

Kelly M. McMann

Abstract

The Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union have come to play a vital role in the U.S. campaign to stamp out Islamic terrorism. While Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have provided bases for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan may be even more critical for long-term U.S. interests. Kazakhstan is expected to become one of the world's top oil producers and exporters within a decade, and its inclusion in the world oil market will expand U.S. policy options in the Middle East. The spread of Islamic radicalism in Kazakhstan, however, could threaten U.S. plans.

Although a modest economic recovery has spared Kazakhstan, so far, from the destabilizing effects of radical Islamic activism that its neighbors have suffered, this may be only a temporary reprieve. Unless the government establishes legal outlets for political expression, either oil-driven prosperity or – should the oil boom not pan out – economic decline, could drive citizens to join underground Islamic movements, as they have elsewhere in Central Asia. As part of its global campaign against terrorism, the U.S. administration must take proactive measures to stem the spread of extremist Islamic groups in Kazakhstan, by encouraging the government to relax its repressive political practices.