction work in

⁶⁶ Figures from BP Amoco, cited in Economist Intelligence Unit, "Turkmenistan: Country Profile", 31 August 2002.

⁶⁷ Energy Information Administration, "Turkmenistan Energy Resources", at www.eia.doe.gov, May 2002.

⁶⁸ Materials from former oil and gas minister, Nazar Sounov.

⁶⁹ See "Turkmenistan, Russia Initial New Gas-Export Agreement", RFE/RL, 19 September 2002.

⁷⁰ Turkmenistan proposed to sell its gas at U.S.\$44 per 1,000 cubic metres, while Gazprom insisted on paying U.S.\$34.

⁷¹ ICG interview with energy specialist, Moscow, October 2002.

Turkmenistan. It is supposed to pay the second half in cash but has accumulated a debt estimated at U.S.\$380 million.⁷² Turkmenistan has little option but to continue business with Ukraine, despite bad payments and the dependence on Russia to allow gas transit. The unreliability of this route is expected to grow in the coming years as two new competitors, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, emerge. Both have announced plans to increase gas exports to Russia through the same pipeline, thereby reducing Turkmenistan's quotas.

Turkmenistan has built a small pipeline that delivers about three billion cubic metres of gas to Iran. Even though this pipeline is not significant economically, partly because of the government's inability to reach agreement on delivery contracts, politically it opens a new export route and potentially allows Turkmenistan to reach Turkish markets via Iranian pipelines, bypassing Russia and the Caspian Sea. Attempts to capitalise on the growing Turkish market for gas have included a project for a pipeline across the Caspian Sea and on to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Problems in negotiations with Turkmenistan, political pressure from Russia, and difficulties with Azerbaijan all have contributed to stalemate on this project, despite significant support from the U.S. Turkmenistan now seems certain to have lost the race for the Turkish gas market, outflanked by Russia and Iran, and possibly also by Azerbaijan.

The other alternative route from Turkmenistan has been a much-discussed pipeline south through Afghanistan to Pakistan, and potentially on to India. This 1,500 kilometre enterprise would pump gas from the southern Daulatabad fields, across 764 kilometres of Afghan territory, link up with Pakistan's gas grid and reach the Indian Ocean. The U.S. company UNOCAL was deeply involved in initial attempts in the mid-1990s to reach agreement, including negotiations with the then Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Lack of security guarantees and growing political opposition domestically to support for the Taliban led to UNOCAL's withdrawal but the project has re-emerged on the scene following the political changes in Afghanistan.

Niyazov met with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai in May 2002 to discuss renewing the Trans-Afghan plan. U.S. officials have also been involved in

reviving the project, and the Asian Development Bank has offered financing for a feasibility study. But with the cost of the project reaching an estimated U.S.\$2 billion to U.S.\$3 billion, so far only Japan has shown any investment interest. The U.S. has political motives to support the pipeline as it would provide energy for its allies, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and challenge Russia's monopoly on the northern routes for energy export. Nevertheless, even if the regional political situation improves and the project finds investors, it will be at least a decade before Turkmenistan can benefit from the Trans-Afghan-Pipeline or become less dependent on the northern route via Kazakhstan and Russia.

Most oil is extracted from fields at Koturdepe, Nebitdag, and Chekelen near the Caspian Sea, which have possible reserves of up to 80 billion barrels. Production fell dramatically in 1995 but recovered in 1999, levelling off at about 150,000 barrels per day (bbl/d) over the past three years.⁷³ Efforts have been made to develop the refinery capacity in the port of Turkmenbashi on the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan's aim is to produce 1 million bbl/d by 2010, a goal that requires an estimated U.S.\$25 billion in foreign investment.⁷⁴

There has been some interest from foreign companies, but little serious investment. Some smaller players have braved the difficult environment, including Dragon Oil (UAE), Monument Resources (UK), and Petronas Carigali (Malaysia). Major players have adopted a wait-and-see approach.

Corruption is a serious obstacle throughout the system, even for foreign companies. As a Turkmen expert explains, "Most Turkish companies that deal with Niyazov have to pay a substantial part back – up to 20 per cent - otherwise they are harassed by tax inspections and threatened to have their equipment confiscated".⁷⁵ Even for those who manage to get round such obstacles, there is little legal guarantee that they will retain control over their business in the long term. The hydrocarbons sector, the showcase of the economy, still remains a risky investment, with the state holding a majority share in any joint-venture. Since the government owns all pipelines, foreign companies must sell oil and gas through the state commodities exchange at

⁷² Michael Lelyveld, "Turkmenistan: Ukraine Still in Arrears on Gas payments", Radio Free Europe, 4 June 2002.

⁷³ Energy Information Administration, op. cit.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

fixed prices well below world market levels. As a result, several projects that could substantially increase oil production have stalled.⁷⁶

Not surprisingly foreign direct investment has dropped sharply, down 25 per cent in the first six months of 2002.⁷⁷ Non-convertibility of the Turkmen manat ensures that investment in the non-energy sectors is also minimal. The most active foreign companies are those who win lucrative government tenders for construction and other services. Foremost among these is the French group Bouygues, the beneficiary of many of the grandiose follies that have grown up in Ashgabat. The construction sector is now emerging as a fourth force in the economy. Providing jobs for poorly educated citizens, it injects money from non-transparent businesses into the economy and also enhances the cult of personality.

The last pillar of the economy – cotton – traces its history back to the Soviet period. The Socialist Republic of Turkmenistan was part of the cotton belt, along with Uzbekistan. This priority has been maintained. There is little arable land in Turkmenistan – only about 3 per cent of the total territory – but fully 50 per cent is planted with cotton, ranking Turkmenistan among the ten largest producers in the world. Turkmen cotton is highly valued on the international market because of its superior quality fibres.⁷⁸ But poor management and lack of commercial incentive for farmers has led to consistently declining harvests.

After a 50 per cent fall in production in 1997, the industry is trying to regain previous levels. In 2002, however, the harvest plummeted to new lows, reaching only 25 per cent of planned production of two million tons. While Niyazov blamed the weather, publicly dismissed officials for failing to work and imposed three-month salary fines on ministers, the real reasons lie in the complete absence of motivation for farmers to grow the crop, given their minimal returns.

B. DYNAMICS OF A DICTATORIAL ECONOMY

1. Personal presidential control

Just as political power has been concentrated around Niyazov, so economic resources are for the most part under his personal control, acting through an opaque network of state institutions and key officials. In practice, the Soviet-style system of a centralised and state-owned economy has been maintained. This means that agriculture, industry and services are provided by government and government-owned entities, and competition from the private sector is not tolerated in major deals. Despite constitutional guarantees, there is no real legal concept of private property in practice, if it challenges the wishes of the president.⁷⁹

The gas and oil industry is under the supervision of the Ministry of Oil and Gas, a powerful institution that operates the Turkmenistan Natural Gas Company – Turkmengaz – and oil companies in charge of exploitation and refining. Given Niyazov's links to former Soviet elites who are still in power in other newly independent states with which Turkmengaz does much of its business, revenues created by the oil and gas sectors are assured to remain under control. Niyazov announced in October 2000 that privatisation of the oil and gas sectors within the next ten to fifteen years was ruled out.

Similarly, the cotton industry is heavily controlled. Cotton is produced on state-owned farms at reduced cost since the state dictates the very low price at which it will buy from producers, and no competitors are permitted. Students and schoolchildren are used as a free labour force to collect the cotton. The industry is supervised by Niyazov via the Ministry of Agriculture, which controls marketing and distribution and has lately developed factories with Turkish capital⁸⁰ to produce fabric or already tailored clothes for export.

Much of the profit from the oil and gas sector, and also from cotton, goes directly to the Foreign

⁷⁶ For example, Malaysia's Petronas suspended operations one year for loss of profit under the current rules; see Energy Information Administration, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Country Profile: Turkmenistan", August 2002.

⁷⁸ See Asia Development Bank (ADB), "Turkmenistan Report for 2002", at www.adb.org.

⁷⁹ "High-ranking officials started building houses in this area of Ashgabat. Suddenly came a presidential decree that this was presidential land, and all fancy houses with marble were destroyed by bulldozers. Several people died of heart-attacks when they saw their houses pulled down". ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

⁸⁰ The Turkish group Calik used EBRD funds to develop complexes to produce denim and jeans in the country.

Exchange Reserve Fund (FERF), an off-budget account, which is effectively under the personal control of President Niyazov. He has used this fund for his personal purposes and for developing his cult of personality through the construction of statues, monuments and other grandiose projects. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has suspended investments in any project where the profits go into the FERF.⁸¹

The World Bank has also indicated that reforming the FERF will be a crucial part of any reform plan, suggesting that this should include “defining transparent rules for a currency reserve to facilitate exchange rate management, an intergenerational savings fund to help offset future shocks, and public investments that are reviewed within the budget framework”.⁸² But the fragile nature of the economy and Niyazov's use of resources for political control suggest that there is little political incentive for him to do anything to make the FERF more transparent.

2. Drugs as a source of government income

Since the Turkmen leadership needs off-budget cash resources to sustain its economic policies, drug trafficking offers an important alternative source of income. There is sufficient evidence from local and international observers to conclude that government structures are deeply involved in the trade. International observers claim to have seen trucks being loaded with drugs at the Afghan border, under the scrutiny of government officials. Former officials claim that drugs in transit have been stored in the presidential palace itself and that hundreds of tons of opium and heroin have been smuggled through the country.⁸³

The government denies any involvement but it discourages investigations. In 1997, border guard Major Vitaly Usachev discovered 400 kg of heroin in a container from Afghanistan at Ashgabat airport. Despite warnings, he reported the case to the KNB. On the same day, he was arrested for drug trafficking, imprisoned and later sentenced to

death and shot.⁸⁴ Reports of border-guards being killed or disappearing for having discovered heroin consignments are not uncommon.⁸⁵

The use of drugs-trafficking as a key element in the regime's economic base threatens to criminalise many of its structures and makes any transition to a more democratic system problematic. The vested criminal interests already in place will not give up this lucrative trafficking route easily, particularly if other routes in Central Asia become more difficult. There is a significant danger that whatever regime is in place in Turkmenistan will be increasingly undermined by the narcotics business, either by personnel within its ranks or by criminal groups outside.

C. SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT

1. The demographic challenge

Turkmenistan's population, estimated at 4.5 million, is growing fast. Encouraged by a generous social system in Soviet times, Turkmen families in rural areas, where traditions encourage large families, typically had six to ten children. Having many children is seen as a sign of prosperity because they can help in the fields and take care of the elders.

Urban families tend to have only one or two children but relatively large rural families with five to seven are still the norm. The population growth rate, therefore, remains rather high, almost 2 per cent per year. The total fertility rate is 3.6 children born/woman.⁸⁶ In practice, this means the population will reach 5 million in 2005 and 6 million in 2015. Turkmenistan's population is very young, with 40 per cent aged fourteen or below.⁸⁷ Sharply reduced possibilities of higher education and poor prospects

⁸¹ “Turkmenistan: Country Strategy”, www.ebrd.org.

⁸² World Bank, “Turkmenistan Country Assistance Strategy”, Public Information Notice, at www.worldbank.org, January 2001.

⁸³ ICG interviews, Moscow, Ashgabat, Bishkek, July, October 2002. Safronov, “Turkmenistan's Niyazov implicated in drug smuggling” op. cit.

⁸⁴ ICG interview with Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, October 2002.

⁸⁵ Turkmenistan expert Rustem Safronov reports that in 1998, border guards in the town of Marushak near the Afghan border detected a convoy that they believed to be transporting a significant quantity of drugs. Upon being informed of the border guards' pursuit of the convoy, Niyazov reportedly dispatched an attack helicopter to destroy the border guard unit. Shikhmuradov alleged that the Turkmen press portrayed the event as another example of border guards dying in the struggle to contain traffickers. Safronov, “Turkmenistan's Niyazov implicated in drug smuggling” op. cit.

⁸⁶ U.S. Bureau of Census figures.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

of employment are likely to lead to a rise in youth involvement with criminality and drugs.

2. Growing poverty

Despite official claims that living standards are high compared to neighbouring Central Asian states, the economic situation is actually worsening dramatically for most Turkmen. Officially, the annual inflation rate is below 10 per cent but this does not reflect the reality of daily life. Only very few products and services are provided by the government at low state-sponsored prices. The bulk of products have to be purchased on the black market, where prices and inflation are high because they are related to a real exchange rate that is four times the official one.⁸⁸

International organisations tend to accept official claims that the social network in Turkmenistan has been preserved. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) claims that "Poverty incidence in Turkmenistan is perhaps the lowest among the transition economies of Central Asia...The high GDP growth rates achieved in the last three years, combined with the Government's scheme for subsidised availability of basic commodities and services, has brought down the level of absolute poverty to negligible levels".⁸⁹

In reality, salaries are extremely low and often delayed or not paid. The average is U.S.\$50 per month in Ashgabat and U.S.\$10 to U.S.\$20 in the provinces. Almost 90 per cent of the 2.3 million working population are employed by the state, since the opportunities for private enterprise are so restricted. Officially there is no unemployment, but in practice it is rising fast, particularly in rural areas and among youth. There are no reliable statistics, but international analysts quote conservative figures of 19 to 20 per cent.⁹⁰ In practice, underemployment is widespread and may reach 40 per cent, according to unofficial estimates.⁹¹

The vaunted welfare system has also collapsed much more than some outside observers suggest. There is

still a wide range of subsidies on local goods, with a litre of petrol costing less than a litre of water. This policy of artificially low prices on basic amenities and scheduled regular doubling of salaries is crucial for Niyazov because it is aimed at buying society's approval of his personality cult. However, the universal subsidies, including virtually free gas, electricity, water, salt, flour and other goods, are increasingly unsustainable. In 2000 the government subsidised the energy sector alone by U.S.\$600 million.⁹²

In rural areas, poverty is even more striking: land has not been privatised and farmers are still enrolled in state-farms that require them to plant cotton and sell it at government-imposed low prices. Agricultural workers earn very small salaries, and the standard of living in rural areas is far below that in Turkmen cities. Article 9 of the 1992 Constitution guarantees citizens the right to own capital, land, and other material or intellectual property, but no law stipulates the source from which land can be acquired, and no fund of land available for private purchase has been established.⁹³

The only window of opportunity is to work abroad, a privilege for holders of Russian passports and for urban residents well connected with the police. Remittances from abroad are a key component of many family budgets but since it is still relatively difficult for Turkmen to travel outside the country, labour migration remains lower than elsewhere in Central Asia.

The government itself implicitly acknowledged its failure to boost living standards, by replacing the Ten Years of Prosperity program "that would bring Turkmenistan to the level of Kuwait", as Niyazov proclaimed in the early 1990s, with the new slogan "A Golden Century of Turkmenistan". Socio-economic pressures, particularly among the young, are one of the key challenges the regime faces. But the constant propaganda regarding the level of prosperity makes it impossible for government

⁸⁸ In November 2002 the black market rate was around 21,000 manats to the U.S. dollar, while the official exchange rate was 5,200.

⁸⁹ Asian Development Bank, "Asian Development Outlook 2002: Turkmenistan".

⁹⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ ICG interviews, Ashgabat and Moscow, July-October 2002.

⁹² World Bank figures, cited in Economist Intelligence Unit, "Turkmenistan", *op. cit.*

⁹³ In February 1993, a State Committee on Land Reform was established, with a goal of privatizing 15 per cent of all agricultural land, but so far land is still in the hands of the government. Consequently, the only opportunity presently is through a law on land ownership that gives every citizen the right to own and bequeath to heirs plots smaller than 50 hectares, so long as they are continuously cultivated, and to obtain a long-term lease on up to 500 hectares.

ministers to devise any serious program to alleviate poverty and ensures that international organisations are also not encouraged to do so.

3. Ecological impact

Another alarming consequence of Niyazov's unsustainable economic policies is degradation of the environment. Turkmenistan inherited a damaged environment due to heedless Soviet concentration on exploiting natural resources. Current policies have only worsened the situation.

The main concern is the increasing aridity of the Karakum and Kyzylkum deserts, where even limited growth of basic crops is becoming impossible. The chief cause is the inefficient use of water due to weak regulation and Niyazov's populist policy of heavily subsidising its use. For example, the Karakum Canal that flows 1,100 kilometres along the Kopetdag mountain range is in desperate need of reconstruction to stop the further destruction of the Aral Sea. Half the water leaks away and creates salt swamps along its path, yet the government has taken no measures to prevent further ruin of the canal. Excessive irrigation brings salt to the surface, forming salt marshes that dry into unusable clay flats. This phenomenon is aggravated by year-round pasturing of cattle and excessive use of chemicals.

Poor drinking water is the primary health risk posed by such environmental degradation. In the northern Dashowuz Province, bacteria levels in drinking water exceed by ten times the acceptable sanitary level, and some experts warn that the province will have to be evacuated by the end of the 21st century unless a comprehensive cleanup is undertaken⁹⁴. The supply of running water is increasingly limited even in Ashgabat, despite the monumental fountains that dominate the city squares.

4. Economic prospects

The murkiness of the Turkmen economy has deterred international organisations, such as the World Bank and the IMF from providing significant budgetary aid. Without major foreign investment or external assistance, and with continued limitations on potential gas exports, Turkmenistan faces a difficult economic future. The disastrous cotton harvest in 2002 will sharply

cut hard currency revenues and put pressure on the ability to service foreign debts.

Official economic data are unreliable and often inconsistent, showing deep contradictions between different departments and ministries. It is difficult to assess the true state of the economy also because of the widespread use of off-budget accounts, under the personal control of government officials. One indication that the country is experiencing serious economic difficulties is the fact that no budget data have been released since April 2002.⁹⁵ The government is probably drawing on foreign reserves in order to maintain state orders in industry and the construction sector and to provide subsidised prices for basic products.

The subsidy policy is expensive and ultimately unsustainable but is Niyazov's only remaining source of popularity in the country, and its withdrawal is politically impossible at present. But in the medium term, reforms of this nature are unavoidable, with all the possible political repercussions and social upheaval that entails.

Much will depend on the regime's ability to maintain and increase gas exports, and here relations with Russia will be crucial. Differences over prices have undermined contractual arrangements, and rhetorical flourishes at summits seldom translate into actual commercial improvements. There is no present prospect of a major increase in gas exports. Increased production requires foreign investment, which will remain minimal while the present regime is in power. Increased export needs either an upgrade of the Russian pipeline or new routes, to Iran or across Afghanistan. Under Niyazov few investors will accept the political risks, let alone the security risks still faced along any route through Afghanistan.

There is little hope of widespread prosperity for the Turkmen people under President Niyazov. For the regime the present gas exports and illegal off-budget income from other sources probably offer enough revenue to keep policies in place for some time. But the population can expect declining standards of living, as subsidies diminish and salaries fail to maintain pace with inflation.

⁹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency Factbook on Turkmenistan.

⁹⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Turkmenistan", op. cit.

IV. A SOCIETY IN RUINS

A. THE ETHNIC TURKMEN COMMUNITY: A MOSAIC OF COMPETING CLANS

Loyalty to clan rather than nation still prevails for the majority of the ethnic Turkmen population, despite almost eight decades of efforts to create a coherent sense of nationhood. The first attempt to promote a sense of a united Turkmen nation was made in early Soviet days, when what had been the Russian Tsarist province of Turkestan, covering much of Central Asia, was divided into Soviet republics largely based on the ethnic affiliation ascribed to its inhabitants. Thus several tribes were brought into the Turkmen SSR in 1924.

In reality Turkmen tribes did not identify with this larger entity and kept tribal divisions alive as the essential basis of their identity. This reality of sub-national identity was unofficially acknowledged by Moscow: the first Soviet censuses included tribal affiliation. Similarly, unofficial recognition of clans was maintained by allowing collective farms to be formed around one kinship group in order to achieve social peace and improve production.⁹⁶

The second attempt to cement Turkmen national unity was made in 1991 when independence was achieved and a sovereign Turkmen state was created for the first time. This nation-building program has been an important part of Niyazov's policy, although it has used his own personality as the central symbol of nationhood. In his book, the *Ruhnama*, President Niyazov particularly stresses the unity of the Turkmen nation.⁹⁷

At the level of ordinary life, in shops, or on the street, clan distinctions do not play a role. Socially and culturally, though, tribalism re-emerges to define life patterns. In theory, each member of the seven main⁹⁸ and 24 smaller tribes knows his or her tribal affiliation, at least seven generations back. The tribal lineage still plays a major role in arranging marriages, particularly in rural areas, and is

reinforced by the presence of dialects that define each group.

Some tribes are particularly insistent on their specific identity and refuse to be amalgamated as part of a broader Turkmen nation. For example, the Holy Tribes or Ovlad-Awliya, which claim to be of Arab descent from one of the first four Caliphs, have maintained their privileged positions and still enjoy spiritual respect, even after seven decades of Communism.⁹⁹ In general, when asked about their identity, ethnic Turkmen tend to mention their clan first. They rarely cite Niyazov's monolithic model of a Turkmen nation.

At a deeper political and economic level, the tribal system is more noticeable and still continues to shape political positions and relations. The Tekke tribe – the most numerous – which traditionally lived in the South, around Ashgabat, controlled much of the power during the Communist period and maintains a strong grip on political positions and law-enforcement agencies today. Niyazov is himself from the Tekke, although his lack of strong family ties may limit his sense of tribal identity. He has granted political preference to Tekke in key positions, a situation that exacerbates frustration within other groups. Opposition leader Avdy Kuliev claims that “Because of Niyazov's policy of divide and rule, there is growing resentment against the Tekke group, since he has placed Tekke at the head of all power structures”.¹⁰⁰

Tension among tribes is also resurgent at the economic level, indicating separatist trends. The Yomud clan, of which Nazar Soyunov, a former government minister now in exile, is a leader, predominates on the Caspian coast. The economic and political elite of Krasnovodsk (the former name of Turkmenbashi, the main port and refinery facility on the Caspian Sea), complain that revenues go to Ashgabat and almost nothing is left for them.¹⁰¹ Some openly call for a boycott of the national

⁹⁶ See Alexandre Benigsen, S. Enders Wimbis, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire* (London, 1985), pp. 97-99; John Glenn, *The Soviet Legacy in Central Asia* (London, 1999), pp. 122-125.

⁹⁷ Saparmurad Niyazov, *Ruhnama*, Ashgabat, 2001.

⁹⁸ The main tribes are the Tekke, Ersary, Yomud, Goklen, Salor, Saryk and Chowdor.

⁹⁹ “I am not a Turkmen, but a descendant of Arab sheikhs”, ICG interview with a member of a Holy Tribe, Ashgabat, July 2002.

¹⁰⁰ ICG interview with Avdy Kuliev, Moscow, October 2002.

¹⁰¹ Traditionally Tekke lands in the South are deprived of energy resources, while Yomud-controlled territories are rich in gas and oil reserves.

budget, saying the Yomuds should fight Tekke hegemony over resources.¹⁰²

Regional elites are extremely resentful of Niyazov's centralised control of resources and are likely to seek increased power in a post-Niyazov situation. Any transitional regime will need to take into account the pent-up frustrations of regional elites and find a mechanism to accommodate the interests of the most powerful tribal and regional divisions. The warning that "Regional elites will boycott a democratic system unless their interests are reconsidered in a new political scenario" should be taken into account by the opposition and the present regime.¹⁰³

B. MINORITIES AS SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS

While ethnic Turkmen represent the majority in the country, about 20 per cent of the population is made up of various minority ethnic groups. No reliable information has been issued in recent years but the 1995 census, the most recent source, gives the following break-down: 77 per cent Turkmen, 10 per cent Uzbek, 7 per cent Russian, 2 per cent Kazakh and 4 per cent others.

Seeking to assert their nationhood after years of external control, all post-Soviet states placed the dominant ethnic group at the front of the political and social scene in the aftermath of independence. Over a decade later, though, ethnic minorities, particularly Slavs, have regained some power and recognition in many republics where laws have been amended to allow better integration of major minority groups.

In Turkmenistan, however, the gap between Turkmen and non-Turkmen continues to widen. Niyazov stated in 2000 that "The 21st century is the Golden Century of the Turkmen",¹⁰⁴ which clearly marks the establishment of an ethnic divide between citizens living in the same country.

1. Russians: from masters to servants

The Russian community feels particularly vulnerable in the process of self-assertion of the Turkmen

majority. Privileged during the Soviet period as a highly-qualified and better paid labour force and guaranteed political supremacy, it now lives under entirely opposite rules.

In the years following independence, more than 50 per cent of the ethnic Russian community has left, mostly to Russia and Kazakhstan. As a result, while Russians were nearly 20 per cent of the population in the late 1980s, mostly concentrated in Ashgabat and the oil fields, they accounted for just 7 per cent by 1995, and subsequent emigration has shrunk their numbers still further. When asked why they have left and still leave their country, ethnic Russians point to the lack of economic opportunities because of their ethnic origin.

Politically, Russians are denied any participation in the country's administration and state structures. There are no ethnic Russian ministers, deputies, or other high-ranking officials. In the aftermath of the alleged assassination attempt in November 2002, ethnic Russians working in government institutions were reportedly being checked closely and in some cases dismissed.¹⁰⁵

The only advantage ethnic Russians still possess is the chance to gain dual citizenship: in 2000 Turkmenistan and Russia signed an agreement allowing dual Turkmen and Russian citizenship for ethnic Russians permanently living in Turkmenistan. In practice, this means Russians can leave Turkmenistan freely and travel to Russia and most of Central Asia without a visa.

Economically, very few Russians have kept or maintained any significant stake in the economy. Business is largely in the hands of Turkmen clans, with very limited possibilities to develop independent private enterprises. One of the few areas where ethnic Russians still play a role is as intermediaries in oil and gas contracts with Russian corporations.

The generation of ethnic Russians below the age of 40 believes that it has little future in Turkmenistan. "All that is left for Russians here is to be second-class citizens, to work as waitresses or servants, or drivers", said a Russian from Ashgabat.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

¹⁰³ ICG interview with Sokhrat Kadyrov, Moscow, November 2002.

¹⁰⁴ This widespread slogan was later changed to a less antagonistic "Golden Century of Turkmenistan".

¹⁰⁵ "Niyazov targets Russians as clampdown continues following assassination attempt in Turkmenistan", Eurasianet, 4 December 2002.

¹⁰⁶ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, June 2002.

Culturally, the Russian community feels particularly deprived. In 2000, Niyazov announced a series of measures aimed at suppressing elements of Russian culture in the daily life of Turkmenistan's inhabitants. All major Russian-language libraries, the Academy of Sciences, and the ballet were closed because "they do not meet the needs of the Turkmen nation".¹⁰⁷

The 1992 constitution replaced Russian with Turkmen as the official language. It is still common in official communications, despite campaigns aiming at completely erasing its use over the long term but it has disappeared from higher education, despite the lack of appropriate textbooks and materials in Turkmen. Ethnic Russians and other Russian-speaking groups send their children abroad for studies, as the last Russian school has disappeared, and only one Turkmen-Russian school in Ashgabat provides secondary education on the Russian model.

Having lost political, social, and cultural status and most of its economic power, the significantly shrunken Russian community is expected to diminish further, a clear sign that ethnic integration has failed in Turkmenistan.

2. Uzbeks: a community at a strategic border

Now the second ethnic group in the country after the Turkmens, the Uzbeks account for around 10 per cent of the population.¹⁰⁸ Unlike the mostly urban Russians, the Uzbeks are rural, heavily concentrated in the eastern and northern parts of the country, mainly along the Amu-Darya River that marks the border with Uzbekistan.

Poor relations between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been reflected in the status of the ethnic Uzbek minority. It is perceived in Ashgabat as a potentially separatist population that could ask for reunion with its historical homeland. Culturally, ties between eastern Turkmenistan and the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan are very strong. In order to prevent a secessionist scenario, Niyazov has proposed relocating ethnic Uzbeks to the region around the future Golden Century Lake, in

Turkmenistan's centre, a measure that could provoke serious inter-ethnic tension.¹⁰⁹

Uzbeks are much more traditional in their Muslim faith than ethnic Turkmen and do not share the same nomadic, shamanist heritage. Recent laws have complicated the most basic traditions, such as marriage. Uzbek parents who want to marry their daughter to an Uzbek husband from Uzbekistan, must demand U.S.\$50,000 from the potential husband. According to the law, a foreigner marrying a Turkmen female citizen must deposit this very large sum in the State Turkmen Bank to provide for the wife in case of divorce.

Many Uzbeks and Turkmen living on both sides of the border¹¹⁰ have to bury their dead in family graves that are on the opposite side. "Now we have to pay U.S.\$6 dollars per person to cross the border to Turkmenistan – that's a weekly salary – if we want to bury our dead according to our traditions, because now the grave happens to be on Turkmen territory", an ethnic Turkmen living in Uzbekistan told ICG.¹¹¹

Culturally, Uzbeks also feel threatened. The Turkmen government keeps statistics on the number of Uzbeks artificially low. "This way they do not need to provide Uzbek-language schools and textbooks".¹¹² All Uzbeks are forced to study in Turkmen-language schools and wear traditional Turkmen dress to school.

The government's allegations that the Uzbek Embassy was implicated in the apparent attempt on Niyazov's life in November 2002 and was involved in opposition leader Shikhmuradov's mysterious return from exile prior to his December arrest has significantly worsened the situation of the Uzbek minority, whose loyalty is being questioned again by Ashgabat.¹¹³

Turkmenistan's senior Muslim cleric, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who is an ethnic Uzbek, was replaced by an ethnic Turkmen on 10 January 2003 after he refused to declare publicly that Turkmenbashi is

¹⁰⁷ Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: Country setting out on its 'own path'", RFE/RL, 20 April 2001, www.rferl.org.

¹⁰⁸ As recently as 1995 the 10 per cent figure was cited in official documents. The figure now used officially is around 3 per cent.

¹⁰⁹ See ICG Asia Report N°34, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, 30 May 2002.

¹¹⁰ According to the 1989 Soviet census, there are 120,000 ethnic Turkmen living in Uzbekistan, mostly in Karakalpakstan.

¹¹¹ ICG interview, Uzbekistan, August 2002.

¹¹² ICG interview, Turkmenistan, June 2002.

¹¹³ See Section V (c) below.

God's Prophet.¹¹⁴ On the same date, Niyazov instructed his government to enforce a decree he signed in November 2002 that provides for relocating "unworthy people" along the border to Uzbekistan – a code name for ethnic Uzbeks – to a desert region in the North, on the border with Kazakhstan.¹¹⁵

3. Armenians, Kazakhs, Baluchis

While they account for little more than 2 per cent of the population, Armenians play a significant role in Turkmen society and the economy. Rooted in the area even before the Russian and later Soviet presence, they have been at the heart of business and politics.

Their thriving role in the economy has caused resentment among Turkmen. A wave of vandalism, for example, has devastated numerous Armenian cemeteries.¹¹⁶ The Armenian Church has not been officially recognised or granted registration, and there are no Armenian schools.

Other ethnic groups, such as the Kazakhs, have almost entirely left the country. Once an important presence concentrated on the shore of the Caspian Sea in the Northwest, most ethnic Kazakhs have emigrated to Kazakhstan, and all Kazakh schools have been closed.

The Baluchis represent one of the worst cases of mistreatment of ethnic minorities. A tiny group of a few thousand, they arrived from Afghanistan and Iran in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries and form a rural community concentrated in the South around Mary that speaks little Turkmen or Russian. They are discriminated against by the Turkmen authorities and are often victims of police brutality.¹¹⁷

Overall, there is little sense of Turkmen statehood among the different Turkmen clans or among the other ethnic groups. Political repression seems in some ways to have strengthened traditional patterns

of kinship: ethnic Turkmen rely more and more on the networks of local tribal and clan patronage to balance the intrusion of government into their daily lives. Ethnic minorities, on the other hand, consider emigration to their historical homelands as the only escape from widespread discrimination.

C. RELIGION

Sunni Islam is the official religion of ethnic Turkmen, even though most incorporate shamanist beliefs dating from the nomadic period of their history, thus creating their own form of popular Islam. Official Islam is in the hands of the government, which strictly controls religious activities to prevent the emergence of any political challenge.

The 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organisations guarantees the separation of church and state and removes any legal basis for Islam to play a role in political life by prohibiting proselytising and religious political parties. In reality the state is deeply involved in religion, controlling the activities of official clergy through Turkmenistan's Muslim Religious Board, which employs all Muslim clerics.¹¹⁸ Any clergy opposing the government or propagating religious ideas not in conformity with the official position risk dismissal or worse. In 2000 Hoja Ahmed Orazgylych, an Islamic cleric who had criticised the government, was arrested and sentenced to internal exile.¹¹⁹

Officially, Islam is thriving: Niyazov has ordered the construction of several mosques, including the largest in the world in his home village. But these are largely ignored by Turkmen, who traditionally pray at home and very seldom go to a mosque. "The new mosques are just a sign of Turkmenbashi's imposed view of Turkmen statehood, and only Turkish and other Muslim foreign workers go there", admitted one resident of Ashgabat.¹²⁰

There have been two popular responses to the officially controlled propagation of Islam. Most

¹¹⁴ See BBC report, "Turkmen mufti sacked for not declaring president 'messenger of God'", available at www.bbc.co.uk <<http://www.bbc.co.uk>>, 10 January 2003.

¹¹⁵ Bruce Pannier, "Turkmenistan: President forcibly relocating Uzbeks away from border", www.rferl.org <<http://www.rferl.org>>, 15 January 2003.

¹¹⁶ The Armenian part of the Turkmenbashi cemetery has been entirely destroyed while neighbouring Russian and German graves remain untouched.

¹¹⁷ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

¹¹⁸ This structure is inherited from the Soviet period. The Turkmen Board, together with the Uzbek Board, constitute the Muslim Religious Board of Mavarannahr, based in Tashkent

¹¹⁹ Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Turkmenistan: Leader tightens grip on unofficial Islam", RFE/RL, 28 June 2001, at www.rferl.org.

¹²⁰ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

ethnic Turkmen have taken refuge in pre-Islamic traditions and popular Islam.¹²¹ Pre-Islamic Turkmen rituals combining shamanist, Manichean, Zoroastrian, Nestorian and Parthian elements are still observed, mainly through pilgrimages to holy places by women or entire families. These types of spiritual and social activities are not controlled or limited by the government, which allows travel to such places and even provides free accommodation for pilgrims. One reason for this freedom is that popular Islam both lacks structures or leaders who could become a challenge to state rule and reinforces isolation from the wider Muslim world.

The other response to a repressive official Islam has been a growth in unofficial Islam through the rise of more fundamentalist Sunni teaching outside the official system, as well as the slow emergence of other more radical Islamic groups, some propagated by foreign missionaries. This phenomenon is still limited, since Islamic tradition in Turkmenistan is much less vulnerable to radicalisation than in Uzbekistan, for example. But the government has cracked down hard on any appearance of outside Muslim influence.

In 2000 it expelled about 300 foreign Muslims, mostly Iranian teachers or individuals involved in religious activities. In June 2001 Niyazov ordered the closure of a madrasa in Dashawuz, the last independent Islamic education facility in the country.¹²² Today, the Theological Faculty at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat is the only academic institution to conduct Islamic education, and it limits admission to fifteen students per year. The pilgrimage to Mecca is strictly controlled – every year only a few hundred permits are issued in a country that claims to have 4 million Muslims.

According to one former prisoner, the radical group Hizb-ut-Tahrir is winning converts in prisons:

During my stay in a labour camp, I saw many of my fellow inmates pay attention to what a Hizb-ut-Tahrir convert was saying, and some became fervent supporters of a return to Muslim roots.¹²³

Prisons and labour camps have become one of the most active centres for promoting Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Thrown into jail, often without trial or a clear understanding of their alleged crime, prisoners welcome an ideology that condemns the current regime and offers an entire system of thought and solidarity against the state. There are no reports of open activity by such groups, and it remains a very marginal phenomenon at present, but there are allegations that some mosques are being used to teach more fundamentalist forms of Islam than permitted by the state.¹²⁴

Niyazov's attitude to Islam revolves around his own personality cult. He has allegedly inquired of religious authorities in the Muslim world whether he could declare himself a prophet, and his statement that his book stands on par with the Koran clearly indicate he wants to appropriate Islamic imagery as long as he can control it to promote his cult.¹²⁵

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, non-traditional denominations are barred from basic activities. The law on religious organisations requires that religious groups must have at least 500 members in each locality in which they wish to register in order to gain legal status. In practice, this means that – unlike Sunni Muslims and Russian Christian Orthodox believers – members of the Armenian Apostolic, Baptist, Pentecostalist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i and Hare Krishna churches are unable to register and are, therefore, persecuted by the KNB. While the registration problems remain, members of at least some of these groups have in practice managed to meet.

Jehovah's Witnesses have received particular attention from the security forces because of their refusal to fulfil conscription obligations.¹²⁶ Non-

¹²⁴ "In Ashgabat there is a mosque built on money from Saudi Arabia where local youth is taught very Orthodox Islam, and it is becoming increasingly popular because youth is left to itself and sees no future in the country". ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

¹²⁵ "The *Ruhnama* is now introduced inside mosques, and imams read excerpts from it, using the book as a new Koran, which is a direct violation of the *Shariat*. Niyazov has approached several embassies of Muslim states, and asked how they would react if he declared himself a new prophet", ICG interview with Batyr Mukhamedov, Moscow, October 2002.

¹²⁶ All previously arrested Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors except one were reportedly released in 2002. ICG

¹²¹ A popular Turkmen saying goes: "A Turkmen can give up his religion (Islam) but not his traditions".

¹²² Peuch, "Turkmenistan: Leader tightens grip", op. cit.

¹²³ ICG interview with Batyr Mukhamedov, Moscow, October 2002.

Russian-Orthodox Christian groups such as Baptists have also suffered harassment and persecution, including torture of clergy and confiscation of property. The U.S. government says that reports of harassment decreased somewhat in 2001.¹²⁷ The repression of religious groups has tended to move in cycles, however.

D. EDUCATION

Education has become another battlefield between the state and society. The government perceives it as a tool for official propaganda and development of the Niyazov personality cult, while parents are desperate to gain real life-skills for their children to overcome growing poverty and economic decline.

The country inherited a well-developed system from the Soviet period that offered free and near-universal education for both men and women and achieved very high literacy rates.¹²⁸ During the first decade of independence, this system was largely retained, although economic decline and changes in the Turkmen script caused serious disruption, and corruption began to undermine any assessment of merit.¹²⁹

Publication of the *Ruhnama* in February 2001 further downgraded the system. Since then, it has become an instrument of mass brainwashing, characterised by low standards, discrimination, and widespread corruption:

Everything can be bought and sold. For money you cannot only enter any university, you can pass any examination, without spending a single day attending classes, and at the end still get a degree.¹³⁰

The curriculum has been drastically changed, reducing primary and secondary school from eleven

to a total of nine years. Turkmen and Russian languages have been kept as compulsory subjects but English is an option in more urban areas only.¹³¹ Computer classes are rare and connection to the Internet is not permitted. The *Ruhnama*, described as a life reference for any Turkmen, has replaced the bulk of teaching in most schools, particularly in rural areas where the majority of the population lives. Since old Soviet textbooks have been banned, and few new ones have been printed, students spend much of their time reading and studying the *Ruhnama*. Television has daily programs in which model students answer their teacher's questions solely with quotations from it.¹³²

Similarly, higher education has been drastically reduced from five years of study to two years of study and two years of work, during which students must find employment – usually unpaid – before being able to obtain their degree. They are forced to learn lengthy passages from the *Ruhnama* by heart and are severely sanctioned if they fail to do so. Before independence about 30,000 students entered higher education each year. In 2001-2002 less than 3,000 were allowed to study. Discrimination on ethnic grounds at entry examinations is also reported across the country. As a result, many parents send their children to Russian-speaking countries although Turkmenistan does not recognise most foreign degree certificates.

Officially, education is free, except for the fourteen Turkmen-Turkish schools and the Turkmen-Turkish University in Ashgabat, but corruption has become widespread. Admittance to higher institutes is extremely competitive, and personal connections and bribes play a key role, particularly given the new entry quotas.

In this situation education has become inaccessible for a growing number of young people, as parents cannot afford to pay bribes and would rather have their children work in the fields to help with the family budget. As a result, school attendance in rural areas in particular is in decline. One parent explained:

Children do not go to school in villages because there are no teachers. The reason is that teachers have not been paid their salary

interview with U.S. State Department human rights officer, Washington, D.C., January 2003.

¹²⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Turkmenistan: Religious Freedom Report, 2002".

¹²⁸ In 1924 the literacy rate was about 10 per cent.

¹²⁹ Traditionally written in Arabic script, Turkmen – a Turkic language – shifted to Latin script in the 1930s, and then adopted the Cyrillic alphabet in 1939. In 1995, the Turkmen government officially announced the transfer back to the Latin script that has today completely replaced Cyrillic across the country.

¹³⁰ Akhmet Salamov, "Sotsialnaya osnova", op. cit.

¹³¹ In 2000 the government eliminated 5,000 education jobs – primarily those of foreign language instructors.

¹³² RFE/RL Turkmen Service, 1 September 2002.

for months and have to do business or work in the fields to sustain their own families.¹³³

The growth of a generation of Turkmen who are increasingly poorly educated, ignorant of life outside Turkmenistan, and possess no alternative viewpoints to those of the official curriculum and the *Ruhnama* represents a great danger for society. It is not too fanciful to envisage the emergence of a youth brought up on the banal notions of the *Ruhnama* that would be unable to contribute to the development of a flourishing society and economy, easily manipulated by extremist ideas, and vulnerable to utopian religious groups offering radical alternatives to present realities.

E. HEALTH ISSUES

1. Collapsing health system

Despite official claims to have maintained a system of universal welfare, health care is in crisis. Officially free, it is actually increasingly expensive and of poor quality. Staff are underpaid, and there is a lack of properly trained doctors and nurses. Many qualified doctors have left for Russia, and soldiers have been drafted in to make up for shortages of medical assistants. New staff are poorly qualified, as teaching declines and corruption allows many to buy their degree certificates.

While paying medical staff is now unofficially standard practice, patients need also to pay the high cost of medical drugs that are no longer provided by the state, and are also charged for equipment such as needles, gloves and sheets. One mother explained that:

I had to pay [U.S.]\$10 to have my son admitted to hospital, just for influenza. I also gave money to the doctor to make sure he would take proper care of my son. Everyday I had to bring food and clean sheets.¹³⁴

The figures are disputed but the most reliable suggest that the health of the nation is getting worse. Life expectancy, at 57 years for males and 65 for females, is the lowest in Central Asia, and has declined compared to a decade ago, when it was 61 for men and 68 for women.¹³⁵ Infant mortality, also the

highest in Central Asia, is on the rise at 73.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2000, compared to 69.4 in 1990.¹³⁶

Overall, the health situation is becoming alarming: poor diet, polluted drinking water, and industrial wastes and pesticides cause or exacerbate many medical problems, especially in the Northeast, near the Amu Darya and the Aral Sea. Women in their child-bearing years and children appear to be in the poorest health and the most susceptible to disease and sickness.

The state of the health service has prompted many Turkmen to turn once again to traditional medicine. In some rural areas folk healers employing herbs and prayers offer the only medical attention available.

2. Drug consumption

Turkmenistan does not officially acknowledge a major drug problem but the level of consumption, according to anecdotal evidence, has reached crisis levels. Drugs include the traditional opium and marijuana but there are also reports of heroin and amphetamines reaching the Turkmen market. It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of drug users. Official figures suggest that about 6 to 7 per cent of the population are regulars but unofficial reports suggests that the real figures are much higher, especially among young people. "I don't know of a single family in Ashgabat who hasn't to cope with a relative consuming drugs and stealing or getting into jail", claimed a resident of the capital.¹³⁷ One international expert suggested that up to 75 per cent of young men regularly use drugs.¹³⁸

Drugs are available in most discotheques in Ashgabat and are sold on the street in major cities. As one recent resident complained, "you can buy a dose of opium for less than a U.S. dollar right next to the mosque".¹³⁹ Smoking opium is traditional in Turkmen culture, but it was a habit surrounded by social controls and never reached the levels now

¹³³ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

¹³⁴ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

¹³⁵ U.S. Bureau of Census figures.

¹³⁶ In comparison, the rate is 62.8 in Uzbekistan and 49.2 in Kazakhstan. All figures are from the U.S. Bureau of Census. Official figures show an opposite, positive trend but are not regarded as reliable.

¹³⁷ ICG interview, Turkmenistan, July 2002.

¹³⁸ ICG interview, June 2002. A well-placed medical doctor suggested that more than one million Turkmen – roughly a quarter of the population – use drugs. ICG interview, Moscow, November 2002.

¹³⁹ ICG interview, 30 October 2002, Moscow.

reported.¹⁴⁰ Most worryingly, intravenous drug consumption is newly developing in larger cities.

The government response is ambivalent. Niyazov has stated publicly a number of times that smoking opium is good for the health, and he is believed to be a regular user himself.¹⁴¹ The widespread belief that government and security officials are strongly involved in the trade undermines any serious attempt to counter drug use. The ministry of health has set up some drug use clinics, and international organisations have attempted to develop programs to counter the problem, but their contribution is marginal while the government refuses to address its true scale.¹⁴²

3. Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS

Tuberculosis (TB) is on the rise in Central Asia, particularly in regions surrounding the Aral Sea. While it remains difficult to establish a clear link between poverty and the disease, bad water and malnutrition contribute to the rise in infections.¹⁴³

TB has been acknowledged as a major threat to public health but it has hardly been addressed by the government, and international organisations are hampered in their efforts to assist by their inability to access prisons, where it thrives due to overcrowded cells and lack of basic hygiene. Tuberculosis is extremely widespread among inmates, who infect the general population once they are released. The practice of conducting regular amnesties without addressing the health of recent inmates ensures that the risk of contagion is particularly high.¹⁴⁴

Officially there has been only one known case of HIV infection but the increasing evidence of intravenous drug injection, rising figures for other sexually transmitted diseases, growing incidence of prostitution, and lack of education in this area suggest the official figure is highly implausible. They also seem certain to produce a much more

worrying picture in the future.¹⁴⁵ There is little knowledge of the disease, partly because it is still rare for the government to permit widespread discussion.¹⁴⁶ There is a government program on HIV/AIDS prevention, and there has been increased cooperation in the past two years with UNAIDS, but complacency and lack of reliable information may prove this not to be enough.

4. Civil society

Civil society in the form of NGO activity is very limited compared to other Central Asian states where NGOs are flourishing. In total there are about 150 NGOs.¹⁴⁷ The groups that do exist are discouraged by the government from conducting awareness campaigns, sending members abroad for seminars, or inviting foreign guests. There have been some successes in establishing NGOs that work on the environment and on women's issues, although many are in some way dependent on government structures. One example of a successful independent NGO is the environmental group Catena. It is tolerated because it provides funds for ecological projects and expertise from abroad but it also reportedly comes under pressure from the authorities.¹⁴⁸

This sector, however, does offer some possibilities for engagement by the international community, particularly as public services come under increased pressure. Health, small and medium sized enterprises, education and the environment are all areas that may hold promise for developing more NGO structures, although government suspicion and bureaucratic obstacles will remain serious problems. The NGO sector not only provides useful services, but also offers a chance for qualified Turkmen who do not wish to work in government structures to remain engaged in the country's development.

¹⁴⁰ Nina Kerimy, 'Opium use in Turkmenistan: a historical perspective', at <http://turkmeny.h1.ru/cas/opium.html>.

¹⁴¹ ICG interviews, Moscow, November 2002.

¹⁴² The United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP) has a joint drug program, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is also active in this area.

¹⁴³ ICG interview with medical expert, Osh, October 2002.

¹⁴⁴ On 27 November 2002, a presidential amnesty released an estimated 8,000 prisoners, many of whom are suspected to be infected with tuberculosis. There are no reports that any health monitoring is to be conducted.

¹⁴⁵ Drug Law and Health Policy Resource Network, "Drug policy and health in Turkmenistan", April 2002, at www.drugpolicy.org; IRIN, "Turkmenistan: Focus on HIV/AIDS awareness", 29 July 2002, at www.irin.org.

¹⁴⁶ According to an independent survey, only 31 per cent of respondents believed that condom use had any impact on the spread of infection, and 73 per cent believed that an infected person should not be allowed to work with other people in a shop or office. IRIN, "Turkmenistan: Focus on HIV/AIDS awareness", op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ The figure is from Counterpart Consortium. See www.cango.net for a database of NGOs.

¹⁴⁸ Gabriela Schwartz, "Turkmen NGOs: Off The Beaten Track", www.isar.org.

V. REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT

A. NEUTRALITY

Turkmenistan's foreign policy is closely linked with energy issues. Access to external markets is the main objective, while regional or international integration remains off the agenda. Turkmenistan declared a state of "permanent neutrality", which was formally recognised by the United Nations in 1995. In reality, this translates into a refusal to accept responsibilities towards the international community and the practice of international law.

Turkmenistan has avoided multilateral arrangements with other Central Asian republics. It refused membership in the Central Asian customs union established by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1994, and subsequently in almost all other regional groupings. It is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was established upon the Soviet Union's dissolution by most of its former republics, but does not participate in its military structures and agreements.

Nevertheless, given its geographic location at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East and South Asia, Turkmenistan represents a vital strategic interest for major powers, primarily the U.S. and Russia, and is a key foreign policy issue for its neighbours, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as well as Afghanistan and Iran.

B. RUSSIA

Russian-Turkmen relations depend on one major issue, the natural gas that is needed by Moscow to cover internal consumption and is crucial to Ashgabat in order to secure hard currency and reach other markets in the CIS. The absolute priority given to gas is reflected at the political level: despite the many sources of frustration and mutual accusations of interference, both governments have maintained a relationship largely dictated by economic pragmatism.

This mutual interest has overcome other differences in the relationship. Ashgabat indirectly accuses Moscow of continuing a Soviet-style colonialist policy of controlling resources by limiting exports via the northern pipeline and keeping prices low. This complaint is reflected in its efforts to secure

export routes that bypass Russian territory. Russian leaders, on the other hand, are often irritated by Niyazov's patronising attitude as well as his policies towards ethnic Russians. Turkmenistan's opposition to Russian proposals on the division of the Caspian Sea has also harmed relations. Most recently the Turkmen government has criticised Moscow for sheltering Turkmen opposition activists, many of whom live in Moscow.

Even though the mutual irritation is high, solutions have normally been found to protect economic interests. Moscow partly resolved the issue of ethnic Russians by persuading Turkmenistan to accept dual citizenship, but it has not otherwise been very active in supporting the ethnic Russian community or pressing Ashgabat. This is frustrating for members of the opposition, in particular, who assert that "the Russian Embassy in Ashgabat is a typical example of collusion with Niyazov: it does nothing to help ethnic Russians and members of the opposition who are Russian citizens, because it has been ordered not to harm gas contracts".¹⁴⁹

The recent visit by Russian Security Council Secretary Vladimir Rushaylo was interpreted by exiled activists as confirming their cause for concern. At a news conference on 3 January 2003, Rushaylo announced Russia and Turkmenistan would sign a bilateral security agreement. If brought into force, this document would provide a legal basis under which Russia could extradite to Turkmenistan opposition leaders who hold dual Russian and Turkmen citizenship.

Russia's gas multinationals, primarily Itera and Gazprom, have considerable influence over policy towards Turkmenistan. As monopoly buyers of Turkmen gas, they have been able to keep prices well below world benchmarks, even at the occasional risk to bilateral relations produced by this insistence or the Turkmen government's unreliability in fulfilling contracts.

Nevertheless, Russian policy has more than one component. There are indications Moscow recognises that turning a blind eye as long as the

¹⁴⁹ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002. Throughout the 1990s Russian Embassies in the CIS were under-staffed because they were seen as not important and not prestigious. President Putin has begun to reverse this policy and carefully chooses his top representatives in the CIS. ICG interview, Arkady Dubnov, journalist, Bishkek, September 2002.

gas flows might not be a sustainable attitude in the long term and that other options should be considered. The possibility that a Trans-Afghan pipeline might someday become a reality, thus cutting Turkmenistan's dependence on Russia, is one contingency that may be provoking some rethinking. More immediately, Russian strategists are no doubt aware of Niyazov's increasing domestic unpopularity. Russia hosts the majority of Turkmenistan's opposition-in-exile and is in a position to back one or another faction if the political winds begin to change in Ashgabat.

Russia might consider cutting support for Niyazov if it was sure that it could maintain a continued supply of cheap gas. Given that vital need, preference would probably go to the group that could, once reinstated in Turkmenistan, offer the most privileged access for Russia to energy (and cotton) resources. Russia would also strongly prefer that any new Turkmen government maintained some limitations on the U.S. presence in the country. However, there is little guarantee that a new leader would be as ambivalent as Niyazov about Western involvement. Most potential successors are likely to open up the economy to greater Western investment and seek U.S. aid and political support.

There is at least some possibility that the U.S. and Russia could come to a strategic agreement about their attitudes toward a new regime in Ashgabat. This might involve an understanding to share investment opportunities to some degree, including in any Trans-Afghan pipeline, and to bar any foreign military presence in the country. The chances are, however, that Russia will continue to deal with Niyazov until it feels that he is becoming a liability. At that point, it could shift position rather rapidly.

C. UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are the dominant local powers in Central Asia and politically largely ignore Turkmenistan. However, all three countries compete on the same international energy and cotton export markets, an economic rivalry that creates tension given the lack of regional cooperation much less integration.

The long common border with Uzbekistan divides water and gas resources and creates ethnic minorities on both sides. Relations have been tense, particularly since 1996, when water disputes almost

led to military conflict.¹⁵⁰ The personal relationship between the two presidents is believed to be particularly poor.

Most of the border is formed by the Amu-Darya River, one of the main sources of water for agriculture in both countries. They have failed to come to a bilateral or regional agreement on water distribution, and there has been growing tension over access to the Amu Darya's flow.¹⁵¹ Turkmenistan's plans to build the grandiose Golden Century Lake have also increased suspicions from the Uzbek side. This artificial lake in the heart of the desert would draw substantial water reserves from the Amu-Darya and could heighten risks of drought in Uzbekistan.¹⁵²

Oil and gas fields located on the border have also become a subject of tension. Both countries accuse the other of stealing energy resources. Although the border is demarcated along its length, this situation is exacerbated by the isolation of ethnic minorities on both sides. The new state border, which was merely administrative in the Soviet period, has become difficult and expensive for local people to cross. Border guards have shot and killed a number of those who cross illegally, mostly engaged in petrol smuggling, the main source of income in the area.¹⁵³

Relations worsened towards the end of 2002, following the assassination attempt on Niyazov. The Uzbekistan Foreign Ministry protested a police search of its embassy and the ambassador's residence in Ashgabat. Fifteen men from the Turkmenistan security services searched the compound on 16 December 2002 and filmed the testimony of an unidentified Turkmen who claimed to have taken refuge there.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ ICG Report, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, op. cit.

¹⁵¹ Talks in Ashgabat on water issues in November 2002 collapsed, apparently over the intransigence of Turkmen demands. Vadim Muratkhanov, "Spory iz-za vody?" [Water-related disputes?], *Zerkalo XXI* [Tashkent], No. 46, 14-20 November 2002, p. 2.

¹⁵² See ICG Report, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, op. cit.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, 18 December 2002. The Uzbeks denied that their diplomats were in any way implicated in the assassination attempt but did not retaliate when Turkmenistan expelled the ambassador. This relatively low-key reaction to a clear breach of international law has caused some observers to suspect that Tashkent could have been involved in the incident to some degree. See Adam

In another sign of frayed relations, Turkmenistan recently turned down a request from land-locked Uzbekistan to use its Caspian Sea ports.¹⁵⁵

Turkmenistan has an easier relationship with Kazakhstan, although the two countries are serious competitors in the gas market.¹⁵⁶ They have also differed substantially on their policy towards the division of the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan's approach to this issue has been inconsistent and has often infuriated other littoral states attempting to reach an agreement.

D. AFGHANISTAN

Due to the ethnic Turkmen minority there,¹⁵⁷ economic interests, and the international aid that must pass through its territory, Turkmenistan is an important player in Afghanistan, with which it shares a 744-kilometre border.

Turkmenistan maintained close diplomatic relations with both the representatives of the Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban in the 1990s. It even opened Turkmen consulates in Taliban-controlled Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. In February 1999, Ashgabat helped broker negotiations between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, and developed extremely beneficial economic relations with the former, to whom it provided fuel.¹⁵⁸ Turkmenistan is now renewing its connections with the new political elite of Afghanistan to build up economic relations and achieve its most ambitious economic project: the Trans-Afghan-Pipeline, designed to transport Turkmen gas to the Pakistani market. The political instability in these three countries remains a serious obstacle to the project.

Close relations with the Taliban seem to have enhanced Turkmenistan's position as a major drug

transit route. The border is largely uncontrolled and constantly crossed by Turkmen and Afghans living on both sides. According to one source, "groups of former Taliban followers have settled in border regions south of Mary, and conduct drug business under the protection of state authorities".¹⁵⁹ Such information is difficult to confirm, but it seems certain that the widespread contacts with the Taliban also extended into the drug business and that this activity has continued or even increased under the new order in Afghanistan.

There are also reports that Turkmenistan served as a transit route for several groups of Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters fleeing Afghanistan in late 2001 and even suggestions that Turkmen diplomatic officials provided Taliban and Al-Qaeda followers with transit visas to pass through Turkmenistan, before heading to Europe or Russia. Again it is impossible to confirm such reports, but it is entirely plausible given the level of corruption in the security forces and the close ties with the Taliban.¹⁶⁰

None of these dubious ties seem to have attracted significant criticism from the West. Instead, Turkmenistan has been praised for its role as a transit route for humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.¹⁶¹ It has indeed played a useful role in the delivery of wheat and food to northern Afghanistan via the Turkmen city of Turkmenabat on the Amu-Darya but this hardly outweighs the illegal trade in narcotics that constitutes the main form of cross border activity.

E. IRAN

Over the past decade, Iran has become a key partner for Turkmenistan, providing the only operating alternative for gas exports, considerable cross border trade, and useful leverage in relations with both Washington and Moscow.

Politically, Tehran and Ashgabat seemingly stand at opposite poles: Iran is predominantly Shiite, and religion is a central element of the state ideology, whereas Turkmenistan is a secular state in which Sunni Islam, mixed with folk traditions,

Albion, "Is there a Tashkent connection?", Turkmen service of RFE/RL, 30 December 2002.

¹⁵⁵ Akhmed Nazarov, Galima Bukharbaeva, "Tashkent Protests at Embassy Raid", www.iwpr.net, 20 December 2002.

¹⁵⁶ Most of the ethnic Kazakh minority of Turkmenistan that traditionally lived near the Caspian Sea has moved to comparatively freer and economically richer Kazakhstan.

¹⁵⁷ An estimated ethnic Turkmen community of 700,000 lives in Afghanistan. Most fled Soviet collectivisation in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁵⁸ See "Turkmen Warm to Taliban", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 22 June 2001.

¹⁵⁹ ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

¹⁶⁰ Arkady Dubnov, www.gundogar.org. Dubnov is a Russian journalist.

¹⁶¹ See "Turkmenabad to remain key humanitarian hub", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 29 May 2002.

predominates. Yet, the two governments have mutual economic and political interests and have become strategic partners in regional and wider international relations. Turkmenistan and Iran are also linked by strong ethnic ties. An estimated two million ethnic Turkmen live in the northern Iranian province of Khorassan. As a result of such close relationships, a visa-free travel regime has been established.¹⁶²

Iran is one of Turkmenistan's main business partners. In 1998 Turkmenistan started exporting gas to Iran via its first pipeline that avoided Russian territory. Volumes are small but the symbolic value is important. Iran purchases cotton and chemical products in exchange for food products and road and construction work. Iran is also a key corridor for importing and exporting goods to and from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan via Turkmenistan's roads and railways.

Regionally, Tehran and Ashgabat have allied their positions on Russia's growing control over the Caspian Sea and pipeline routes. Turkmenistan is the only post-Soviet state that supports Iran's position in the ongoing multilateral Caspian Sea negotiations.

In the aftermath of the alleged assassination attempt in November 2002, President Niyazov lashed out at Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan but pointedly singled out Iran as an example of a "good neighbour". Increasingly isolated from other regional powers, Turkmenistan may see even closer relations with Tehran as a foreign policy option.

Tehran's intelligence services are reportedly active in Ashgabat, primarily to counter U.S. influence, but also with the long-term aim of boosting their country's standing in the region and increasing its options for bypassing Washington's embargo.¹⁶³

As a major regional power, Iran expects to play an influential role in any crisis that might develop in or about Turkmenistan such as a contested succession to Niyazov.

F. TURKEY

Turkey is an important economic partner but its political influence has faded during the 1990s. Turkish companies are involved in construction projects, in particular, although many have found the high levels of corruption and poor legal guarantees too difficult to overcome. Turkmenistan has long sought to break into the potentially lucrative Turkish gas market but seems to have been overtaken already by Russia and, possibly in the future, by Iran. The failure to achieve agreement on a potential trans-Caspian pipeline, which aimed to transport gas to Azerbaijan and on to Turkey, severely damaged its chances.

Politically, Turkey has generally been supportive of Niyazov's regime, seeing parallels with the authoritarian modernisation of Atatürk. A new Turkish government, eager to satisfy EU membership terms including on the human rights front, may be less tolerant of Turkmenistan's political system.

G. THE U.S. AND THE WEST

U.S. policy in the 1990s was based on several main premises: that Turkmenistan should be encouraged to move out of the Russian sphere of influence, that it should be a significant link in a pipeline network that would export Caspian oil and gas to world markets, while avoiding Russia and Iran, that it should improve its record of interdicting drugs, and that it should become a viable state by carrying out economic and democratic reforms. While agreement was achieved in September 2002¹⁶⁴ on a Baku-Ceyhan route to bring Azerbaijani oil eventually to Turkey, bypassing both Iran and Russia, a projected second pipeline under the Caspian Sea to link up Turkmenistan's oil and gas fields looks politically and financially impractical. Progress stopped in 2000 when the Turkmen government essentially removed itself from the negotiations by refusing all offers by its commercial partners and making unrealistic demands for pre-financing. Instead, the U.S. is focusing its efforts to obtain additional diversified sources of energy on the proposed Trans-Afghan pipeline.

¹⁶² "Iranians enjoy the relative freedom of Turkmenistan in terms of prostitution and alcohol, and many have bought flats in Ashgabat". ICG interview, Moscow, October 2002.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ For more details, see Michael Lelyveld, "Caspian: presidents launch construction of oil pipeline", www.rferl.org, 18 September 2002.

Since the events of 11 September 2001, however, Washington's clear priority throughout Central Asia has become counter-terrorism and related concerns for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (with drug interdiction second). Pipeline construction remains of interest, but little progress is expected in the near future, and the U.S. has adopted a "wait and see" approach pending the release of an Asian Development Bank feasibility assessment later in 2003.

At the same time, Washington also is concerned at the internal direction taken by the Niyazov regime, as its actions to raise the human rights issue at OSCE in late 2002, with the EU and others, demonstrates.¹⁶⁵ In fact, the U.S. appears to have become increasingly disaffected with the Turkmen regime, although it hosted President Niyazov in 1998. The wave of repression launched following the November 2002 assassination attempt has caused the State Department to issue public statements of concern, including for the fate of a U.S. citizen who was arrested and to whom embassy officers have not been given consular access.¹⁶⁶

The U.S. has also consistently condemned human rights abuses, urged the Turkmen government to allow local NGOs working on issues such as the environment and women's rights to register, and helped opposition human rights advocates attend some intergovernmental meetings abroad.

The media attack launched on the U.S. ambassador, Laura Kennedy, following the arrest of Shikhmuradov, however, indicates Washington's relatively weak position in the eyes of Niyazov. On 8 January 2003, the state-controlled media outlets implied that Kennedy tried to help the former foreign minister flee the country after the failed assassination attempt.¹⁶⁷ Earlier, they sharply criticised U.S. State Department spokesman Philip Reeker for making allegedly false accusations about massive arrests following the assassination attempt.

In fact, the U.S. lacks effective tools with which to achieve serious political change from the Niyazov regime. If anything that lack of leverage has been exacerbated by the desire to avoid regional opposition to its counter-terrorism agenda.

Any future support that might be given a pipeline project, including through the Asian Development Bank, should be paired with clear public acknowledgement of Niyazov's shortcomings and conditioned on substantial changes at least in Turkmenistan's economic policies and legal structures.

U.S. aid to Turkmenistan amounted to U.S.\$18.1 million in fiscal year 2002, of which U.S.\$8 million went to the security sector, mostly on border security to control the spread of weapons of mass destruction and interdict drugs.¹⁶⁸ Given the evidence of government officials' involvement in smuggling, the latter kind of aid seems unlikely to have any impact on the problem and provides a rather poor example for U.S. relations with the region. There appears little reason to renew aid to the security sector in 2003, unless the government demonstrates a new and genuine commitment. Some of that money might be better used to strengthen civil society and support exchanges.

Other Western states have only slight engagement with Turkmenistan, although France has some commercial interests. The EU has gradually cut the aid it provides through its TACIS program,¹⁶⁹ and a partnership and cooperation agreement was never ratified.

There is little to show for a decade of financial support from the West. Positive engagement with the present regime has no hope of modifying its fundamental behaviour and carries a risk that has to be weighed carefully against any specific benefit of discrediting the West in the eyes of the opposition and the wider public in Central Asia.

¹⁶⁵ ICG interviews, Washington 8-10 January 2003.

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/16276.htm>

¹⁶⁷ See Radio Free Europe Newslines – Transcaucasia and Central Asia, www.rferl.org, 9 January 2003.

¹⁶⁸ State Department Fact Sheet: "U.S. Assistance to Turkmenistan: Fiscal Year 2002", at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/15221.htm>.

¹⁶⁹ TACIS is the European Union's program for assistance to the states of the former Soviet Union.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current situation in Turkmenistan is deeply unstable. Niyazov's poor health, growing opposition and conflict within the security forces, and widespread social and economic desperation are all potential triggers for a collapse of the regime. Yet, the government retains significant resources, both security and economic, and it is possible to imagine Niyazov clinging to power for several years.

This dilemma, and the difficulty of making any accurate prognosis from outside, suggest the international community should have a two-track approach. Certainly it needs to develop a strategy that takes into account the possibility of the present regime's sudden demise. At the same time, the possibility that Niyazov will stay in power for some years poses the danger of further social decline and highlights the need for international assistance to reverse dangerous long-term trends in education, health and social affairs.

There is growing acceptance that a necessary condition for any process of economic development or even modest democratisation in Turkmenistan is the removal of Niyazov. While there is little that the international community can do to accelerate this, at the least care should be taken to avoid policies that prop up the regime beyond its natural life.

A. PREPARING FOR TRANSITION

Being ready for a possible transition primarily requires much better information on the situation within the country and greater ability to react quickly to a political crisis. First, it would be helpful for governments to share the limited information that is available about the domestic situation as widely as possible with other interested states and international organisations.

Secondly, governments and NGOs alike need to establish more contacts with the opposition-in-exile, whether privately or publicly, and help to build up its capacity to participate in a peaceful transition. Such a transition is likely to be much smoother if the present sharp differences between the main opposition groups have already been resolved in a structured way.

Thirdly, governments and aid agencies should make contingency plans for humanitarian and other assistance in the case of a regime collapse. Any political change is likely to be accompanied by a breakdown in the ability of the state to function properly, with potentially disastrous short-term consequences for the population.

These efforts can only provide minimal preparation for an unpredictable scenario but they may offer a level of early warning and rapid response that could ensure a more peaceful transition than would otherwise be the case.

B. CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

At the same time, the international community must address the real needs that Turkmen society faces under the present government and attempt to counter the worst effects of its policies, particularly in the fields of drug transit and abuse, education, health and information.

Turkmenistan has sought and achieved political isolation. The country has been closed to any significant flow of people and information not pre-approved by the authorities. Increasing this isolation through boycotts, sanctions or simply an unwillingness to engage with it, will only deepen the potential long-term crisis in Turkmen society. It will do nothing to accelerate the fall of Niyazov or bring about political or economic reforms.

Instead, the international community should take a much more proactive stance and where possible upgrade its presence in the country. In particular, Western states should fund increased exchange programs to allow a freer flow of specialists, students and businesspeople to and from Turkmenistan. Independent media in the Turkmen language, whether based inside or outside Turkmenistan, should be supported. Any educational initiatives that can be achieved in the country should be pursued. And where it is possible, support for NGOs helps an important sector largely outside government control that may play a role in rebuilding society in the future.

Such engagement is focused on preserving society inside Turkmenistan, and there has been some positive movement in relation to NGOs and development projects in 2001-2002. But any progress will always be slow, and the international

community also needs to seek more powerful levers to push for political and economic change.

The continuing repression and abuse of human rights, and the complete absence of any democratic process, are serious threats to long-term political stability. The international community needs to be much more vocal in its criticism of the government and clearly denounce violations of human rights and the worsening situation in general.

Typically, governments that have commercial interests at stake tend to downplay any criticism, while other embassies are relatively outspoken, thus creating a situation of mixed messages with a diluted impact.

Foreign delegations have begun to visit Turkmenistan in increasing numbers since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 but few have been forthright enough to express any public dissent with the regime's policies. Most have praised Niyazov for his contribution to the transit of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and largely left it at that.¹⁷⁰ It is important for local officials to hear much more open and frank dialogue from delegations that, as a practical matter, are under fewer restraints than resident diplomats or representatives of international institutions.

A rare example of coordination is being demonstrated at the OSCE in the wake of the many arrests and reports of torture that followed the November 2002 assassination attempt. The U.S., Canada, Norway and the EU have triggered the Vienna and Moscow mechanisms pursuant to which Turkmenistan was first required to answer in writing within ten days to the human rights concerns raised by its fellow member states in that organisation and then to accept a mission of investigation. Whether Turkmenistan will ultimately cooperate is still uncertain.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ On 4 November 2002, OSCE chairman Antonio Martins da Cruz praised Turkmenistan's record on democracy, quoting the abolition of the death penalty and the coming presidential amnesty as positive steps forward, without mentioning in public at least any of the serious infringements of OSCE commitments in the country. See reports on www.osce.org.

¹⁷¹ Turkmenistan did not respond substantively within the time allotted to the use of the Vienna mechanism. Consequently, on 12 December 2002, ten member states (Germany, Austria, UK, Ireland, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Canada, and the U.S.) requested that a mission of investigation be sent under

C. LEVERS OF INFLUENCE

The only serious levers that the international community possesses are those over gas and oil exports and foreign investment in the country. Here the two key players are the U.S. and Russia. Russia should adopt a broader policy in Turkmenistan, focused not only on cheap gas exports, but also on a stable future for the country. Any sudden collapse of the regime is unlikely to produce a pro-Russian leadership, and the best long-term option for Moscow is a controlled transition under which it could retain its priority standing as a gas recipient and play a role in developing Turkmenistan's Caspian oil fields. A more far-sighted policy, including more cooperation with the U.S., could also give Russia a role in the Trans-Afghan pipeline, ending the constant geopolitical squabbles over routes, and reaching some level of mutual advantage for both powers and for the Central Asian states.

The U.S. still would like to see the Trans-Afghan pipeline happen but will only "wait and see" at least until after the ADB assessment is complete. It is clear that under Niyazov's political system, the pipeline represents a huge risk for any investor. The U.S. and other governments should condition political support for such a project on changes in political control over the economy, more transparency in financial affairs, particularly the off-budgetary accounts of the president, serious attempts to develop a legal system that could provide some guarantees for investors, and other key aspects of macroeconomic reform. The ADB should be encouraged to address these aspects of risk in its feasibility study.

The private sector should also become more involved in addressing the social and political impact of its investments. Investments should be avoided that feed profits directly into the FERF, which is Niyazov's main sources of funding for his personality cult and many of his extra-budgetary security projects.

the terms of the Moscow mechanism. Pursuant to that request, the OSCE designated a rapporteur, Professor Emmanuel Decaux, a French national, on 14 January 2002. (The OSCE rapporteur cannot be a national of a requesting state.) Turkmenistan is now required to designate a second rapporteur, and the two rapporteurs should then agree on a third. If Turkmenistan does not name a rapporteur, the OSCE rapporteur has a mandate to work independently and to report to the 55 member states regardless of whether Turkmenistan permits him to enter the country. ICG telephone interview with an OSCE official, 16 January 2003.

Investors should form an investors' council, possibly under EU-U.S. auspices, that would lay out guidelines for those considering putting money into Turkmenistan and address the relevance of political and social issues and compliance with international law, including conventions on bribery and other international agreements. There are few investors at present, and several of those have little obvious interest in promoting political reform, but any future pipeline projects should have political and social impact assessments built in.

Stability in Turkmenistan is an illusion, and there is a serious risk that any political change could be accompanied by violence. The situation is unpredictable and potentially dangerous. In response to the dramatic events leading to the defeat of the Taliban and the establishment of a new government in Afghanistan, ICG has consistently pointed to the need not only for reconstruction in that country, but also for attention to conflict prevention in its northern neighbours. Turkmenistan is one of the most fragile of the Central Asian states, and potentially the one that poses the greatest threat to regional stability. Leaving it to fester under an increasingly unbalanced dictator until it collapses would be both foolish and risky. Critical engagement to counter a decade of destructive policies, and a serious attempt to work towards a peaceful transition of power to a new generation of Turkmen leaders, should now be at the top of the international agenda in Central Asia.

Osh/Brussels, 17 January 2003

APPENDIX A

MAP OF TURKMENISTAN



APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 80 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.crisisweb.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris and a media liaison office in London. The organisation currently operates eleven field offices

(in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Islamabad, Jakarta, Nairobi, Osh, Pristina, Sarajevo, Sierra Leone and Skopje) with analysts working in over 30 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents.

In *Africa*, those countries include Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone-Liberia-Guinea, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe; in *Asia*, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir; in *Europe*, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; in the *Middle East*, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in *Latin America*, Colombia.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors. The following governments currently provide funding: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Foundation and private sector donors include The Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The John Merck Fund, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Open Society Institute, Ploughshares Fund, The Ruben & Elisabeth Rausing Trust, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and the United States Institute of Peace.

January 2003

APPENDIX C

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* The Algeria project was transferred from the Africa Program in January 2002.

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