Central Asia Jihadism: Home and Abroad

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ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of Central Asian jihadists both on Syrian battlefields and on the international scene in 2016 and especially in 2017 forced researchers to reconsider and renew the notion of the radical Islamic threat coming from the region. The paper examines the historical background which paved the way for the rise of local jihadism, the roots, nature and specifics of the Central Asian foreign fighters phenomenon, as well as current trends and risks for international and national security.

**The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).**
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Introduction

The flow of foreign fighters travelling to Syria to join various jihadist groups attracted the attention of both decision makers and academic researchers, and become an object for a significant number of papers, not least because of its mass nature and broad geographical spread.

From the very beginning of the flow (2011) some regions and countries were in the spotlight: MENA region, Western countries, Russia, and more, and have been studied comprehensively.

However, the situation in Syria and Iraq has developed and changed, and new trends in the flow of foreign fighters emerged subsequently. In such a manner, 2015 was marked by significant intensification of the flow of foreign fighters from Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan). Central Asian Jihadism poses a significant threat not only in regards to foreign fighters, but also to countries outside of Syria and Iraq. This threat was exemplified by the recent (October 31, 2017) vehicular ramming attack in Manhattan, which was carried out by Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, an Uzbek national, who reportedly left a note claiming the attack was in the name of ISIS. This attack highlights the importance of understanding the phenomenon of Central Asian jihadism, with its effects both on fighters in theaters of jihad and abroad.

Foreign fighters from the Central Asian region were traced as travelling or attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq since the beginning of the war, but the flow was humble, and militants hardly appeared on stage. Since 2015 one can observe a substantial rise to the flow, which in no small measure was mobilized by propaganda products produced by jihadist groups operating in Syria and Iraq (Islamic State - ISIS). This period, from 2015 until now, is marked for ISIS by significant shifts in its positions in Syria and Iraq, accompanied with losses of territories and fighters. Such circumstances forced the group to turn its attention toward new potential fighters, and particularly Central Asian fighters.

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1 There are several definitions of the borders of Central Asian region based on various grounds. This paper accepts the definition, which includes five post-Soviet countries, as it was proclaimed by theirs leaders after gaining the independence.

Today, foreign fighters from Central Asia number more than 4,000,\textsuperscript{3} are becoming more and more visible, and hold important posts within jihadist groups. In the last three years, the number of terror attacks, performed by natives of Central Asia, rose sharply, which suggests continued expanding terror activities and growing potential threats coming from this population. Moreover, analysis of recent trends allows to suggest that Central Asian militants tend to replace Chechen fighters in the ranks of ISIS - one of the highest valued fighters of the group. Thus, Gulmurod Khalimov, an ethnic Tajik, former commander of the police special forces of the Interior Ministry of Tajikistan, superseded Omar al-Shishani after his death as military commander. Moreover, there are Chechens who play crucial roles in the radicalization and recruitment of potential militants from Central Asian countries.

Although usually the phenomenon of foreign fighters from Central Asian countries is examined as a whole, without distinctions between the countries, an extended analysis of national background seems to contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of the specifics of the flow.

Moreover, Central Asia today is the center of the geostrategic calculations of USA, Russia, and China, which makes the situation with foreign fighters, and the terror threat in general, more complex.

From the other side, it is important to note, that counteractions undertaken by Central Asian governments seem to be stovepiped and focus on restrictions of civil freedoms, due to their authoritarian nature, and, as a result, can be defined as ineffective.

The paper is aimed at conducting a deep analysis of the phenomenon of foreign fighters coming from Central Asian region:

- to review historical background and modern factors affecting the flow of the foreign fighters,

- to highlight national, political and cultural specifics of fighters coming from each particular country of the Central Asian region,

- to reveal specific features of the phenomenon itself, caused, among others, by the complexity of political and social situation within the region,

- to highlight existing and potential trends and to assess risks for international and national securities.

**Historical Background and Impact Factors**

First of all, it is important to note that each country of the Central Asian region [Kazakhstan (population 18 million), Kyrgyzstan (6 million), Tajikistan (8.8 million), Turkmenistan (5.5 million), and Uzbekistan (30.5 million)\(^4\)] has its own political, social, and cultural specifics, which have formed the Islamic radicalism in the region and today influence each particular flow of foreign fighters.

Those peculiar features have formed against the historical background of the 1980s and 1990s, which, among other aspects, is characterized by a religious revival which was started after 70 years of state atheism on all post-Soviet territories, including Central Asian countries. Such a sharp increase of interest in religion (Islam - in the case of Central Asian region) coupled with other impact factors led to emergence and rise of Islamic radicalism in the regions.

All main influencing factors can be arranged on two levels:

1. **Regional level**

2. **Country level**

On the regional level, there are historical and current factors that are shared by each of those countries and characterize the region as whole:

1. **Interrupting tradition.** Historically, the ancestors of modern Central Asians were nomads, and therefore Islam in the region has no deep roots. The nomadic nature of

ancient Central Asian inhabitants led to formation of specific domestic Islamic
tradition, which is divorced from the generally accepted canonical teachings. Muslims
of Central Asia sometimes do not understand the most elementary religious norms,
and such illiteracy plays into the hands of the jihadists. In the 1990s in order to
correspond with growing religious needs, hundreds of citizens traveled to Middle East
countries and Egypt for Islamic education drawing no distinction between moderate
and radical ideas.\(^5\)

2. On the other side, from the lack of experience in handling religious extremism and
seeking to establish new geopolitical contacts, including ones with Islamic extremist
movements, Central Asian governments allowed to enter, and in some cases
welcomed, various Islamic radical groups and representatives from Saudi Arabia
and other countries (as Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Hizb-ut Tahrir, etc.). These preached in the
region and established and inspired various groups and communities, which almost
immediately turned themselves into bases of local radical Islamic movements.\(^6\)

3. Another important factor is the tough if not repressive nature of governance of
Central Asian countries. Trying to hold power in their hands, the authorities often
suppressed any opposition movements, even moderate Islamic political groups (such
as Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan), forcing them to go underground.
Repression politics and a pursuit of total control over religious life in the countries,
contributed in large part to the formation of a radical Islamic underground.

4. Political and social instability also play an important role in emergence and spread
of radical Islamic ideology, especially outside of metropolitan areas. As in all other
cases throughout the world, people seeking political, economic, and social justice,
often turn themselves to radical Islamic groups, with their promises to build new
society based on Sharia law.

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5. **Geographical and ethno geographical factors** also may be considered as crucial. All countries of the region, along with shared borders, have long-established communications with each other on both the governmental and people’s levels. Therefore, emergence and activity of extremist groups in one country rapidly affects neighboring ones. Moreover, there are significant ethnic diasporas living in neighbor countries (the most prominent example is the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan) - the factor, which also contribute to communication, and by extension to spreading the radicalism.

6. Among geographical factors the **Fergana Valley** is of particular importance. The Fergana Valley is shared by Kyrgyzstan (in the East), Tajikistan (in the South), and Uzbekistan (in the West). The valley constitutes an enclave that affects all three states, and, conversely, is subject of influence of each of them. It was always economically attractive, mainly thanks to plenitude of fertile ground and its deposits of natural resources. However, the overpopulation led to decrease of economic level of the inhabitants. Because of the large number of social, economic and political problems, the Fergana Valley is sometimes called the "valley of discord". Economic and social depressions together with geographical factor - Fergana valley is surrounded by mountain systems left with only one narrow passage - turned it turned it to a hotbed of radicalism, the center for the formation, development and dissemination of radical Islam in the region. Today, the Fergana Valley has become one of the most problematic areas in Central Asia.

7. **The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan** to a great degree triggered the rise of radical Islam in the region. Afghanistan, which shares borders with three Central Asian countries: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, became a source and a gateway for radical Islamists entering those countries. The main force of resistance in this war were radical Islamic groups, and geographical proximity of these regions and the close ties and connections of their peoples also led to the spread of radical Islam in Central Asia.

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8. **Propagandist activities of foreign organizations.** There is a variety of jihadist movements and organizations operating across the Central Asian region, including Al-Qaeda affiliates, Afghanistan’s Taliban, Muslim brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and others. Most of them were banned by the governments and continue to operate illegally, calling potential recruits to join jihad in Syria. Most of the groups’ representatives are located in the Fergana Valley, where the political and social situation is not perfectly stable, and in border areas with Afghanistan.

**Along with regional factors there are specifics of each country which influence the nature and the body of foreign fighters’ flows.** Thus, **Kazakhstan** has relatively weak social base for rooting and spreading radical Islamic ideology, according to experts. Despite the rise of private mosques, which were not controlled by the government, repressive attitude to Salafism, and gaps in relevant legislative framework, Kazakhstan traces no prominent history of radical Islam having emerged and developed on its territory, and started to face numerous terror attacks only since 2011 (14 attacks were carried out within a year), which could be one of consequences of the financial crisis of 2007-2010.

**Kyrgyzstan,** on the contrary, represents an example of political, social, and ethnic complexities. First of all, there is a significant Uzbek minority living mainly in the Fergana Valley part of Kyrgyzstan (they compose almost 20% of the total population), and such neighborhood engenders various ethnic conflicts. Moreover, since the 1990s the country went through a number of political unrests: the change of regime in 1991, the tulip revolution of 2005, the Kyrgyz revolution of 2010, which was followed by increased ethnic tension between Kyrgyz people and Uzbeks. Those events contributed to the political character of radical Islam in the country. Geopolitically, the country shares borders with the Uighur region of China, and is close to Afghanistan and Pakistan. From the historical perspective, due to certain politics of both political parties and government, Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s became a hub for international Islamic terrorist groups. Among other reasons which were facilitated by the cooperation of local political parties with such radical Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, and others, which were granted with permission to operate on

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Kyrgyzstanian soil, since the Kyrgyzstanian government sought to turn the country into a base for dialogue between various ideologies (in opposition to Kazakhstan). Thus, Hizb ut-Tahrir oriented its propaganda in Kyrgyzstan towards women, high-educated people, and government workers, in contrary to many other examples throughout the world, when radical Islamic groups turn themselves toward disadvantaged groups. Among the other banned organizations Al-Qaeda (about 2,000 followers) and Tablighi Jamaat (about 20,000 followers) may be highlighted. Both have their cells in all regions of the republic. A local organization known as Jamaat of Kyrgyzstan Zhaishul Mahdi, which carried out several terrorist acts in various cities and regions of the republic, is engaged in open terrorist activities in Kyrgyzstan. The group was formed in 2007, but actively began to operate since 2010. Emir of Jamaat was Kyrgyz citizen S. Islamov. The organization's goal is to build a "caliphate" on the territory of Kyrgyzstan and other states in Central Asia through the wide application of methods of terror.9

Such factors as political and social instability, tensions between secular and religious ideologues, external and internal migration flows, coexistence of (and tensions between) Islam and paganism within one culture, etc. also contribute to the rooting and spreading of radical Islamic groups in the country.

The neighbor of Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan today is a primary source of foreign fighters in the region. Since the 1990s Uzbekistan faces threats of radical Islam both homegrown and coming from neighbor countries - thus, political unrests in Kyrgyzstan and the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997) jeopardized civil peace in Uzbekistan as well. Therefore, the Uzbekistani government in parallel to the process of re-introduction of Islam to the society during 1980s-1990s, since 1992 has launched the war against radical Islamic groups. Ironically, it is Uzbekistan which became a homeland for Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan - one of the most significant radical Islamic movements in the region, whose actions affected almost all Central Asian countries, and faced the problem of terror attacks since 1999 - before other countries of the region. This and other factors, common for all counties of the region, caused toughness of governmental measures aimed at fighting radical Islam: thus, there is a

common practice of collective punishment of Islamist/terrorist’s/foreign fighter’s family members, public penitence of those who were accused in sympathizing or attempts to join terror group, harsh conditions of detention for terrorists (they are banned from talking to each other while in prisons), etc. However, today Islam (and radical Islam, in particular) holds strong positions in social life of the society, and Uzbekistan faces the vexing problem of foreign fighters.

**Tajikistan** in turn is also forced to deal with the pressing issue of foreign fighters, and there are several significant factors which caused the problem. First, the geographical location of the country - shared borders with the Uighur region of China and Afghanistan, closeness to Pakistan, territories lodged between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan on the one hand, and vast mountain terrains with plenty of places of hard access on the other, lay the groundwork for strengthening and outspread of terror groups. Other factors which contributed to the development of radical Islamic underground in the country include economic and social instability (as consequences of civil war 1992-1997), high level of Islam’s involvement in political life of the country, in combination with extremely high percent of youth (about 70% of population are young people under 30) and governmental policy of sending youths to work and study abroad. These four aspects fertilized the ground for radical Islamic groups flourishing. It is important to note, that foreign terror organizations more catalyzed the spreading of radical ideology and ideas than operated in the country themselves. Among other reasons it was caused by the strong historical influence of Iran to the culture, lifestyle, and to a certain extent to politics of Tajikistan, which, considering the misfiring relationship between Salafi Islam and Shiism, triggers tensions within local communities. Another important feature of Tajikistan’s radical Islam is the strong connection between local undergrounds and ones in other countries of the region, which helps to create a kind of terrorist network. Today most of Tajikistan's foreign fighters are recruited abroad - primarily in Russia as migrant workers, or in Arabic countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait as foreign students - this, as was mentioned above, is a result of prolonged governmental policy. It is important to note, that since 2010 authorities tend to bring back youths who study abroad, but the problem of outflow of youth and the influence of radical Islam not only during the studies in Arabic countries, but also during their work time in Russia, remains.
Turkmenistan stands apart from all other Central Asian countries, primarily due to governmental policy of isolation. It also caused limitation of knowledge regarding the level of radicalization in the society, number of foreign fighters coming from the country, etc. Since the 1990s Saparmurat Niyazov - the leader of Turkmenistan from 1985 until his death in 2006, pursued a coherent policy of controlled islamization, despite the fact that according to its constitution, Turkmenistan is defined as a secular country: gradual increase of mosques (from 4 to 500 in ten years), organized procedures for religious education abroad along with continuous suppression of both secular and religious opposition, turned Islam to the object of politics. The repressive character of governing was supplemented by planted cult of personality of Niyazov, and, therefore, tensions between ruling tribe and other ones. Intertribal relations play more significant role than interreligious and most Turkmens espouse secular or moderate Islamic views (because of the nomad background), and despite this, there is radical Islamic underground formed in Turkmenistan mainly because of its repressive inner policy. What distinguishes Turkmenistan from other countries of the region is its close diplomatic relations and coalition policy with the Taliban since 1994 and welcoming of jihadist ideology at the beginning of 1990s. Such relations were not least caused by a huge Turkmenian diaspora (about 1 million) living in Afghanistan. In 2004 the law restricting activities of radical religious organizations in Turkmenistan was revoked, which provided free rein for all religious groups. Such (formal) freedom together with the repressive nature of politics in general and isolation of society (for today Turkmenistan has visa regime will all countries in the world except Turkey) led to mixed results: on the one hand, there is no legible information regarding scale and activity of radical Islamic underground, as well as regarding foreign fighters origin from the country, while on the other there is information about a camp close to the capital - Ashgabat, where all local Islamists undergo basic training before leaving for the Middle East, and potential (or actual) contribution to the foreign fighters flow made by diaspora in Afghanistan - the possibility which cannot be disregarded.

Until 2013-2014, when the problem sharply escalated, Turkmenistan managed to avoid the appearance of jihadist groups and their agents of influence on its territory, but with the beginning of unrest in the border areas of Afghanistan in 2014, the number of religious citizens increased sharply in the country, which became noticeable in terms of the number of visitors. Today there is a significant threat coming from the Afghan-Turkmen border, which appears to be guarded inefficiently. According to some sources, up to 70% of the Turkmen
army was transferred to the Afghan border in 2015, but analysts question its fighting capacity. Moreover, the Ministry of Defense is trying to double the number of conscripts - thus, the conscript age has been increased from 27 to 30 years.\(^\text{10}\)

The political, social, and cultural background formed in the region since the 1990s contributed significantly to the emergence and development of local radical Islamic movements. One of the most prominent of them is the **Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)** formed in 1998 by ethnic Uzbeks from the Fergana Valley - Juma Namangani (Jumaboi Khodjiyev), who was a former soldier who had participated in the Soviet-Afghan war, and Tohir Yuldashev. Namangani used his combat experience fighting in Tajikistan civil war along with United Tajik Opposition, but lately left for Afghanistan, and then to Pakistan, where he established connections with the Al-Qaeda leadership. Initially the movement was aimed to oust the president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov and to create an Islamic state on the territory of the country. Since 1999 the movement, based in Tajikistan, carries out terror attacks against governments and civilians throughout the region: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. However, after international pressure was made on Tajikistan's government, IMU was expelled from the country and rebased in Afghanistan and lately in Pakistan, turning to close cooperation with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and continuing to carry out attacks on the international level. After the movement undergone leadership, membership (today the exact number of its members is unknown and estimate from 500 to 1,000 fighters), and financial crises, on August 6, 2015 it’s leadership pledged the allegiance to ISIS, giving rise to talks about the future of the movement itself and in the region in general, but there are no doubts that the new status of the IMU will affect the radical Islamic underground in Central Asia. The case of IMU plays an important informative role for the analysis of the nature of foreign fighters leaving and especially *returning* to their countries with gained combat experience.

**Specifics of Recruitment**

As seen from the previous chapter, there is a fertile ground in the Central Asian region for the forming of a flow of foreign fighters. However, until the end of 2014 - beginning of 2015 the intensity of the flow remained very low, comparing to ones from top

regions (MENA, for example). The growth of the numbers since the end of 2014 is primarily caused by a shift in the attention of ISIS, which in the light of the slump of fighters’ flow from its main sources (MENA, West, and North Caucasus) launched a recruitment campaign oriented towards “backup” regions, including Central Asia. The fighters from the region were nonpriority at first mainly because of the lack of combat experience (as compared to those from MENA and North Caucasus) and the absence of propagandist attraction (as distinct from Western fighters). When the situation changed and Central Asia became a target for ISIS’ propaganda, the flow of foreign fighters had grown rapidly - about 2,500 fighters arrived from Central Asia to Syria and Iraq in just one year (second half of 2014 - first half of 2015).11

Today, as was noted in the introduction, the total number of the fighters coming from the region12 is about 4,000-5,00013 - unfortunately, there are no data updates neither general, nor by countries since late 2015, and even reports from 2017 use those numbers,14 so only speculations can be made regarding more precise numbers. In any case, even 4,000 fighters make Central Asia the one of the largest source of jihadists leaving their homes to join ISIS and other militant groups in Syria and Iraq, trailing behind only the MENA region and Western Europe, and being nearly on the level with Russia.

As all other foreign fighters, militants originating from Central Asia have their specific features, caused by political, social, and cultural factors, and they are important for understanding the nature of the phenomenon and its perspectives assessment.


12 Unfortunately, there is common confusion between those citizens who leaving the country, and those, who coming to Syria from Russia. Such confusion persists when it comes to data per country.


For deeper analysis, the recruitment of Central Asian fighters may be divided into two general groups:

- Inside the region

- Outside the region

Such a distinction is necessary due to conceptual differences in the nature of the two groups: persons of recruits, motivation and driving factors lying behind their joining radical groups, specifics of recruitment process, personalities of recruiters, etc.

**Inside the region**

As shown in the first part, jihadist background in Central Asia varies from one country to another, but at the same time has features shared by all of them. The situation with today’s foreign fighters is identical. Among shared characteristics of militants leaving their homes for jihad in Syria and Iraq are the following:

1. Lack of jihadist combat experience. As mentioned above, despite the history of jihadism in the region, the presence of local and international radical Islamic groups and networks, and the number of terror attacks, fighters coming from Central Asia (comparing to those from the MENA region or North Caucasus) hardly participated in armed conflicts as part of jihadist groups.\(^{15}\)

2. Family jihad. Another feature which distinguishes Central Asian fighters from those coming from the MENA region, North Caucasus, or West Europe, is their tendency for “relocation” together with their families - wives and children. An interesting fact is that family plays twofold roles in the radicalization of Central Asians. On the one hand, families (because of high importance and strong influence of the family and

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\(^{15}\) Those Central Asians, who joined jihadist opposition in Afghanistan during Soviet invasion, as well as those, who carried out terror attacks on Central Asian soil, base mainly in and operate from Afghanistan and/or Pakistan and in case of their joining jihad in Syria and Iraq, they do not come from their home countries, but from mentioned countries. However, such cases remains unresearched.
community on the person) may prevent a person from radicalization and/or from jihadist migration. On the other, however, in the case of immigration, family becomes an additional force arriving with a fighter, which turns mere joining of an individual to struggling forces to fully resettlement, establishment of full-fledged community, etc.

3. Prevalence of offline recruitment. While Western jihadists (due to Western youth’s cultural background) are recruited mainly online via social media websites, messengers, and other tools of digital communications, fighters coming from Central Asia undergo radicalization and recruitment processes in small cells operating in local mosques and religious centers via personal contacts. This feature, which is caused by a number of reasons, including a strong jihadist background in the region, strong social ties and pressure, mentioned above, and hard censorship politics pursued by the governments towards online communication tools. Thus, Facebook, YouTube, as well as Russian social media - Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki (along with global media websites) were and are permanently or temporarily banned by local governments, which obviously impedes online recruitment.

4. Interethnic dissociation. Central Asian fighters (unlike North Caucasian, for example) do not tend to come as one group and do not remain together with others from the region or even from the same country, but divide into groups associated with different belligerents. This is caused on the one hand by tensions between ethnic groups lasting since the Soviet rule, and by the strong influence of clan and local community, which is even more important than ethnic or country bounds.

5. Turkey pass. All Central Asian countries have a visa-free regime with Turkey, which makes the latter a most convenient pass for foreign fighters in their way to Syria and Iraq.

These shared features do not rule out specifics of the countries. Kazakhstan, as seen from the first part of the paper, appears to be the most prosperous and stable country in the region and has not faced any significant threats from radical Islamic groups until 2011. Ironically it is Kazakh fighters who joined ISIS the very first in Central Asia and became the faces of jihadist propaganda. By 2015 about 400 fighters left Kazakhstan for Syria, reportedly 150 of them women and about 50 children, which confirms the scale of family jihad.

Today there are two main hotbeds of jihadist recruitment in Kazakhstan, located in the south and the west. In the southern part of the country the jihadist threat is higher mainly because strong positions of Islam in general. In the west intensive industrial development of oil and gas reserves led to the concentration of socially marginalized groups, especially migrants (first of all, oralmans - ethnic Kazakhs who returned to Kazakhstan), and this social environment led to the rise of radical Islamist groups. The main places of recruitment are mosques and local religious communities, and it is interesting to note that main recruiters are local representatives of the Tablighi Jamaat group. However, recently the Internet took strong positions in recruitment.

Researchers note that the main driving factors for fighters to leave lie in political and social spheres: on the one hand, the socio-economic crisis, as a consequence of a significant decrease in oil revenues plays an important role among the reasons for the growth of terrorist and extremist threats. The crisis led to a fall in the national currency (tenge) rate, price increases, and cuts in social expenditures of the state. Social tension resulted in mass

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17 As mentioned above, there is no data updated since 2015 on countries of Central Asia.


protests, which took place between April and May 2016 in the cities of Western Kazakhstan (Atyrau and Aktobe). On the other hand, there is a phenomenon of clan membership in Kazakhstan, which appears to be extremely important in Kazakhstani society, which may contribute to the rise of religious extremism in the case if the transit of power from the first president of Kazakhstan will be accompanied by serious inter-clan conflicts.

Finally, it is necessary to note the tendency of criminalization of local radical Islamists or, conversely, Islamic radicalization of ordinary bandits. It is particularly evident in the example of Western Kazakhstan, which also impact the growth of numbers and threats coming from local jihadists.

Kyrgyzstan in turn shows a unique example of foreign fighters’ flow. There are more than 500 fighters that have left Kyrgyzstan for jihad in Syria (according to some experts there are about 300 Kyrgyzstan citizens in addition which were not considered by the government)\(^\text{21}\), including 63 families, 122 women\(^\text{22}\) and more than 100 children, which again demonstrates the trend of family jihad. There are several hotbeds of jihadism in Kyrgyzstan - Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken provinces,\(^\text{23}\) and all of them are located in the southern part of the country and are part of, or border with, the Fergana valley. An interesting fact is that all three provinces are main places of living for local Uzbeks\(^\text{24}\), and, moreover, about 80%\(^\text{25}\) of foreign fighters origin from Kyrgyzstan are ethnic Uzbeks, which hold Kyrgyzstani passports. That fact drastically changes the picture, since the specifics of the flow, as well as motivation and driving factors of the fighters differ from ones relevant for ethnic Kyrgyz. First, Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan are more religious than ethnic Kyrgyz. Secondly, they are historically


\(^{24}\) Osh province: 470,000 (55% of total population), Jalal-Abad province: 283,000 (31.8% of total population), Batken province: 70,500 (8.3% of total population).

oppressed by the dominant ethnic group both politically and socially. Moreover, Osh city became a scene for repeated ethnic discords. All those factors together aggravated the situation in the region and in the country and led to formation of foreign fighters’ flow.

Uzbekistan itself faces foreign fighters’ problem at the same level as other countries of Central Asia. Again, the exact number of Uzbeks joining the jihadi groups in Syria is unknown, and there is a wide gap between data provided by the Uzbekistani government - about 200 people (relevant for 2015) and unofficial estimates - more than 1,000. The most feasible number, according to experts, is about (more than) 500 fighters. There is lack of data regarding quantity of families and children coming from the country.

Uzbekistan today (and especially the Uzbekistani part of the Ferghana Valley) is the main hotbed of Islamic extremism in the Central Asian region. There is an expression in Uzbekistan society regarding inter-region differences: “One in Samarkand rules, one in Tashkent makes business, one in Fergana prays”, which again highlights the important role of religion in Fergana valley, and in its Uzbekistani part in particular; moreover, almost all key Islamic leaders of the country traditionally origin from Fergana. At the beginning, when the phenomenon of foreign fighters from Central Asia began to gain momentum (2013-2014), ethnic Uzbeks were the most visible group of the region. In October 2014 the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan gave to the flow an additional impetus, when it pledged allegiance to ISIS. Another threat comes from Afghanistan districts, such as Darzab and Qush Tepa, which are inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks, some of whom joined IMU and other jihadist organizations.

As in other countries of the region, the two main driving factors for foreign fighters are economic and political: an economic crisis caused by an income drop and a drop in oil prices.

on world markets, which led to growing unemployment, and inter-clan struggle, which also can be used by jihadist recruiters.

It is important to note the role of Russian social media (Odnoklassniki social network in particular) in jihadist recruitment in Uzbekistan. Despite censorship politics (but partly because of it - such politics push people off online to express their opinion), social networks became an important part of recruitment along with offline activities. It is mainly caused by numerous propaganda efforts which Uzbek fighters in Syria have produced since 2013 for their countrymen both in Uzbekistan and in Russia.

According to Tajikistan’s government, as of 2015 there were more than 1,000 citizens of the country fighting for jihadi groups in Syria. Most of them came from Khatlon province (400), which borders Afghanistan on the south and Uzbekistan on the west, Sughd province (272), which is located in the north of the country and is part of the Fergana valley, and districts of republican subordination (393, including 139 from Dushanbe - the capital of the country), which are located in central Tajikistan and share borders with Kyrgyzstan, Khatlon province, and Uzbekistan. Even though the data was not updated since 2015, there are clear trends of jihadist hotbeds in Tajikistan. As in other countries of the region there is a gap between governmental, expert, and unofficial estimates on the numbers of foreign fighters origin from the country: from 200 to 2,000 jihadists. An interesting fact is that, unlike other Central Asian countries, the Tajikistan government (particularly Ramazon Rakhimzoda, Minister of the Interior) does not understate those numbers comparing to estimates provided by experts, but conversely, articulates the much higher data - 1,000 against 200. There is an example of mentioned above confusion between Tajikistani citizens coming to Syria from the country and those Tajiks who come from Russia: according to governmental report, about 85%

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30 Jihadist propaganda targeting Central Asian citizens will be examined in more detailed way in the next chapter (see page 21).


of the fighters are labour migrants working in Russia,\(^{33}\) which leaves us with 200 fighters coming from Tajikistan.

Inside the country the main driving factors for radicalization are poverty (that is also the reason for broad-scale labour migration), social exclusion (due to importance of clan membership and local connections labour migrants, even in case of return to Tajikistan, find themselves excluded from social life), and external influence: Tajikistan of all Central Asian countries has the longest border line with Afghanistan, and the continuing complex military-political situation in Afghanistan poses a serious threat of the spread of extremism and terrorism in Tajikistan. Such a neighborhood also provides to Tajikistani fighters an alternative path to Syria in addition to the one via Turkey.

As in the case of Uzbekistan fighters, there is lack of verifiable information regarding family jihad from Tajikistan, however recorded cases highlight the trend.

Finally, Turkmenistan, due to its closed nature, appears to be the most difficult country in the region to gather any reliable information and to highlight any trends from.

It might be stated that between 200 and 400 Turkmens fight in jihadist groups in Syria. Comparing to other Central Asian countries, Turkmen fighters appeared on the international jihadi scene relatively late - at the end of 2014 - beginning of 2015. Such lateness is caused by several factors. First of all, the historically ritual and nonpolitical nature of local Islam (since Turkmen traditional culture is nomad), which naturally prevents jihadist radicalization of people. Moreover, it is necessary to mention the role of the promoted cult of the president - Turkmenbashi and the book he wrote - Ruhnama, which until the certain level was equated with Quran. The combination of those two factors along with the destruction of the local political and religious opposition back in the 1990s, hard censorship, and severe restrictions of Internet access for population, for a long time brought to naught external influence of radical Islamic groups.

However, there always was a potential threat from the Afghan border, especially considering the significant number of Turkmen tribes living along that border in Afghanistan (three out of ten districts of the Jowzjan province of Afghanistan border Turkmenistan. According to the reports, 70% of the population of the province are ethnic Turkmen), which traditionally support Taliban and keep contacts with their countrymen inside the country. On the cusp of 2014-2015, the military situation on the border escalated, because ISIS forces appeared in the border regions and recruited significant number of Turkmens from local tribes. At the same period within the country an upsurge of jihadist propaganda targeting local youths was registered.

Along with external factors there is an impact made by economic crisis (debt crunch for Chinese gas pipeline, oil prices drop, etc.), political specifics (intertribal tensions subsequently the president elections), and, on the personal level, by identity crisis, when a potential fighter due to various reasons (for example, labour migration) becomes excluded from the clan. It is worth noting, that Turkmens have worked as labour migrants in Turkey (and not in Russia), because of close Turkmen-Turkey relations since the 1990s. Those migrants are one of the primary target for jihadist recruiters.

Finally, there is a confusion one may see in some articles and academic papers between citizens of Turkmenistan fighting for jihadist groups, and Turkmens living in Syria and Iraq. The latter support Turkey government and in some cases Jabhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian

36 President Berdymukhamedov, unlike the deceased Turkmenbashi (who, as is known, grew up in an orphanage, and therefore did not show respect to his tribe), favor his tribe’s relatives. As a result, there is a discontent grows among the representatives of other tribes. This creates a potential threat to the ”Libyan scenario” for Turkmenistan.
Army, and what is more important they do not have any connections (political, social, or even cultural) with militants origin from Turkmenistan.

Outside the region

As was mentioned repeatedly, the poor economic situation and, in some cases, economic crises push citizens of Central Asian countries to seeking work abroad, mainly in Russia and Turkey (as in case with Turkmens).

The phenomenon of labour migration is widespread in Russia. There is lack of exact numbers of labour migrants because of the gap between official and unofficial estimates, and numbers vary from 5.7 to 10 million people. Nongovernmental experts highlight that from two-thirds to 80% of them work illegally, which makes the official statistics irrelevant. It is important to note, that 60% of all labour migrants are settled in two major Russian metropolitan areas: Moscow and Saint-Petersburg.

Workers from Central Asia are engaged in trade, transport, building, housing and utilities sectors on unskilled positions. However, they do not integrate into Russian society, but on contrary create parallel infrastructure – economic, social, and cultural.

Such social and cultural closeness, along with high-profile migrant crimes, lead to further isolation of foreign workers, and together with disconnection from home and

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40 There are 1.8 million labour migrants in Russia from Uzbekistan, 860,000 from Tajikistan, 588,000 from Kazakhstan, and 570,000 from Kyrgyzstan (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (along with Russia, Belarus, and Armenia) are members of Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which allows the citizens of those countries to stay and work in Russia without any impediments). Turkmenistan's workers - 24,000 - are hardly (comparing to others) represented.


community and xenophobia from locals, poor working and living conditions egg migrants from Central Asia towards radicalization.

Seeking new backbones and identity, Central Asian migrants, even those who never were religious back at home, turn to Islam, often in its radical forms - because they also find themselves excluded from local Islamic communities.

A crucial role in radicalization of Central Asians, according to witnesses and media, especially at the beginning (2014-2015) played Chechens. Thus, migrants who live and work in Moscow claim that several small (3-4 men) groups of Chechen propagandists (all of them are at mid-30s) almost every evening visit migrants at dormitories after they finish their work. Their calls to migrants to move to Syria and join jihadist groups there (mainly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra) are based on promises of decent respectful religious living and options to choose - to become a fighter, or to live as civilian. Propagandists offer potential recruits from $5,000 to $15,000, and highlight the importance of moving with whole family, arguing that otherwise governments will use the families as a bargaining chip.

Today the Central Asians themselves became recruiters, which might raise the number of potential fighters among migrant workers from the region. Russian media sources frequently report about arrests of Central Asian jihadist propagandists all over the country.

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43 There is controversial myth in Russian society, that workers from former Soviet Union are “better” than those from China, Vietnam and other countries, because the shared past and cultural frameworks of post-Soviet countries help to forge relationships between the locals and migrants. However, that myth is get broken when faces the reality: most of the Central Asian workers are young: they were raised in post-Soviet societies, their belief systems are in stark contrast to what is expected by Russians, and finally they (in contrast to previous generation) hardly speak Russian. The divergence of expectations with reality creates an additional tension in society.


The main audience for recruitment among migrants are those who stay in Russia illegally, have problems with police, and/or cannot find a job. Along with homes of migrants propagandists in Moscow, in particular, often appear in front of one of the mosques close to city center after Friday sermons.

Another mean of recruitment of migrants is the Internet and social media networks. Unlike in their home countries, in Russia workers from Central Asia enjoy free access to Internet resources, and may easily become a target for jihadist propaganda.

The standard path for recruits is flight from Moscow to Istanbul, and then to the Syrian border.

In general, it might be stated that the subject of Central Asian labour migrant recruited by jihadist groups in Russia, despite all its importance (there are known cases of Central Asians carrying out terror attacks in Europe and Russia, and not only in the Middle East, and moreover, many of those migrants currently work on various strategic facilities, as Moscow subway, stadiums construction, public transportation, etc.), is still under researched and requires further examination. For example, the exact numbers of those who travel from Russian is unknown, as well as the origin and persons of recruiters, as well as procedure and details of recruitment.

**Militant Activity in Syria**

As well as fighters from all over the world, Central Asian recruits in Syria as a part of radical Islamic groups are employed in various positions: militant, civilians - thus, there were special reports back in 2015 on ISIS recruiting doctors and engineers - the vital specializations for building civil society - from Uzbekistan, etc. 

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47 Those cases will be examined below (see page 35).

There are significant propagandist efforts put into recruitment of Central Asian potential fighters both inside the region and in Russia. Along with offline propaganda, there are video, audio, and print materials produced in Syria and Iraq, mainly by ISIS’ propagandists.

The first video clip, released by ISIS and oriented toward Central Asian fighters, appeared back in November 2014, and (as was mentioned above) pictured Kazakh children during their military trainings. The dialogues in that prominent video, titled “Race Towards Good” interchange between Arabic and Kazakh with Arabic, English, and Russian (for recruits from other countries of Central Asia) subtitles.

This video clip was followed by number of similar ones, promoting both children and adults, calling for potential recruits to join ISIS and threatening Central Asian and Russian governments and societies in local and/or Russian languages - thus in one of such videos Kazakh boy presumably executes two men accused by ISIS of being Russian spies.

In its propaganda toward Central Asians ISIS takes into account local specifics and focused not only on threats to return to their states and establish the new order, but also on “family values” (the institution of the family is highly valued in the traditional Central Asian society) - people are encouraged to emigrate to ISIS with their families and “protect the caliphate”. Those videos emphasize the spirit of camaraderie, social justice, the possibility of raising children in accordance with Islamic norms, a peaceful life, examples of mutual assistance, etc.

Along with propaganda products made by ISIS, there are (far less, however) video clips produced by other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. For example, in December 2015 Katibat Imam al Bukhari - an Uzbek group allied to Jabhat al-Nusra, released a video of

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Uzbek children receiving military training in Syria, which may be considered as a response for the similar video produced by ISIS.

There is a noticeable struggle between ISIS and Al-Qaeda (and its affiliates) for the minds and hearts of potential (including ones from Central Asia) fighters on the propagandist level. Thus, in June 2015 ISIS released a video message of Abu Hussein al-Uzbeki - one of the group’s militants, who, according to his own words, arrived in Syria back in 2013 to join his countrymen fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra under the alias of Abu Salah al-Uzbeki. However, after spending some time with Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Hussein left the group for ISIS, claiming that all groups in Syria (other than ISIS) treat their foreign fighters badly, and use them as a cannon fodder. The appearance of Uzbek nationals in propagandist videos is deliberate - Uzbek fighters compose a majority of Central Asian recruits, and, moreover, wield influence among other ethnicities of the region.

According to media reports, there are 11 training camps in Syria, where Central Asian and Caucasian fighters undergo their military education, and four of them belong to Uzbeks - that again confirms the important role and place of Uzbek fighters among other ethnic groups from the region.

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (now part of Tahrir al-Sham) are two main destinations for Central Asian foreign fighters on the Syrian front: there are ethnic-based (sometimes mixed) battalions and smaller groups in the ranks of major organization (or affiliated with them).

The exact breakdown between two main competitors, as well as exact number of battalions remain unclear, but there is a data regarding the most prominent of them.

Despite the propagandist efforts toward Central Asian fighters made by ISIS, the largest and most noticeable group from the region which operates in Syria - Katibat Imam Al Bukhari (Imam Bukhari battalion), which is made up mainly of Uzbeks (500 fighters, as for 2015), is allied today to Jabhat al-Nusra as a part of Tahrir al-Sham, as was mentioned


The group was formed in 2013 and operates in both Afghanistan (where they pledged their loyalty to Taliban) and Syria. The founder and leader of the group - Akmal Jurabaev (nomme de guerre - Salahuddin al-Uzbeki, assassinated in April 2017) was born and raised in Namangan city of Fergana valley (Uzbekistan) and possessed considerable militant experience back from Afghanistan (according to media sources, Salahuddin joined IMU in 1999 and fought alongside its leaders since then). After the death of Salahuddin he was replaced by Abu Yusuf a Tajik national, who became the new leader of the group. It is interesting to note that Salahuddin’s assassinator was a member of the group of Uzbek or Tajik origin named Jobir, which indicates the tensions within the group.

Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ), also known as Jannat Oshiklari (Paradise Loving), is another Uzbek group operating in Syria, which consists of Uzbeks (predominantly) and Kyrgyz nationals (as well as small number of native Syrians and Uighurs). The group was presumably established in 2013 (however there are sources which mention 2014 - the year when the group split from the Seyfuddin Uzbek Jamaat of Jabhat al-Nusra). Despite splitting KTJ continues to cooperate with Jabhat al-Nusra, since both groups are parts of Tahrir al-Sham. Moreover, the group maintains coordination and shares propaganda materials with Katibat Imam Al Bukhari, since both of them are Uzbek groups, both have ties to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and finally, both operate in Aleppo province.


58 Originally recruited by Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.


and Sayfullah Shishani’s Jamaat - a Chechen (primarily) brigade also operating in Aleppo and led by ethnic Uzbek Abu Ubayda al Madani. The leader of the group is Sirojiddin Mukhtarov (nomme de guerre - Abu Saloh), an ethnic Uzbek origin from Osh province of Kyrgyzstan. There is a significant number of both Uzbeks and Uighurs living in his home village - Kashgar-Kyshtak, which explains the presence of Uighurs among the fighters of KTJ. Abu Saloh was presumably radicalized by a local imam back in Osh, and arrived to Syria in 2012. According to the Kyrgyzstan government, ethnic Uzbeks who composed the core of the group originate mainly from Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken provinces, which, as was mentioned above, are the hotbeds of radicalization in the country. Abu Saloh puts significant efforts to producing and distributing propaganda materials, also in social media networks. An interesting fact is that he apparently looks beyond Syrian battlefields - the certain number of KTJ fighters, after completing initial military trainings in Syria, returned to Kyrgyzstan, where they established local jihadist cells, preparing for and carrying out terror attacks. Thus, local cells of KTJ were reportedly responsible for the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek bombing (30 August 2016). Moreover, according to Russian and Central Asian sources Abu Saloh is responsible for the St. Petersbourg metro bombing in April 2017 (the case will be examined below). According to SITE group, KTJ claimed credit for the

62 The very fact, that Uzbek national became a leader of Chechen brigade is remarkable, and confirms the (recent) military raise of Central Asian fighters on Syrian battlefields.


attack. Today there is an official Russian language website of Tahrir al-Sham group, which also covers the activities of KTJ in Syria - Sham Center.

Ethnic Central Asian groups also fight alongside ISIS, however less information is available on this topic. Media sources allows to suggest at least three such groups.

Uzbek-Tajik (or, according to other sources - Chechen-Uzbek) Sabri Jamaat, was presumably founded back in 2013 by Emir Abdurrahman al-Uzbeki, but its most known leader was ethnic Uzbek Abdullah at-Toshkandi. It is based in Aleppo and has about 70 fighters in its ranks. The jamaat was named after its second leader - Sabri (details are unknown), who as well as the first one was killed. The jamaat pledged allegiance to ISIS in March 2014. Today’s leader of the group is unknown; however, some sources claim the group has changed its ethnic composition and became a Daghestani jamaat led by Khalid ad-Daghestani.

Another group is Kazakh Jamaat. Its title, as well as any other details regarding this group are unknown, but the Kazakhstani security forces, as well as former fighters confirm its existence. Thus, one of the Chechens who fought for ISIS in 2014-2015, claimed that

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Kazakh jamaat was ruling al-Shaddadi’s oil fields in Syria, which may suggest the high rank of the group.

Finally, there is a Tajik Jamaat, operating in Syria on behalf of ISIS. The exact number of the fighters is unknown, but media sources note that initially many of those fighters joined Ahrar al-Sham group and changed sides after the appearance of Gulmurod Khalimov, whose case deserves more detailed examination, since it sheds light on certain trends in Central Asian foreign fighters’ flow.

Gulmurod Khalimov (born in 1975) was a lieutenant-colonel and served as head of police special forces back in Tajikistan. During his service between 2003 and 2014 Khalimov completed five counterterrorism training courses organized by US Anti-Terrorism Assistance program in both Tajikistan and USA. He disappeared from the country in April 2015, and appeared next month in ISIS’ propagandist video. He explained his decision as a reaction on restrictions Tajikistani government applies on practicing Islam (impossibility of wearing Islamic clothes, etc.), as well as on current geopolitical relations between Tajikistan, US, and Russia. Khalimov defined all labour migrant from Central Asia working in Russia “slaves of kafirs”, and called them to leave for Syria and join ISIS to start a new life of free men.

According to Tajikistani officials, the family of Khalimov, his second wife and eight children, joined him in Syria. Moreover, there is an unknown number of other fighters from special police forces who moved to ISIS together with Khalidov, being inspired by him. Two of his brothers back in Tajikistan were killed, and three were arrested by local police in July 2017 on suspect of terrorism and attempts to join jihadist groups in Syria.

Central Asian and Russian experts highlight the importance of the case of Khalimov, which indicates the shifts in ranks of foreign fighters from Central Asia: one can talk now not just about undereducated labour migrants, but also about highly qualified and trained

militants.\textsuperscript{79} Despite that there is no information regarding other similar cases, there are concerns raised over the possible influence of Khalimov’s image to his colleagues back in Tajikistan who may be dissatisfied with governmental politics. Thus, the Tajiki jamaat has united and strengthened especially after appearance of Khalimov, and its prestige among the supporters of ISIS grew significantly.

In September 2016, Khalimov was appointed to a military commander of ISIS, instead of Chechen Umar al-Shishani, who was killed in July. There is another important trend might be depicted: since middle 2015 - beginning 2016 Central Asian fighters became more visible on the jihadist scene, driving out and replacing Chechens on the leading positions to a certain extent.

Thus, another Central Asian - Abdulrahman Uzbeki (ethnic Uzbek, as followed from his name) was a close associate of al-Baghdadi and served as a head of financial department of ISIS until his killing in April 2016 by US forces.\textsuperscript{80} Abdulrahman Uzbeki was probably connected to the terror attack in the Reina nightclub of Istanbul in January 2017.\textsuperscript{81}

Another example is Abu Ibrakhim Khorasani of Tajik origin, who in July 2015 became a new commander of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) - a prominent Chechen group operating in Syria, which was founded by Umar al-Shishani. Khorasani replaced Salakhuddin, an ethnic Chechen from Pankisi Gorge, who was killed.\textsuperscript{82} This case is rather indicative since the Chechen fighters (and Chechens from Pankisi Gorge, in particular) from the very beginning comprised the “core team” of JMA, and the appearance of Tajik as a leader, points to the certain shifts in division of powers among post-Soviet jihadists in Syria.

All above examples and cases clearly demonstrate that Central Asian fighters in Syria “rose through the ranks” from unskilled cannon fodder under the command of Chechens to

militant leaders, holding key positions and replacing the Chechens, which, according to the experts, resulted in a situation where Chechens started to lose their positions in jihadist groups.  

Such changes engender the conflicts within what sometimes is called “Cyrillic jihadist community” - jihadists from post-Soviet countries who use Russian language for communication. Thus, there was an incident between Chechen and Tajik brigades of ISIS, when Chechen fighter referred to Tajiks as “slaves who work for Russians”. The conflict ended with shooting and resulted in several deaths. 

The conflicts are not limited to infighting between Central Asians and Chechens, but Central Asian brigades themselves were embroiled in interethnic tensions. For example, in late 2015 Central Asian fighters on their accounts in Vkontakte social network (see pictures below) actively discussed the corruption scandal, which involved Kazakh Jamaat of ISIS: other Central Asian fighters denounced them for theft of the organization’s money. In addition to that, Kazakhs were accused of nationalism and ethnic bias when it came to combatants: it was said that representatives of other nationalities (Ingush, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, etc.) were sent first to the battle by Kazakh administration, and the Kazakhs themselves stayed in reserve. 

Source: Vkontakte.com


86 Ibid.
The above examples highlight the point that Central Asian (and moreover “Cyrillic”) jihadist community does not come as a body, but in opposite, each ethnic group origin from post-Soviet space should be examined separately, since each of them has its own specifics and special relationships with others.

**Threats and Attacks Outside Syria**

The two recent years, 2016 and 2017, were marked by stepped-up terror attacks carried out by Central Asia foreign fighters. Indeed, the militants who gained combat and tactical experience in Syrian battlefields apply that experience beyond the war’s frameworks.

All threats posed by Central Asian militants might be divided into three groups, depending on location:

- Central Asian region
- post-Soviet space (mainly Russia)
- Worldwide

Despite the warnings directed by the foreign fighters against local governments in various video clips, there are no clear trends of growing terrorist threats from returning jihadists. There were two prominent incidents in the last two years within the region: multiple shootings in Aktobe (Kazakhstan) in June 2016, and the bombing of Chinese embassy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in August 2016, carried out by jihadist of Uyghur origin.

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However, there is a tangible threat of military clashes on the Turkmen-Afghan and the Uzbek-Afghan borders, considering the flock of jihadists in those areas.\(^{89}\)

It might be suggested that foreign fighters who originate from Central Asia turn their attention to the international scene, with particular stress on Russia.

Indeed, since the beginning of 2017 three noticeable terror attacks involving Central Asian perpetrators have occurred, targeting civilians in Istanbul, Stockholm, and St Petersburg.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Type of attack</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
<th>Assailant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1, 2017</td>
<td>Reina nightclub</td>
<td>Mass shooting</td>
<td>39 deaths, 70 injuries</td>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Abdulkadir Masharipov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 3, 2017</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Bombing</td>
<td>16 deaths, 64 injuries</td>
<td>Tawhid wal-Jihad</td>
<td>Akbarzhon Jalilov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 2017</td>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Vehicle-ramming (truck)</td>
<td>5 deaths, 14 injuries</td>
<td>ISIS (inspired)</td>
<td>Rakhmat Akilov</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three cases are obviously not enough to elicit any trend in terror attacks carried out by Central Asian militants, but the analysis of attackers’ personalities may contribute to better understanding of some perspectives of the phenomenon.

Abdulkadir Masharipov *(nomme de guerre Abu Mohammed Khorasani Abdulkavi)* is a 34-year-old ethnic Uzbek, who was born in Fergana province of Uzbekistan. For some time he studied at physical faculty of one of the universities in Uzbekistan, however he never graduated. It is unclear when exactly and under which circumstances Masharipov was radicalized, but Turkish media report he was linked to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) before joining ISIS. He is described by both Turkey officials and media as intelligent and a well-trained and educated person. Indeed, he speaks five languages - Uzbek, Russian, Arabic, Turkish, and Chinese, and trained in militant camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan - probably in connection to IMU.

Masharipov swore allegiance to ISIS back in Pakistan and arrived illegally to Turkey via Iran in January 2016, a year prior to the attack, along with his family: a wife - Zarina Nurullaeva of Uzbek origin, and two minor children. His son was probably taken by ISIS’ fighters and was being sought by the police. Nurullaeva denies any connections to her husband’s terror plans or actions. It might be suggested Masharipov belonged (or had ties) to an ISIS’ Uzbek cell in Turkey - after his arrest police conducted raids on such suspected cells in several districts of Istanbul. Along with Uzbek connections, there are possible ties he had with local Uyghur radicals: first of all, as was mentioned above, Masharipov speaks Chinese, and secondly, after the attack, he, according to his own statement, entered Uyghur


restaurants to contact his friends working there. That fact might again confirm connections between Central Asian and Uyghur jihadists, which exist despite all historical tensions between two regions.

Finally, Masharipov had a supervisor for that terror attack - Islam Atabiev (nomme de guerre Abu Jihad al-Shishani or Abu Jihad al-Karachai, which implies his Karachai or Chechen origin), whom he communicated with in Russian via Telegram.

**Akbarzhon Jalilov** (22 years old at the time of the attack) was an ethnic Uzbek born and lived in Osh city of Kyrgyzstan. According to the witnesses neither he nor members of his family were religious. The boy graduated from the local school and in 2011, a year after inter-ethnic tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs in Osh, Jalilov moved to Russia along with his father and became a Russian citizen (as was mentioned above, the procedure of obtaining Russian citizenship for Kyrgyzs is easier and faster than for other Central Asians).

During the first two years in Russia both father and son had worked in auto repair shop, but in 2013 father had returned to Osh, and the son stayed in St Petersburg, working in a sushi shop as a cook.

Each year Jalilov visited his family in Osh, however in 2015-2016 he did not come. His family claim he served in the Russian army, but there are no evidence confirming that - documents or photos. Russian police and officials, as well as one of the Turkish newspapers argue that Jalilov spent those two years in Turkey (his purpose and activities are unknown) and was deported to Russia in December 2016.

It is unknown where and how exactly Jalilov was radicalized: while Kyrgyzstani sources insist it happened in Russia, the representatives of the investigative committee of Russia maintain that the radicalization process started back in 2015 while he was in Turkey.

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According to that source, during that time Jalilov shared jihadist content via his account in Vkontakte social network. After the terror attack all extremist information was deleted. In any case it is unlikely that Jalilov was radicalized in St Petersburg, since he had no any jihadist connections in his social circle prior to the radicalization. He never visited either an official mosque (there is one main mosque in St Petersburg), or private praying rooms, most of which are located on the territory of Sennoy market - a hub of labour workers in the city. A noticeable fact - when some workers of the marked were asked about knowing Jalilov, they argued he was an Uzbek and they are Tajiks, which is the main reason they have nothing to do with him. This case does not form a rule, but illustrates a dividing line drawn between the nations and ethnicities of Central Asia.

A few months prior to the terror attack, Jalilov rented a relatively expensive flat in St Petersburg, which is unusual for labour workers (even for those with citizenship, such as Jalilov), who usually prefer to rent shared apartment and to save money for their families back at home. Jalilov, however, apparently had another unknown source of income, since the rent ($350) and the amount of money he sent home ($300-350) exceeded his salary ($350) twice.

Jalilov visiting his family in Osh in February - March 2017 for the last time. According to witnesses after that visit he changed his behavior: became unsociable and secretive. Russian police suggest that trip became decisive in his radicalization. Moreover, unlike previous visits, this time he chooses another itinerary - not direct as usual, but with connection in Moscow. Investigation suggest he met someone connected to terror attack in Moscow, probably his supervisors.


The investigation revealed that Jalilov was not a lone wolf. It is confirmed both by above facts (unknown money source, change in the itinerary), as well as by others. Thus, his school teacher in Osh insists Jalilov was extremely poor at physics and chemistry and was not be able to create a bomb by himself. Analysis of the movements of Jalilov on the day of attack, as well as his last calls allowed the police to suggest he probably was not chosen as a suicide bomber, but was due to pass the bomb to some other person.

A week after the attack the police in Moscow arrested a person who presumably planned the bombing. Abror Azimov (very little is known about him) was in contact with Jalilov a few minutes before the latter entered the metro station. Azimov partly admitted guilt for the attack, but insisted he was just a link in a chain.

That allows to assume a presence of jihadist cell, operating at least in St Petersburg and Moscow.

**Rakhmat Akilov** is a 39 year old ethnic Uzbek, who was born in Samarkand (second largest city of Uzbekistan). Little is known about his life until 2012, when he, together with his wife, moved to Russia as labour migrants (Akilov had previously worked in Russia for about five years), leaving in Samarkand their five children.

While in Russia, Akilov divorced with his wife and left for Turkey, but was deported from the country, being accused of extremism and links to ISIS, as Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah reports.

His brother - Olim Akilov - describes Rakhmat as a smart, modern, industrious person. He was not religious, however, according to his brother, was able to read Quran in Arabic.

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The timeline of Akilov’s movements during the last five (or even more) years, as well as his background in general, are not clear. His brother claims Akilov had been working abroad for years, including countries such as Russia, Germany, Denmark, Czech Republic, and finally Sweden, but never mentions Turkey. On the other hand, Rakhmat Akilov himself, when applied for residence permit in Sweden in 2014, mentioned his active involvement in protest movements while in Uzbekistan (as a basis for application). Migration service officers doubted his story, and refused a permit. Uzbekistan authorities in turn insist that Akilov was radicalized during those years abroad (however, there are no details regarding exact place or time), and was actively involved in dissemination of jihadist propaganda in online social networks, including Facebook and Telegram. He was prosecuted in Uzbekistan for involvement in activities of extremist and terrorist organizations, as well as for calling against the Uzbekistani government. The Head of Ministry of Interior in Uzbekistan stresses that they sent all the information regarding Akilov to Swedish officials, however representatives of Swedish Ministry of Interior deny they received any files.

While in Sweden Akilov had been working in construction, and was described by his former colleagues as normal, not very social and not religious person. This description disaccords with the Uzbek authorities' assertion that Akilov was already radicalized, when he arrived at Sweden. Moreover, Swedish journalists found out that contents of both his Facebook page and his account in Odnoklassniki social networks (both are deleted for now) indicate Akilov’s involvement in jihadist propaganda: he followed Tawhid wal-Jihad page and shared ISIS propaganda videos.

Along with that, the Local newspaper’s investigation revealed that there were at least two men in Sweden who used the name Rakhmat Akilov. The terrorist, after his request for a

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residency permit was denied, appealed to the immigration court under the name Rahmantjon Kurbonov. Another Rakhmat Akilov was an employee at Scandic Hotels (fired in January 2017), but the management of the hotel insist their worker is not the same person who carried out the attack.\(^{114}\)

In any case, Akilov (in fact, both) lost his job few months prior the attack. It is unknown how he spent those months, and what exactly triggered the attack. Along with that there is no clear evidence Akilov was a member of any jihadist cell. However, he was in contact with some person, who was identified as an ISIS supporter (and had a Russian telephone number) prior and immediately after the attack and exchanged with him messages in Russian via WhatsApp:\(^{115}\)

Source: Expressen.se

Thus, before the attack Akilov described the ingredients he has, asked for advice on bomb manufacturing, and outlined his plans for tomorrow (to find a big car and drive it into a crowd), and after described the situation on the spot: “I knocked down 10 people in the


Stockholm’s center, and now I need to get out!!!”. His confidant asks for video proofs of the attack.

Two weeks after the attack Swedish police arrested another person in Stockholm (30 years old, of Uzbek origin) on suspicion of terrorism, who was presumably connected to Akilov. As Expressen newspaper reports, that arrested person has ties with Chechen militants.116

That proves Akilov was a part of an unknown jihadist network, operating in Sweden (and probably abroad).

The analysis shows that all three cases share common features and correspond with the radicalization factors, listed in the previous chapters.

All the assailants are ethnic Uzbeks, which might prove the crucial role of Uzbek foreign fighters does not limited by Syrian battlefields.

All of them originate from secular families and neighborhoods, and did not demonstrate sights of radicalization openly until the moment of the attack, which complicates the identification of potential terrorists at an early stage.

The attackers presumably were not radicalized in their home countries, but while living abroad.

An important role in their radicalization plays time spent in Turkey: as was noted in previous chapters, all Central Asian countries have a visa free regime with Turkey, which makes the trip for the citizens much easier than to other countries; there are significant Central Asian ethnic communities living in Turkey, due to long historical relationships between the country and the region.

Finally, all of them did not act alone, but were part of local jihadist cells/networks, receiving various kinds of support, guidelines, etc.

In addition to terror attacks performed by Central Asians, there is a significant number of precluded plots (mainly in Russia), which grew noticeably since 2016.

Thus, in May 2016 twelve citizens of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (labour workers) were arrested in Moscow on suspicion of plotting a terror attack in the city on Victory Day (9 May). They all were members of Jabhat al-Nusra and planned a mass shooting in the center of Moscow.\footnote{Сергей Машкин, “Боевики называли теракт свадьбой”, Коммерсант, August 7, 2017, accessed September 28, 2017, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3377787}

In November 2016, Russian security forces in St Petersburg and Moscow arrested ten members of ISIS, who planned the repetition of the Paris attacks (November 2015) on its anniversary, including a bombing and mass shooting. All of them arrived in Russia from Central Asia (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan mainly).\footnote{“ФСБ предотвратила теракты в Москве и Петербурге”, Lenta.ru, November 12, 2016, accessed September 28, 2017, https://lenta.ru/news/2016/11/12/stop_terror/}

Finally, in May 2017 four ISIS members of Central Asian origin were arrested in Moscow, when planning the terror attack in Moscow metro (like the one in St Petersburg, but on a larger scale).\footnote{“ФСБ предотвратила теракт в Москве”, RNS, May 25, 2017, accessed September 28, 2017, https://rns.online/articles/FSB-predotvratila-terakt-v-Moskve-2017-05-25/}

In addition to the terror plots there are groups and gangs composed of Central Asian migrants, which combine criminal and jihadist sides. The most prominent case is the so-called GTA gang (named after Grand Theft Auto video games) – a group of 10-16 of Central Asian origin (predominantly Tajiks and Uzbeks), which initially was formed in Moscow and nearest suburbs in 2012 as a training group for potential fighters willing to leave for Syria by Ibaydullo Subkhanyov - probably ethnic Uzbek from Osh, Kyrgyzstan, who had gained military experience in Syria, fighting for ISIS. The members of the gang called themselves a jamaat, highlighting their jihadist basis,\footnote{“Банда убийц с трассы «Дон» называла себя джамаатом”, Газета.ру, November 6, 2014, accessed September 28, 2017, https://www.gazeta.ru/auto/news/2014/11/06/n_6628313.shtml} however the activities of the group were solely criminal: robbery, murders (15 victims), weapons manufacturing, etc. Some of the members were killed during the arrests in late 2014, other were arrested (including the recruiters arrested in Tajikistan)\footnote{“В Таджикистане задержан вербовщик ИГ из “банда GTA””, Газета.кг, June 28, 2016, accessed September 28, 2017, https://www.gazeta.kg/news/kyrgyzstan/102357-v-tadzhikistane-zaderzhan-verbovshik-ig-iz-bandy-gta.html}. In 2017 while all of them were already under arrest, story of the gang has continued. At the beginning of August, when transporting to court, five of the gang
attacked the security guards, attempting to possess their weapons, and entered the court hall, initiating shooting with the policemen. Thus, three of them were killed.  

All those incidents might have led to the conclusion that the territory of Russia (and especially large cities) are main targets for Central Asian jihadists today.

**Implications and Perspectives**

Until 2015 - 2016 the Central Asian jihadism and terrorism remained a regional problem, concerning local governments and, to a certain degree, neighboring countries and potential/actual geopolitical partners.

Yet recently the problem drew the attention of both security services and academics worldwide, especially when Central Asian foreign fighters appeared in the international jihadist scene.

An analysis of the phenomenon reveals certain trends and perspectives, which might contribute to a better understanding:

- There are certain hotbeds of jihadism and radicalization inside the region. Those hotbeds were evoked by the triggering factors, unique to the region, as compared to other post-Soviet countries. *Rich history of jihadism* (IMU and other local jihadist organization, which contribute to the phenomenon of foreign fighters today) prepared the ground for today’s actors. *Closeness to Afghanistan and Pakistan* allows local jihadist organizations to survive, receive support, and communicate with international counterparts, and for foreign jihadi organizations to enter the region and operate inside with support of local networks. Finally, *inter-ethnic tensions, especially in the complex areas, such as the Fergana valley*, where any local conflict may lead to escalation of violence, pave the way for jihadist activity.

- Despite that triggers, most of the Central Asian fighters are radicalized outside the region: mainly *in Russia*, where they come as labour migrants and where they face

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economic and social challenges, and suffer from marginalization, and in Turkey, where potential fighters enjoy a visa-free regime, assistance of ethnic diasporas, Islamic culture, and finally, closeness to Syria and easiness of joining various jihadist organizations.

- In Syria, Central Asian foreign fighters are equally spaced between ISIS and Al-Qaeda groups. At the early stage, there was a kind of dominance of Chechen fighters, as ones with noticeable militant experience over others from post-Soviet space, including foreign fighters from Central Asia. Chechens played a crucial role in radicalization of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia, and occupied leading positions in jihadist groups in Syria. However, by 2015-2016 Central Asian jihadists gained great militant experience and started to replace Chechens in both spheres. Today most of jihadist propagandists operating in Russia among Central Asian workers are from Central Asia themselves, which certainly might help to raise the number of potential recruits. Along with that, in Syria Central Asian militants started to fill the leading positions both in ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups.

- The rise of Central Asian jihadists turned them to a danger threatening the international community - 2017 was marked by three noticeable terror attacks carried out by jihadists of Central Asian origin. Two main targets for potential terror attacks performed by Central Asians may be named: Russia (because of the unsolved problem with labour workers’ immigration, and its military policy in Syria) and Turkey (because of the same reasons which were listed above: easiness of reaching, closeness to Syria, etc.). It is unlikely the threat of such attacks in Western Europe or North America will grow - the Central Asian diasporas in those regions are not significant, and there are certain obstacles for them to reach those countries, because of the visa regimes and economic grievances. Along with that Central Asians rarely may apply for asylum, since there is no warfare in the region.

The main threat for the region itself posed by foreign fighters is not mass return, which is unlike, due (among other factors) to the harsh policy of the local governments toward returning jihadists. However, there is a tangible threat of intervention coming from the Afghanistan border areas. It is the place, where members of local jihadist groups expelled
from the region (as IMU), militants who have ethnic ties with the region, and experienced local foreign fighters returning from Syria and relocated to Afghanistan are concentrated. All of them, considering the insufficient level of border control in the region (both outside and within), are capable of attacking the borders of the Central Asian states and breaking the peace from outside.
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