

Some Straight Talk for a Washington Visitor

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A high-level Uzbek official is in Washington this week for talks about ramping up cooperation on supply routes through Central Asia for US troops in Afghanistan. All well and good. The US needs to supply the troops. But if the Arab Spring has taught the U.S. nothing else, it is that there is a cost for playing footsie with repressive regimes. And Uzbekistan is about as repressive as they come.

Abdulaziz Kamilov, Uzbekistan's deputy foreign minister, is here for the mid-year review of the Annual Bilateral Consultations between the US and Uzbek governments. While cooperation on Afghanistan will certainly be discussed, the Uzbek government's egregious human rights record needs to be at the center of the talks and [not pushed aside](#) in favor of subjects where mutual security interests more conveniently align.

Uzbekistan is viewed as an increasingly important strategic partner for the US. The Northern Distribution Network, a transit corridor that runs through Uzbekistan, supplies as much as 50 percent of the non-lethal cargo needed by NATO troops in neighboring Afghanistan. As the US begins to draw down its forces from Afghanistan, the Obama administration is seeking authorization to move equipment out of the country through Uzbek territory.

Not surprisingly, in recent months high-ranking US officials, including Senator Lindsay Graham and Denis McDonough, the deputy national security adviser, have visited Tashkent. What has been surprising, however, is the deafening silence from the US concerning Uzbekistan's abhorrent treatment of its own citizens.

There are plenty of reasons for the US to speak up. Uzbekistan remains one of the most repressive regimes in the world. The country has been ruled by the same strongman, Islam Karimov, for over 22 years. Torture is routine across the criminal justice system. Independent journalists are [harassed and jailed](#). Forced child labor is widespread in the nation's vast cotton fields. The government prevents local civil society activists and independent international organizations from operating. And the government systematically represses religious freedom.

In 2005, government forces [opened fire on protesters](#), most of them unarmed, in the eastern city of Andijan, killing hundreds. No government officials have been held accountable for the massacre.

One area of particular concern is the persecution of human rights defenders. Human Rights Watch, which the government has [barred](#) from working in the country, has documented the cases of [13 jailed rights activists](#) -- often given long sentences on fabricated charges after sham trials. Akzam Turgunov and Dilmurod Saidov are just two examples, but their cases are unfortunately representative. Turgunov, sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2008, worked as a lay public defender and was investigating police corruption when he was jailed on trumped-up extortion

charges. After his arrest, authorities poured boiling water on his back, causing severe burns. Saidov, an independent journalist and advocate for farmers' rights, was sentenced to 12 ½ years in prison in 2009 on similarly fabricated extortion and forgery charges. Saidov suffers from tuberculosis, while Turgunov, who weighs less than 100 pounds, is forced at age 59 to work in a brick-making prison camp.

The US has, of course, publicly expressed its displeasure with these practices. Last December, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly and privately urged Karimov to make progress on protecting human rights. Such statements are an [important affirmation](#) that respect for human rights is a central component of US foreign policy. However, Tashkent is receiving mixed messages. The Obama Administration is seeking a waiver from Congress in the next State and Foreign Appropriations Bill. This waiver would allow the administration to circumvent restrictions imposed by Congress on financial support for the Uzbek government until it improves its human rights record. Further, recent visits by US officials to Tashkent--visits that came and went without any public statements of concern about rights abuses there--appeared to reinforce the message that the US is willing to overlook such atrocities for the sake of an ally on Afghanistan's northern border.

Uzbekistan's increasing strategic importance means the US must deal with the Karimov regime. But the alliance brings financial and other benefits for Uzbekistan, giving Washington an opportunity to reinforce the message that it supports a democratic Uzbekistan that respects the rights of all its citizens, including human rights defenders like Turgunov and Saidov. Deputy Foreign Minister Kamilov needs to hear that message loud and clear this week in Washington.

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