TITLE: Land and Water Politics in Uzbekistan

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Summary

This is a trip report based on the author's participation in a conference supported by the U.S. Department of State in Tashkent as well as on field observations in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is still a highly protected cotton colony but its agriculture is facing the same structural and organizational problems, and the same need to change, as agriculture in the rest of the former Soviet Union. How long this kind of compromise can hold together is very much in doubt.
For anyone familiar with the immense changes Russia has undergone since 1989, a visit to Uzbekistan creates the sensation of having fallen into a time warp. Such, at least, was this writer's feeling during a week-long stay for a conference on water management and agricultural development in post-Soviet Central Asia organized by the East-West Center with support from the US Department of State.

The conference, like a previous meeting in Phoenix, Arizona in 1992, had two complementary objectives. On the one hand, it aimed to bring together a group of American Sovietologists and other academic specialists to focus on a regional problem, as well as issues of one economic sector, agriculture, in comparative perspective. On the other hand, the conference sought to educate Central Asians, particularly the Uzbeks who are the most populous people in the region and its main water consumers, in comparative experiences in international river basin management. Since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Central Asian water management has been transformed from an issue in which the main axis of conflict pitted Moscow against the Central Asians and Moscow ultimately resolved conflicts among the republics into a matter of international relations among the region's new states themselves. World experience suggests that equitable solutions to international issues similar to the allocation of Central Asian water generally require an effort by the international

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community and outside mediation.¹ That the East-West Center is not alone in this view was shown by the simultaneous conduct, also in Tashkent, of a World Bank-sponsored conference intended to persuade Uzbek authorities of the need to adopt a comprehensive plan to limit the damage caused by the continuing desiccation of the Aral Sea, a national water-management strategy, and an inventory of water-management networks and needs in the country.

The Situation in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan, like the other states of former Soviet Central Asia, gained its independence as a result of the collapse of the USSR following the abortive coup of August 1991. The Uzbek republic was a creation of the Moscow authorities. The country’s very boundaries resulted from Moscow’s decisions to create several republics out of Soviet Turkestan in the early 1930s, and those borders leave a substantial Uzbek population at the entrance to the Fergana Valley, the richest agricultural district in all of Central Asia, formally citizens of Tadzhikistan.

Since the 1930s, Moscow directed Uzbek development primarily to ensure itself a supply of cotton for Russian textile mills. Central Asian agriculture has always been based on irrigation—the main canal feeding one of the farms the East-West Center group visited had been constructed three centuries earlier and some of the water works in the Fergana Valley are reputed to be two millennia old. But starting in the early 1960s, additional vast

amounts of irrigation water were drawn from the region's two major rivers, the Amu Dar'ia and Syr Dar'ia, to increase the cultivated area and particularly cotton production. The logical result of the emphasis on cotton at all costs was monoculture and eventually enormous scandals as a result of Uzbek first secretary Sharaf Rashidov's promises to increase cotton production by twenty percent in the early 1970s. Rashidov failed to increase production, but reported output, as well as payments to a corrupt Uzbek elite for that "increase," did grow.

Growing demands for water for cotton and rice cultivation cut the annual inflow into the landlocked Aral Sea, some 56 cubic kilometers of water in the wet year of 1960, to 42.5 cubic kilometers in 1973, 8.3 cubic kilometers by 1980, and zero by 1982. Now river water flows into the Sea only in unusually wet years such as 1992, when about 4 cubic kilometers reached the rivers' mouths. The Aral Sea began to dry up, splitting into two much smaller, much saltier bodies of water by the 1980s. The surrounding area was officially defined as a disaster area as a result of salt and dust storms from the dry sea bed, environmental pollution from irrigation run-off from upstream areas, and a general lack of investment in and attention to public health, housing and infrastructure.

The Soviet planners' insistence on maximum cotton output at all costs had additional evil effects familiar from other colonial situations. The party's ability to mobilize urban populations to provide cheap hand labor made agricultural mechanization a low priority. It was cheaper for farm managers to dragoon vast armies of manual pickers than to make Soviet cotton combines, scarce, expensive, unreliable and prone like all machines to overlook some cotton that hand pickers would harvest work properly. The availability of seasonal work in the countryside, and the need for casual labor, helped to preserve a large rural
population, leading to overcrowded living conditions in the countryside and contributing to population problems. But the use of enormous amounts of agricultural chemicals, including defoliants to aid in picking by stripping leaves from the plants made working conditions for the corvee labor very unsafe, contributing directly to a disastrous rate of infant mortality and birth defects. Education suffered as school children spent as much as four months of each academic year in the fields as part of their "training." (Students at the Pedagogical Institute in Dzhizhak were particularly interested when, during the Center group's visit, the American visitors told them that students in the U.S. were not required to do such labor.) Even food supplies suffered. With every inch of available land planted to cotton, peasants had to feed themselves from their private plots. Low rural incomes led them to sell much of what they did produce in the cities, creating an impression of abundance in the urban bazaars often not supported by villagers' appearance, health, or physical characteristics.²

The Soviet-era Uzbek leadership hoped for, and repeatedly demanded, a technological "quick fix" to their problems through the construction of vast water diversion projects intended to reverse Siberia's north-flowing rivers. Indeed, water planners by the mid-1970s were expanding irrigated acreages on the assumption that Siberian water would be available. However, many Russians bitterly opposed the Siberian schemes, which became a focus of some of the first political groups formed during perestroika, and the USSR in any case lacked the capital to build such grandiose projects. Although local water planners told the

² The issue of food sufficiency for the Uzbek rural population is being investigated in more detail in a current study by Peter Craumer of Florida International University, a conference participant.
conference they still hoped for massive diversion from Siberia or the Caspian Sea, such works will not—and probably should not—be constructed in time to save the Aral. Because they understand that such a technological "quick fix" is unlikely and even undesirable, reduction in the area planted to cotton, action to save the Aral Sea, and measures to develop the countryside have been the key points in all Uzbek opposition movements' platforms.

Agrarian Reform in Uzbekistan

In 1990, Uzbekistan had some 940 kolkhozy and 1,108 sovkhozy. In mid-summer of that year the republic adopted a Law on Land, which, like its all-union model adopted three months earlier, permitted individuals to hold land for private plots and individual farms on long-term lease (arenda) or usufruct (pol’zovanie) and allowed tenure to be inherited but forbade private ownership of agricultural land.³ In 1990 and 1991, about one-half million hectares of arable land were distributed for use as private plots or individual farms, so that now about 550,000 hectares are worked as household plots. According to Uzbek Academy of Agricultural Sciences President Said Usmanov, the country now has about four million hectares of irrigated agricultural land altogether. Another speaker at the East-West Center conference reported that the country has about 875,000 hectares of dryland arable. So private plots now occupy between one-eighth and one-ninth of the country’s agricultural land. Sovkhozy have now been denationalized, reorganized into associations of peasant farms, a

hybrid form which theoretically allows farmers independence. However, no statistics on the progress of this reform were available, and this author was told by local officials that the new "private" farmers in at least one raion of Dzhizhak oblast' had not been allowed to register their farms as individuals or become legally independent of the big farm, leading to questions about the real independence of such "individual" enterprises.

Usmanov told the East-West Center conference in an opening address that distribution of land for private plots had largely stabilized agricultural output. Although kolkhoz and sovkhoz output had fallen by two or three percent in 1991-1992, he said official statistics showed that private plot output had increased by approximately five percent. Closer studies done by his Academy, moreover, suggested that the real increase in private plot output was more like fifteen percent. They now produce fifty percent of the country's meat, seventy percent of its milk, and about fifty percent of its potatoes, vegetables, and fruit. (These proportions are about the same as those in Russia before the present agrarian reform began in 1990.) Usmanov and other sources all suggested that the official agrarian reform intended to develop further this dual structure of large kolkhozy and private plots.

The strategy of President Islam Karimov, Usmanov continued, is to stabilize agricultural production before attempting any agrarian reform. Elsewhere in the Soviet Union, that position has meant that no change is intended, since if production can be stabilized at a high enough level, no reform is needed. In any event, it is clear that the regime intends to maintain agricultural protection and the old Soviet-style system of state orders and subsidies. State orders for vegetables amount to fifty percent of the crop. State orders for cotton, once covering 100 percent of the crop, are being reduced, so that next year farms will have to
deliver only 70% of their crop as raw cotton to the state cotton gins. The orders will continue to decline by 5 percent a year for several more years after that. (Individual farmers, lease-holders or farms as a whole can have the state gin clean the balance they are not required to deliver to the state and sell it themselves to the state at a higher price as cotton lint. But since they have no other place to sell their cotton, this simply is a way for producers to capture profits that otherwise would go to the state procurement agency that owns the cotton gins.) Usmanov also indicated that the republic's average cotton yields of 28 to 30 centners per hectare are too low and need to be improved. The area under cotton has fallen from some 200,200 hectares annually to 160,000 hectares. But Usmanov's speech did not suggest that he expected it to continue falling by much more. He was more concerned with the fact that the country exports 90% of its cotton as cotton lint. Only 10% of cotton production is processed into finished goods within Uzbekistan. The obvious way to improve the country's economy, he implied, is to move more cotton manufacturing industries into the country.

According to the Uzbek academician, the principal problem of Uzbek agriculture is the lack of good incentives for the individual farm worker. The republic's authorities intend to correct this problem through broad use of leasing of land and assets to individuals and families within the framework of the existing collective and state farms. This was exactly the argument, and exactly the remedy, proposed on the all-union level by Mikhail Gorbachev from 1987 to 1990, a strategy which had mediocre results because of failure to reform the economic environment in which the collective and state farms operate—reforms which would have threatened the basic farm structure itself and so the power of the party in the country-
side. Whether or not the Uzbeks can make the same strategy work better remains to be seen.

The group was told unofficially that there are only about two hundred and fifty real private, or peasant, farms (dekanskoe khoziaistvo) in Uzbekistan. Although we had asked to see a variety of farm types, large and small (and for studying water problems the experience of kolkhozy and sovkhozy is especially important to understand), we were shown three "farms" (fermy), all of which were operating on a lease, or sharecropping, basis within reorganized sovkhozy or kolkhozy. All three were operating exactly as the standard all-union guidelines on within-farm leasing, promulgated in 1987, specified they should.

Dzhizhak

According to agricultural economists at the Dzhizhak Pedagogical Institute, 21% of the oblast's arable land has been distributed to individual farmers, who sow 50% of the province's cotton. Judging from the farm we were shown and descriptions of others, these clearly were sharecroppers or "internal lessees" within reorganized sovkhozy, not true independent farmers.

We were taken to the Bakmalskii raion of Dzhizhak oblast'. This district was clearly not typical of either Dzhizhak oblast' or Uzbekistan as a whole since it had little or no cotton cultivation, and did not depend entirely on irrigation for its agricultural water supplies. A new administrative unit, created by dividing another district in 1971, the raion has a population of some 96,000 forming approximately 10,000 families. According to the raion's deputy administrator, 56% of the raion's total area of some 180,000 hectares, could be used
for agricultural purposes, including woodlands and pastures. The raion had 5,000 irrigated hectares and 23,000 hectares of dry-land grain sowings, as well as producing vegetables, potatoes and forage crops. The district had some 90,000 cows, of which 20,000 head were state and the rest private (whether on sub-lease from the farms, in kolkhoz herds, or truly private was not clear). Moreover, the raion had some 80,000 sheep. The land was organized into nine kolkhozy, a state breeding farm, an orcharding experimental farm, a hog-feeding operation, and an interfarm feed lot. The district also had one winery.

This was apparently a progressive raion. According to the raion deputy administrator, an American had been working with a local farm for at least a year to improve their seed potatoes. That farm or another was also using Dutch seed potatoes (an innovation being widely attempted in Russia as well).

About fifty agricultural types from the raion attended this initial meeting with our delegation, held in the raion administration building. Only one person present was an individual farmer. He had 40 cows, a tractor, and 100 hectares of dry land in his farm worked by five able-bodied family members. Begun in 1989, this farm last year produced 20 tons of milk as well as a quantity of meat.

We were shown a family lease operation on the kolkhoz Bog-i-shamal. The entire plot was irrigated from the kolkhoz system. The farm members included some twenty-five able-bodied adults, making it a "group farm" rather than a family farm in the usual American sense. The family head and therefore official "farmer," Gapurov, had put thirty-seven hectares under grapevines as well as producing three hectares of vegetables. Although his
lease ran for only seven years, he anticipated that the grapevines would have an eighty-year life cycle, suggesting he was not concerned about losing his land.

Under the terms of his lease, the farmer got his water free (as all farms in Uzbekistan do), although we were told that the Uzbek parliament had just passed legislation instituting payment for agricultural water as of 1995. However, the idea that water should be paid for was clearly not considered by this or any other farmer we talked to, since they had never faced the need to do so.

All other inputs were to be supplied by the farm as specified in the lease agreement. Machinery for heavy cultivation, transportation, and other services were provided by the kolkhoz machine yard at per-job prices specified in the lease agreement. (Although we were unable to find out for certain, it appears that the kolkhoz accountant’s office continues to keep track of who owes whom how much for work done with a settlement of accounts after the harvest.) Asked what would happen if two lease-holders needed the same equipment at the same time or if the collective farm simply failed to carry out its end of the bargain, the farmer responded that such a thing wouldn’t happen because his agreement provided for things to be done.

This year the lease-holder used nitrogen fertilizer, supplied by the farm, at a rate of 250 kilograms/hectare (a spreading rate John Waterbury identified as standard throughout the world). A ton of fertilizer cost the farmer 80,000 rubles, apparently the state price.

The lease holder was obliged to sell 70% of his crops to the kolkhoz. The balance he could sell privately, although the only winery available was a state enterprise located on the kolkhoz territory—although it was managed by state procurement officials, not the farm. In
1992, the lease operation delivered 150 tons of grapes to the farm to fulfill its requirements at a price of 600 rubles per centner. In addition, the lease-holder sold the farm an additional 20 tons of production at the "above-plan" price of 1500 rubles per centner. Wet weather last year prevented him from drying that part of his crop into raisins, which he could have sold on the side in an urban bazaar at a better price.

Fergana

We were shown two farms in the Besharikskii raion, Fergana oblast'. According to the deputy administrator (hakim) of the Fergana oblast', some 12,000 of the province's total 36,000 hectares of arable land are in cotton this year. The province sports some 58 stock-raising, 17 cotton-growing, 2 orcharding, and 2 other specialized farms similar to the ones we were shown. The farmers had a total of 654 cows (krupnyi rogatyi skot), 331 hectares of cotton plantings, and 25 hectares of orchards. The raion's former six sovkhoz had all been reorganized into "associations of peasant farms" or "leasing enterprises." The raion broiler factory had become a kolkhoz.

The first Fergana farm we saw was a subunit of the leasing farm (arendnoe khozai-stvo) "Iakkatut," a reorganized sovkhoz. This was really an expanded private plot operation producing livestock products. The farm was worked by eleven able-bodied family members, including nine adults. The farm head was a former "snabzhenets" (supply specialist) from the town's agricultural equipment plant. As such, he had traveled throughout the former Soviet Union. He said that he had been impressed with the quality of cows he had seen in the Ukraine so he had brought them (he seemed to have about a dozen head) back to start his
farm. His stock was kept in a shed built on one of the inside walls of his courtyard. They were free to roam within an enclosure and at least one cow was lying down in the others' excrement—not a good omen for milk quality or the cows' health.

The farmer had five hectares of irrigated land for forage crops on a ten-year lease. He owned his cows and a variety of equipment, including a wheeled tractor and two trailers, a plow, a feed chopper. This was apparently equipment he had rebuilt. We were told that Sel’khoztekhnika retains its monopoly over agricultural equipment sales in Uzbekistan. Even if a farmer were to show up at the plant door with cash in hand, he could get equipment only if he also had an allocation order from the agricultural equipment supply monopoly.

The second farm we were shown was a cotton-growing operation on the kolkhoz imeni Kirov. This farmer indicated that, with five adult members of his family, he leased six hectares of cotton land, on a nineteen year lease. The second farm we were shown was a cotton-growing operation on the kolkhoz imeni Kirov. This farmer indicated that, with five adult members of his family, he leased six hectares of cotton land, on a nineteen year lease. The second farm we were shown was a cotton-growing operation on the kolkhoz imeni Kirov. This farmer indicated that, with five adult members of his family, he leased six hectares of cotton land, on a nineteen year lease. Last year he raised 34 ct/ha of cotton, while the all-farm average yield was 31.6 ct/ha (it should be noted that both of these are better than the national average yield, which was said to be about 28 ct/ha). 85% of his crop went to the government. The balance of his cotton also went to the state, but as cotton lint sold at a higher price rather than unginned cotton.

This entire farm was using biological methods of pest control rather than the heavy applications of pesticides which had been characteristic of Uzbek cotton cultivation. As Professor Philip Micklin of Western Michigan University, who had toured the biological research center where natural pest-control methods are developed for Uzbekistan, observed,
this is not only better for people's health but also much cheaper now that the Uzbeks can no longer get agrochemicals from Russia or elsewhere at concessionary prices.

Conclusions

Clearly, the Uzbeks are not ready to move far from their old ways. In particular, they were not interested in discussing problems of water prices. Nor, given the quickly-arrived-at agreement in principle of February 1993 which maintains the status quo in inter-republican water allocation in Central Asia, was our audience particularly interested in discussing the issue. Since cotton is the country's cash crop, this protectionist policy may make more sense in Uzbekistan than it would, for instance, in Ukraine or Russia. On the other hand, one wonders how long Karimov's regime, which seems to be attempting to maintain a communist-style political system without Marxism-Leninism, can last.