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## UZBEKISTAN: A TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

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**Gateway to the East / The Old Communist Leadership / Uzbekis vs. Tadjikis / The Plight of the Jews of Tadjikistan / Tashkent's Changing Demographics / Secular vs. Fundamentalist Islam / The Jews of Uzbekistan / Local Leadership and Outside Organizations / Doing Business in Central Asia / Frontier Medicine**

### Gateway to the East

Uzbekistan is in the center of Central Asia, bordered on the south by Afghanistan, on the north and east by Kazakstan, and located less than 200 kilometers from China's border. Tashkent, the capital, located in the eastern part of the country, is one of the few places in the former USSR open to rail and air traffic for the full calendar year. Therefore, the Soviet Union developed Tashkent as a major focus for transport and communications to its eastern regions. This key strategic location is one of Uzbekistan's few major economic resources and reflects its history as the "silk route" gateway to the East.

The American government clearly knows what the potential opportunities are in the five Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, as well as what the loss would be if they go the wrong way. Therefore, the U.S. State Department and its AID program is currently making a major effort and investing time and energy in these republics to establish an American presence and influence. In

particular, it is concerned about the Iranian influence and its model as a fundamentalist Muslim state, and that Russia not reestablish its control.

One of the State Department's specific activities is a general evaluation of the health care facilities in Central Asia. To that end they have contracted with a variety of universities in the United States to assess the situation in the different Asian republics. The University of Illinois received the responsibility to evaluate the resources in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on maternal and infant care. Approximately nine months ago the first representatives from the university arrived in Tashkent to begin the project. As part of the ongoing activities, a week-long course for local physicians who were involved in maternal and infant care was organized, and I was invited by colleagues at the University of Illinois to be part of the faculty. My only condition was that it be made perfectly clear to all that I was coming as an Israeli. In turn, their only request was that I travel on my American passport as part of the group that had been orga-

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nized through the Uzbekistan Embassy in Washington.

The University of Illinois group arrived in Tashkent via Moscow. I and my wife were able to fly directly from Tel Aviv to Tashkent. The Air Uzbekistan brochure distributed on the plane had a map with Tashkent in the center indicating that there are international flights to Tel Aviv, Jeddah, London, Karachi, and elsewhere. Apparently there was no hesitation in having Tel Aviv and Jeddah on the same map, reflecting the current secular political stance of the government.

There are two flights a week between Tashkent and Tel Aviv in either direction. As Air Uzbekistan flies on a regular basis not only to Tel Aviv but to Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Delhi, the plane that leaves Tel Aviv is made up largely of Israeli backpackers who have just finished their regular army service and are on their way east for their obligatory Far East trip (*tiyul*). Tashkent is now the cheapest and most reliable way for Israeli young people to get to the Far East. It is more reliable than through Romania, the previous favorite, and is cheaper and safer than going through Cairo or Athens. Backpackers also save the extra cost of an overnight hostel. On our return flight we boarded an Air Uzbekistan plane that originated in Delhi and which was filled with Israeli students coming back for the start of the university year.

Uzbekistan is probably the only place in the world where Israeli young people are not seen exploring the countryside — they do not leave the airport. This is not because of the cost — jokingly, one says they could buy the country for about a dollar — but it is not safe, it is not a welcome place, and there are very few basic tourist services.

### The Old Communist Leadership

Uzbekistan became an independent republic in September 1991, a few weeks following the coup attempt in Moscow against Gorbachev. They only got around to begin taking down the statues of Lenin about six months ago. While the major ones in the city squares are all gone, Lenin's presence can be found here and there on buildings, subway entrances, and out of the way streets.

The current president, Islan Karimov, an ethnic Uzbek, was the country's Communist leader before independence. He even sided with the people who were attacking Gorbachev and may be the only head of state who chose the wrong side in 1991, survived, and is still

in control. Not only is he in control, but essentially the whole infrastructure of the government prior to 1991, the Communist Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (USSSR with one extra "S"), is essentially intact and thus in many ways very little has changed.

### Uzbekis vs. Tadjikis

After an initial opening of the country, the general atmosphere has begun to revert back to that of a more dictatorial semi-police state. This came largely in reaction to a combination of economic stresses and a flare-up of interethnic tensions in the region. Some 60 percent of the population is Uzbeki, roughly 20 percent are Tadjiki, and at the moment 10-12 percent are ethnic Russians.

About a year ago, interethnic fighting began in the adjoining republic of Tadjikistan. In Tadjikistan the ratios are essentially reversed, with a Tadjiki majority of 60-70 percent, while 20 percent are Uzbekis. As in many other places in the world, people on one side of the border want to join with their family members and ethnic group on the other side. At the present time, the civil war is still going on in Tadjikistan, though in somewhat low-key fashion. However, the reaction of the leadership in Uzbekistan was to reestablish more control over the general population to prevent the spread of this interethnic war. Informally polling our hosts, we found that a majority predict that ultimately there will be an outbreak of serious fighting in Uzbekistan, while a distinct and strong minority thinks they will work matters out peacefully because of the control of the central government.

### The Plight of the Jews of Tadjikistan

There were some 6,000 Jews in Tadjikistan in its capital of Dushanbe. Tens of them were killed, not because they were particularly singled out, but because they were literally and figuratively caught in the middle of a civil war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives. Almost all of the rest have been quietly evacuated by the Jewish Agency over a relatively short period. Half of them are now in Uzbekistan; the other half are in Israel or scattered elsewhere. There are only a few hundred Jews left in Dushanbe at the moment. Dushanbe is normally a 3-4 hour drive from Samarkand, but today the trip takes 17 hours; one must skirt around the mountains where the roads are controlled by snipers. There is no reliable air transport to Tadjikistan and the fate of the remaining Jews there is perilous.

### Tashkent's Changing Demographics

Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, is a city of roughly two million people and the functional capital of all Central Asia. Two years ago, before the establishment of the independent republic of Uzbekistan, ethnic Russians comprised some 60-70 percent of the population of Tashkent. Today this has changed dramatically and they number about 30 percent. This means that no less than half a million ethnic Russians have fled from Tashkent, changing the tone of the city. There are also a quarter of a million Koreans in Uzbekistan, almost all of whom live in Tashkent. They were brought in in the 1930s as laborers and miners, and most have links with North Korea where they originated. The major group buying the houses of the Jews leaving Tashkent are the Koreans.

Physically Tashkent looks like an Eastern European city, a combination of Minsk and Warsaw. The Tashkent subway, build in 1967 after the earthquake, far surpasses that of Moscow in beauty; it is really exceptional in its design and efficiency. Of interest, the closest we came to being arrested was for taking pictures in the subway, an act which apparently is still illegal. In contrast, we took pictures in the airport and, interestingly, were not stopped. We could not begin to fathom this logic other than assume that it is a relic of some previous regulation. There were other controls as well. Foreigners may officially stay only in hotels, and one needs a visa for each individual city, although, in practice, to travel from place to place it is just a matter of knowing the going rate to pay off the appropriate people when one is stopped at the inevitable roadblock.

### Secular vs. Fundamentalist Islam

Two major forces in that part of the world are trying to influence the political and social development of the countries of Central Asia — Iran to the south and Turkey to the west. (For more on this struggle for influence, see SAA29: "Return to the Source: The Islamic Republics of Central Asia and the Middle East.") Since nearly all Uzbekis and Tadjikis are Muslims, Iran is the model for the Muslim fundamentalists, while Turkey is the model for secular Muslims. The current government is a secular Muslim government that is publicly willing to align itself with Turkey. Yet even in Tashkent, where there were 500 mosques two years ago, we heard there were 5,000 mosques today, built mostly with Iranian and Saudi money.

One indicator of the direction this struggle is taking is the controversy over which alphabet to use. Up to

two years ago, the alphabet was Cyrillic. About a year ago the new Uzbekistan parliament decided to switch to Arabic letters. Six months ago they decided to switch to Turkish letters — Latin letters. However, the letters on the signs in the streets are still Cyrillic. Decisions and implementation are not necessarily linked one to the other. At any rate, the computers, typewriters, and printing presses are all still in Cyrillic. Our visas were in Cyrillic.

### The Jews of Uzbekistan

The Jewish community in Uzbekistan has three centers: a relatively large, Westernized community in Tashkent; a smaller but still vibrant Bukhari community in Samarkand; and a very small and disappearing community in Bukhara.

Tashkent has the largest percentage of Ashkenazim, many of whom came to Uzbekistan during or after World War II from the Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The Soviet census of 1954 listed 50,000 Jews in the city. Many of the Ashkenazim returned west in the early 1970s when there was some loosening up in the Soviet Union. One interesting subgroup was 800 Chabad hassidim who reached Samarkand after the war. They came as a group but all went back in the early 1970s and none are left today. Almost all of them eventually ended up in the United States after passing through the western part of the Soviet Union.

Samarkand, where we spent the bulk of our time, is essentially a rural village of a quarter of a million people. Outside of the blocks around the university, the government buildings, and one or two hotels, it is hard to find a fully paved street. The people walking the streets are mostly in Asian-style dress.

The few Ashkenazim that are left in Samarkand are neither religious nor very much involved in the Jewish community, although in the last year or two they have been contacted by the various organizations that support aliya and Jewish consciousness.

Intermarriage in the Bukhari community means that a Bukhari marries an Ashkenazi; marrying a non-Jew is unheard of. Among the Ashkenazim, however, there is a fairly high rate of intermarriage. The birth rate of the two communities is quite different, with the Ashkenazim much like their ethnic Russian counterparts, i.e., at most, two children per family. In the Bukhari community, large families are still the norm, and as the family structure is still one of extended families who lived in homes built around a common courtyard, there is a physical base to support such a

high birth rate. The Ashkenazim came as refugees during and after the war and had all the problems of little space common to most of the Soviet Union, and therefore they had very small families. Thus, the large number of Ashkenazim who came did not grow proportionately to the native Bukharian Jews and, given their return to Russia in the 1960s and 1970s, they represent a relatively small percentage today.

The Tashkent Jewish community today numbers 15-20,000, with somewhere between a quarter and a third Ashkenazim. In Samarkand the community numbers 5-7,000, with a maximum of 1,000 Ashkenazim. In Bukhara a little over a thousand Jews, essentially all Bukhari, are left.

### Local Leadership and Outside Organizations

Uzbekistan provides an excellent case study of the activities of the organized international Jewish community. There are three major forces on the scene — the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and the Lishkat HaKeshet of the Israeli Foreign Service — plus representatives of numerous other Jewish and Israeli organizations. Most frequently, all these players are at odds with each other in competing for a piece of the Uzbeki pie.

Samarkand is one place where they do work together and actually coordinate their services in the field. Tashkent, on the other hand, is the classic example of how each one of these organizations has their own agenda, where they rarely if ever talk to each other, with inevitable duplication of effort and waste of limited resources.

Samarkand is also interesting to study because of how one individual, the local rabbi, can set the whole tone. In this case it is a 31-year-old Bukhari rabbi who is both energetic, organized, and quite politically sophisticated. The rabbi received his ordination ten years ago from one of the few Bukhari rabbis still living at the time. Over the years he has learned the ins and outs of every government office in all of Central Asia and sees it as his mission to support and develop the entire Jewish community of Samarkand. As such, to succeed, any outside organization must work with and through him or be isolated. Previous attempts were made by the various organizations to send representatives into Samarkand to establish their own programs, but they were unsuccessful until they came to realize the fact of the centralization of activities through the rabbi.

Early on, the Bukhari rabbi came to realize that money was also available from other sources such as

Chabad. He thus went to the United States two years ago, spent six months with Chabad in New York where he became certified as a *mohel* and a *shochet*, and returned home as a Chabad rabbi. In turn, Chabad not only provides him with financial support, but has also sent two teachers to the Jewish school in Samarkand.

The rabbi has established a particularly good relationship with the JDC representative for Central Asia who is based in Samarkand, as well as with the JDC official in Jerusalem supervising activities in Central Asia. This may be due in part to the fact that all of these individuals are religious and willing to work through the religious establishment. This is in contrast to people from the Jewish Agency and the Israel Embassy who are ambivalent at best in their relationships with the local religious authorities and who apparently do not support anything that smacks of religion.

Every religious and political Jewish and Israeli organization appears to have sent somebody to Tashkent in the last year. Typically, they show up for a month or two, get 10-20 children together, and offer them a program ranging from aliya as the sole solution to an anti-Zionist haredi philosophy. These representatives rarely stay beyond the summer months.

The small Jewish community in Samarkand has also been fortunate to benefit from the presence of an extremely successful young Israeli couple who represented the Lishkat HaKeshet and were serving as teachers and youth leaders. He is a medical student who is a graduate of six years in Yeshivat Hesder, the program that combines army service and religious studies. His wife had done national service, then spent the two subsequent summers working in camps in the United States, and was now a student at Tel Aviv University. With that kind of broad experience and with a modern religious, knitted-kipah orientation and background, they clearly understood the local dynamics and were willing to cooperate with both Chabad and the Jewish Agency representative.

Interestingly, the Lishkat HaKeshet has found the modern religious stream (the knitted-kipah, Bnei Akiva movement types) to be the best source of people to send as emissaries. In the religious community, the equivalent of going off for a year to Bangkok or South America after the army is to go through Lishkat HaKeshet as an unpaid volunteer teacher to some exotic Jewish community. Unfortunately, these people are not willing to take off a year, but usually they take off summers or a few months after the summer. During the regular school year they are not available. In

contrast, the Jewish Agency recruits teachers for a full school year and pays a regular salary. Those who follow this route can come home with a tidy income because it costs next to nothing to live in some of these places. For example, the Jewish Agency teacher receives a tax-free salary of around \$2,000 a month and the total cost of living in Samarkand ranges from \$50 to \$150 a month. In contrast, the Lishkat HaKeshet covers expenses only, so there is no financial motivation, and thus they are having great problems finding appropriate people willing to disrupt their own lives for two or three months. Other than the Bnei Akiva graduates, they find people who have some family ties to Uzbekistan or who are semi-retired or between jobs and are willing to go for a short period of time, but as such it does not work out ideally.

### Doing Business in Central Asia

The current Uzbekistan government is very willing to publicly acknowledge the existence of the Israeli Embassy. Formal diplomatic relations were established in February 1992. My demand to be publicly identified as being from Israel singled me out for special attention only in the most positive way. Every government official in every setting really wanted to spend time with me; they all wanted to talk business and were less interested in the technical or medical information that I had. They wanted to know which pharmaceutical company or medical equipment firm I was representing, not which university I was affiliated with. The problem is that most business is transacted through bartering. Their major cash crop is cotton. They have a few petrochemicals, but most of their natural resources are not well developed. This is in contrast to Kazakhstan to the north where the Eisenberg group has negotiated business deals worth at least half a billion dollars. Most of the business people on the scene were a variety of Asians representing major international trading companies. The typical businessman in Samarkand was a Pakistani or Malaysian representing Hewlett-Packard, working out of an office in Athens and covering the Central Asian republics, who had established relationships from his previous contacts and his friends back in Malaysia and Pakistan. Indians are also very visible in the country as they have been trading in the area for decades.

Inflation is rampant. Just a few days before we arrived, the exchange rate was 1400 Russian rubles to a dollar. By the time we arrived it was 1700 rubles, and it was 2400 rubles by the time we left. It costs 6 rubles for public transportation, 100 rubles for a kilo

of tomatoes, and 400 rubles for one lemon. The salary of the interpreter at one of the institutes where we spent a day is 20,000 rubles. The salary of the head of a department in the medical school is 60,000 rubles a month. Food is not a major problem in Uzbekistan. There is enough local produce, vegetables and fruit.

In Tashkent the hotel is a standard, serviceable, Moscow-type Intourist hotel. In Bukhara the hotel is actually one step up from standard Intourist. The hotel in Samarkand, however, for reasons not entirely clear, was five steps below even the lowest level Intourist hotel. For example, no water runs after 12 midnight.

You can dial direct from Tashkent but not from Samarkand. All phone calls go through Moscow and the breakdown of economic relationships has affected service because Russia wants payment in New Rubles and Uzbekistan does not have New Rubles to give them.

Samarkand is an exotic place to visit from a physical point of view and is worth the trip. However, the dangers are real. Daytime is not a problem, but nobody goes out at night. This is not because of ethnic problems but, rather, economics — the threat of attack on the street by various low-lives. A few months before our visit, two young girls who were there as representatives from the Lishkat HaKeshet were stabbed, though in comparison, Moscow is considered to be worse.

### Frontier Medicine

Samarkand has a medical school linked to the health care system, but that system is at such a low level that it becomes a vicious cycle. They have read about how to practice diagnostically and therapeutically with modern techniques, but they do not bother teaching these techniques or procedures because they cannot afford the equipment.

In the end, after all our demonstrations of equipment and all our sophisticated academic lectures, we went back to the basics like washing hands. The problem is that there is not always soap. When I asked one hospital director what he would do if he had \$50,000 to spend, he replied that he would use it to buy penicillin, as they lack even the most basic of medications — there is no local pharmaceutical production. Their lack of foreign currency leads to inevitable shortages even of immunization supplies and thus few of the children receive routine immunization.

In one busy maternity hospital I visited, the total special equipment was one old incubator, with two babies in it. I saw no infusion pumps, no monitors, or respirators. They keep the babies in wooden boxes,

3 and 4 together. They admit to an infant mortality rate of between 50 and 60 per thousand. In Israel the comparable rate is 9 per thousand. From one-third to one-half of all babies do not get born in hospitals and if they die in the first year they never get registered, so the actual mortality rate is even higher. But the most shocking figure is the maternal mortality rate of nearly 60 per 100,000. In the Western world, maternal mortality is not over 4 per 100,000 and in Israel it is less. The common cause of maternal mortality is infection acquired during the birth. They do not have disposables. Their sterilizing equipment is antiquated. They may wash the floor, dress in gowns, and don masks, but as they do not wash their hands with soap or adequately sterilize their equipment, then the above figures are tragically inevitable.

In summary, two facts are clear. First, Uzbekistan will play a pivotal role in the geopolitics of Central Asia and in the worldwide conflict of secular and religious forces in the Muslim world. Second, the an-

cient Jewish community of Uzbekistan will no longer exist in the near future as a viable indigenous community. For Israel, thus, Uzbekistan has major importance as a factor in the political developments of the Middle East, while to its Jewish community, Israel has obligations to serve as the haven once again for those whose diaspora home no longer welcomes them.

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