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Foreign Policy in Focus

## Obama to Aid Uzbek Dictatorship

By Stephen Zunes

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The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, in a move initiated by the Obama administration, has voted to waive Bush-era human rights restrictions on military aid to the Islam Karimov dictatorship in Uzbekistan, one of the most brutal and repressive regimes on the planet. The lifting of the restrictions, now part of the Foreign Operations bill, is before the full Senate and appears to have bipartisan support. The Obama administration has indicated that it intends to provide taxpayer-funded military assistance to Uzbekistan once the legislation passes both houses of Congress.

Torture is endemic in Karimov's Uzbekistan, where his regime has banned all opposition political parties, severely restricted freedom of expression, forced international human rights and NGOs out of the country, suppressed religious freedom, and annually taken as many as 2 million children out of school to engage in forced labor for the cotton harvest. Thousands of dissidents have been jailed, and many hundreds have been killed, some of them literally boiled alive.

In reaction to the Obama administration's efforts, 20 human rights, labor, consumer, and other groups signed [a letter](#) to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, saying, "We strongly urge you to oppose passage of the law and not to invoke this waiver." The signers encouraged the administration "to stand behind your strong past statements regarding

human rights abuses in Uzbekistan” and not move toward “business as usual” with that regime.

Signatories included the AFL-CIO, Amnesty International USA, and Human Rights Watch, as well as organizations with close ties to the foreign policy establishment like Freedom House and the International Crisis Group.

### **White House Claims**

Despite evidence to the contrary, Secretary of State Clinton, who visited Uzbekistan on Oct. 23, [has claimed](#) that the regime was “showing signs of improving its human rights record and expanding political freedoms.” Similarly, when asked about the dictator’s claim that he was committed to leave a legacy of freedom and democracy for his grandchildren, [a senior State Department official responded](#), “Yeah. I do believe him. I mean, he’s said several times that he’s committed to this. He’s made a speech last November where he talked about this.” In response to some skeptical follow-up questions by journalists, the official replied that “we still have some quite serious concerns about the situations on the human rights.” However, “we think that there is really quite an important opening now to work on that stuff, also work on developing civil society, which again President Karimov has expressed support for. So, yeah, I do take him at his word.”

A White House official told me that Obama had spoken directly to Karimov in recent weeks about human rights concerns, noting “he said more on democracy in that call than eight years of Bush administration dealings with Karimov.” The official also insisted that the Obama administration would condition future policy on the regime’s performance and that was made clear to the Uzbek leadership.

U.S. administrations, however, have rarely followed through on suspending aid when regimes fail to improve their human rights record. Despite assertions that military aid and cooperation can be used to improve a regime’s human rights record, it usually results in the opposite. Indeed, this line has been used for decades — most notoriously as a rationale for arming the death squads and murderous counterinsurgency units of the right-wing junta in El Salvador in the 1980s — and has been repeatedly shown to facilitate rather than limit the repression.

The Obama administration is making this controversial move in order to open the Central Asian nation to transit military equipment and other supplies in and out of Afghanistan, particularly after neighboring Kyrgyzstan looks likely to close its U.S. military base in Manas when the lease runs out in 2014. Potentially of greater consequence, Pakistan has threatened to cut off supply routes to U.S. forces in that landlocked country, so there is a scramble to look for alternatives. Unfortunately, as defenders of administration policy have put it, Afghanistan is surrounded by dictatorships, leaving them little choice but to provide assistance in return for transit rights.

The Uzbek government has insisted that these human rights restrictions be dropped in return for providing U.S. forces with a northern route into the country. As [Justin Elliot](#) of Human Rights Watch put it, “Operation Enduring Freedom — otherwise known as the war in Afghanistan — could soon result in less freedom for the people of Uzbekistan, if the Obama administration gets its way.”

To those who question whether the United States should still be fighting in Afghanistan in the first place, defenders of administration policy stress that travel through Uzbekistan may be necessary not just to supply the troops, but to get them and their equipment out of there.

However, the administration has not made a convincing case as to why U.S. forces could not be supplied or evacuated by air. The U.S. military has thousands of C-130s and other huge planes designed for that very purpose. Although countries have to provide clearance for foreign aircraft to cross their airspace, it’s hard to imagine that the Pakistanis would risk war by shooting down U.S. transport planes.

## **A History of Repression**

Karimov became leader of the Uzbek Communist Party in 1989 in the waning days of the Soviet era. He backed the unsuccessful coup by Communist Party hard-liners against reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 and personally opposed Uzbek independence. But finding himself president of a sovereign state when the Soviet Union suddenly dissolved, he quickly modified his position, changing his first name to “Islam” and morphing into an Uzbek nationalist. President Obama called him in September to congratulate him on the twentieth anniversary of independence.

As president of the newly independent Uzbekistan, Karimov quickly banned leading opposition parties and has since held onto power through the suppression of the opposition and a series of rigged elections and plebiscites, labeling virtually all opponents as Islamist radicals.

Uzbekistan is the largest country in Central Asia in terms of population, and its capital, Tashkent, is the region’s largest city, with a modern subway system and an international airport built during the Soviet era. As an independent state under Karimov’s rule, however, Uzbekistan remains one of the poorest of the former Soviet republics despite its generous natural resources, including one of the world’s largest sources of natural gas and sizable but largely untapped oil reserves. Karimov pockets virtually all of the revenue generated by the country’s natural endowments. Corruption is rampant, and his brutal militias routinely engage in robbery and extortion. Businessmen who refuse to pay bribes are frequently labeled as Islamic extremists and then jailed, tortured, and murdered.

Despite this, Craig Murray, who served as the British ambassador to Uzbekistan between 2002 and 2004, [observed how](#) Karimov was “very much George Bush’s man in Central Asia” and that no Bush administration official ever said a negative word about him. Indeed, Uzbekistan was a destination in the “extraordinary rendition” program, where the

United States would send suspected Islamist extremists for torture. Popular pressure forced a reluctant Bush administration to cut off military aid to the dictatorship in 2004.

In May 2005, following an eruption of pro-democracy demonstrations in Andijan and other cities, Uzbek government forces massacred more than 700 protesters over a two-day period. The Bush administration successfully blocked a call by NATO for an international investigation, though [a report](#) from Human Rights Watch, based on interviews with scores of eyewitnesses, determined that government troops had used “indiscriminate use of lethal force against unarmed people.” The British newspaper *The Independent* [reported](#) that Uzbek dictator Islam Karimov “almost certainly personally authorized the use of ... deadly force.”

When asked about the 2005 massacres during Clinton’s October visit, [a senior State Department official responded](#), “We’ve definitely — we’ve moved on from that.”

If Congress approves the waiver, it will send a message to other dictators facing pro-democracy uprisings that they can murder people by the hundreds and still receive U.S. assistance. This is nothing short of a license to kill. Other despots will likely interpret such assistance to indicate that warnings — such as those given by the Obama administration to the Egyptian military back in February that ties would be severed if pro-democracy protesters were massacred — are not to be taken seriously.

Along with administration efforts to provide [additional military supplies to Bahrain](#) following that regime’s brutal crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrations earlier this year, it is yet another indication of the Obama administration’s continued willingness to prop up some of the world’s most brutal dictatorships.