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Uzbek forces participate in anti-terror drill. (Photo: Uzbekistan Ministry of Defense)

Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia

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On July 29th, 2018 two American, one Dutch, and one Swiss cyclist were killed in southern Tajikistan. Two days later Amaq, the Islamic State's media outlet, published a video of the attackers pledging allegiance to the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and stating their aim to "establish the Almighty's rule on this land."¹ This was the first attack on Western tourists in the region in almost 20 years and the first attack within the region to be convincingly linked to ISIS.

Central Asians have also made headlines with a series of attacks outside of the region. In 2017, citizens from the region were involved in high-profile terrorist attacks in New York, Stockholm, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg. By 2017 Russian speakers were thought to be the largest group of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, outnumbering those from the rest of the Middle East.² Some recruits have risen to positions of authority within foreign terrorist organizations. For example, after spectacularly defecting to the Islamic State in May 2015, Colonel Gulmurod Halimov, head of Tajikistan's paramilitary police (OMON), became the Islamic State's Minister of War.

As with previous incidents, these developments have led to renewed speculation from outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Business Insider* that the region is becoming a "growing source of terrorism"³ and "fertile ground" for recruitment.⁴ However, despite the long-standing narrative that the region is becoming a hotspot of terrorism, the terrorist threat within Central Asia itself remains limited. In Central Asia only 19 attacks initiated by non-state actors and labelled terrorism by the governments have occurred





since 2008, resulting in just 142 casualties. Just 0.005 percent of the region's population has joined terrorist groups.

Certainly, the terrorist threat within Central Asia is "a reality that cannot be ignored," as analysts Anna Matveeva and Antonio Guistozzi recently argued.⁵ But we cannot ignore the way actors have manipulated the threat.⁶ Central Asian regimes are caught between the desire to use the threat to justify a crackdown on other opposition groups, as we have seen in Tajikistan, and to downplay the issue to demonstrate their control, such as in the case of Uzbekistan. In the past decade, government efforts to counter extremism and terrorism have resulted in far more casualties than terrorism itself. Because the topic of terrorism is so politicized, it is important to recognize the limits of what we can actually know about the causes and extent of the transnational threat coming from Central Asia.7

The Threat within Central Asia: Local Politics More than International Terrorism

Many Sovietologists viewed Central Asia as the USSR's soft underbelly by virtue of its recalcitrant Muslim population. Writing after the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, the doyen of Sovietological commentators on Central Asia, Alexandre Bennigsen, wrote that "the Muslim community is prepared for the inevitable showdown with its Russian rulers."⁸ After independence from the Soviet Union, observers continued to frame the region as "potentially one of the most explosive" in the world and to consider ways to "calm" local tensions, especially the potential for religious extremism.⁹ While none of the darkest predictions came to pass, during the first 15 years of Central Asian independence, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its offshoot the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) posed the most significant terrorist threat to the region.¹⁰ Between 1999 and 2000, the IMU led armed incursions from its base in war-torn Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, taking hostages. After these failed, the IMU retreated to Afghanistan, where it suffered heavy losses in the 2001 U.S.-led invasion and relocated to Waziristan. The Uzbek government blamed the IMU for bombings in Tashkent in 1999 and the IJU claimed responsibility for attacks in Bukhara and Tashkent in 2004. By 2013, the IMU and IJU had an estimated 3,000 fighters.¹¹ Over the border in Tajikistan, the only country in the region to experience civil war, the government battled with former commanders who did not accept the 1997 peace deal, in which the opposition agreed to lay down its arms in exchange for receiving 30 per cent of government posts, and led a series of attacks between 1997 and 2001. At least 145 individuals were killed as a result of this violence across the region.

Between 2008 and 2018, terrorists organized 19 deadly attacks Central Asia. This figure includes attacks that resulted in one or more deaths, including the terrorists themselves; were labelled terrorism by government officials; and were instigated by a terrorist group or individual rather than by state forces as part of a counterterrorism operation. Since 2008, 138 individuals have died in terrorist attacks, the majority being representatives of law enforcement (78) and terrorist groups (49), with 11 civilian casualties. Half of these incidents have occurred in the





region's most prosperous state, Kazakhstan, with over half of deaths occurring in Tajikistan. To put these figures into perspective, during the same period 11,553 people were killed in traffic accidents in Kyrgyzstan alone.¹²

Figure 1: Terrorist Attacks in Central Asia (2008–2018)

Date	Country	Location	Туре	Deaths
19 April 2009	Tajikistan	Isfara	Murder of police officers	1
26 May 2009	Uzbekistan	Khanabad/Andijan	Armed attack/suicide bombing	2
3 September 2010	Tajikistan	Khujand	Suicide bombing	4
19 September 2010	Tajikistan	Kamarob	Armed attack	25
17 May 2011	Kazakhstan	Aktobe	Suicide bombing	1
23 May 2011	Kazakhstan	Astana	Bombing	1
1 July 2011	Kazakhstan	Aktobe	Armed attack	3
31 October 2011	Kazakhstan	Atyrau	Suicide bombing	1
8 November 2011	Kazakhstan	Almaty	Armed attack	1
12 November 2011	Kazakhstan	Taraz	Armed attack	7
21 July 2012	Tajikistan	Khorog	Assassination	1
30 July 2012	Kazakhstan	Almaty	Mass murder	14
23 May 2014	Tajikistan	Khorog	Armed attack	1
19 May 2015	Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	Suicide bombing	1
4 September 2015	Tajikistan	Dushanbe/Vahdat	Armed attack	39
5 June 2016	Kazakhstan	Aktobe	Armed attack	21
18 July 2016	Kazakhstan	Almaty	Armed attack	10
30 August 2016	Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	Suicide bombing	1
29 July 2018	Tajikistan	Danghara	Attack with car/knives	4





All of the incidents in Figure 1 meet the criteria of being deadly, initiated by a non-state group and labelled as terrorism by the government. Some are less obvious examples of terrorism. These include the 2012 assassination of the Chairman of the Directorate of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security in Badakhshan Province General Abdullo Nazarov in July 2012, which precipitated an armed conflict between the government and former opposition commanders in Khorog; and the murder of 12 people in the Ile-Alatau national park in Kazakhstan in August 2012, which the authorities blamed on an "extremist religious group."¹³ Across these cases, however, it is possible to make a number of observations.

Almost all of the attacks targeted law enforcement agencies: the security services, police, and army. Terrorism in Central Asia is related to the state in a number of ways. The pervasive state security services have helped keep the region stable; the

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> governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan claim to have foiled 61 plots in 2016. But state repression has also provoked a violent reaction from some members of the public. In Tajikistan, violent incidents in Khorog, the Rasht Valley, and Dushanbe were perpetrated by former state officials. As part of the peace accord that ended the

country's civil war, former opposition commanders were incorporated into the state and given positions that allowed them to generate rents from drug trafficking, patronage, and other activities.¹⁴ But as the government of Emomali Rahmon established its position, it has relieved these commanders of their positions within the state in a process John Heathershaw and Parviz Mullojonov call "authoritarian conflict management."¹⁵ For example, Deputy Defense Minister Abduhalim Nazarzoda, who led the armed attacks in Dushanbe and Vahdat in September 2015, reacted violently to the government's attempt to remove him.¹⁶ The terrorist incidents that have occurred in Tajikistan are better understood through these local dynamics of authoritarian consolidation than through the international terrorist narrative put forward by the government.¹⁷

State repression also seems to have provoked some of the violent incidents that have occurred beyond Tajikistan. Ruslan Kulikbayev, who shot three policemen and a civilian in Almaty in July 2016, was reportedly radicalized while serving a sentence for robbery. He claimed his attack was an "act of revenge" against law enforcement officials who had tortured him and his "brothers."¹⁸ Convicted criminal Rakhimjan Makhatov, who blew himself up in the headquarters of the Kazakhstani security services in Aktobe on May 17, 2011, was also reportedly acting in protest against the government's restrictive religious laws and abuse of prisoners.¹⁹

Attacks have taken place in the region's cities, in Almaty, Bishkek, and Dushanbe. But the majority of terrorist attacks have occurred in areas that are distant from the center, like Aktobe in Kazakhstan or the Rasht Valley in Tajikistan. These isolated peripheral areas, like Kyrgyzstan's Ferghana Valley





or the oil-rich town of Zhanoezen, have also seen instances of ethnic violence and violently suppressed protests. These are areas that have not benefitted as much from economic development, and where grievances against local government are high.

While Central Asians have participated in transnational jihadist movements, most of the attacks that have occurred in the region since 2008 appear to have limited links to groups beyond the region. While the IMU and IJU were able to coordinate attacks from their bases outside of Uzbekistan up until 2004, the ability of external groups to stage attacks in the region appears to have diminished. Jund al-Khalifah, a Kazakh jihadist group based in Afghanistan which claimed responsibility for two attacks in Kazakhstan in 2011, has been met with skepticism by local experts, many of whom believe the organization was trying to capitalize on the attacks rather than direct them.²⁰ A few external groups have managed to launch attacks in the region. The Kyrgyz security services blamed the Uyghur group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, for ordering an attack on the Chinese embassy in September 2016.²¹ The young attackers in Tajikistan were inspired by ISIS to target tourists.

Kulikbayev. In a similar incident, Maksat Kariev killed seven people in a series of attacks across the city of Taraz in December 2011. Other attacks have been carried out by groups inspired by jihadist propaganda but without direct orders from a specific group. The convicted criminals who carried out the June 2016 Aktobe attack, in which 16 men robbed two gun shops and attacked an army base, were allegedly inspired by senior ISIS member Abu Mohammad al-Adnani's call for jihad.²² Like the attack in Aktobe, terrorist attacks in the region have mostly been sporadic, short-lived, and disorganized. Few of the attackers have made specific demands or stated their goals. And when they have, such as in the case of the recent attack in Tajikistan, these aims have been vague.

The Flow of Returning Ex-Fighters and Recruits to Afghanistan: A Trickle not a Surge

Since 2011, between 2,000 and 4,000 Central Asian citizens have migrated to Syria and Iraq to join militant groups there.²³ But the decline of ISIS and Jabhat Fateh in Syria and Iraq raises questions of what will happen to the remaining Central Asian militants if these groups lose all of their territory.²⁴

A greater danger lies with lone wolf attacks by radicalized individuals, like Almaty gunman

Country	Upper Estimate	Lower Estimate	
Tajikistan	1,89925	1,141 ²⁶	
Kyrgyzstan	86327	50028	
Uzbekistan	1,500 ²⁹	20030	
Kazakhstan	350 ³¹	300 ³²	
Turkmenistan	36033	360	

Figure 2: Estimates of Central Asians Participating in Conflicts Abroad





Ex-fighters are faced with three options. They could migrate to another country, move to join a terrorist group in another conflict zone, or return home. While a number of analysts have pointed to the danger posed by militants returning to Central Asia, the evidence suggests that a mass return to Central Asia remains unlikely.³⁴ For many, this was a oneway journey to seek adventure, martyrdom, or a new life.³⁵ Many fighters have migrated with their families, a further sign of the permanence of their migration. At least 800 of those who went to the Middle East have been killed.

The governments of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have amended legislation to revoke the citizenship of those convicted of being members of terrorist organizations, giving the state the right to bar or deport them. Over 300 ex-fighters from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan have returned, either to face prosecution or to be amnestied, as in the case of Tajikistan, which amended its criminal legislation in 2015 to that effect.³⁶ Sending radicalized citizens to fight in Syria and Iraq may actually benefit the regimes in the region, helping them to, as Józef Lang writes, "avoid the problem of Islamic terrorism, by transferring it outside of the region."37 Over 30 of those amnestied in Tajikistan have returned to the Middle East.³⁸ An undisclosed number of citizens are in prison in Syria and Iraq. This leaves between 1,000 and 3,000 militants from Central Asia in the Middle East.

Instead of returning home, the fighters are more likely to migrate to Europe as refugees or move on to another theater. Afghanistan, with its geographical proximity and linguistic affinities with Central Asia, appears to be a logical destination for ex-fighters and new recruits.³⁹ Potential destinations for recruits include Al-Qaeda affiliated Jamaat Ansurallah,⁴⁰ the Islamic Jihad Union,⁴¹ and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,⁴² which declared allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015. With these organizations weakened by years of war, it has been Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP) that has been most active in trying to recruit ex-fighters and new recruits.⁴³ Like ISIS, the group has developed a sophisticated media presence outmatching the Taliban.⁴⁴ In March 2018, the group released a video in which Uzbek fighters called on militants in Syria and Iraq to join the group.⁴⁵ Having declared its

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existence as an affiliate of ISIS in January 2015, ISKP has extended its presence beyond its initial base in Nangarhar to establish bases in Badakhshan and Jowzjan in northern Afghanistan controlled by former IMU commander Moawiya, who broke with the Nangarhar branch in the summer of 2017.⁴⁶

The group's actual strength remains hard to ascertain.⁴⁷ Afghan officials have estimated that ISKP has 3,000 foreign fighters in its ranks.⁴⁸ Many of these are militants from Pakistan and Uzbekistan who have fought in the region since the 1990s. Nonetheless, there is evidence that some Tajik citizens have joined the group more recently. Tajik president Emomali Rahmon claimed in May 2018 that dozens of citizens had joined ISKP.⁴⁹ Most





cross into Afghanistan from Iran.⁵⁰ In an illustrative case, Shodidjon Boev worked as a migrant laborer in Russia before trying to travel to Syria via Turkey. Having failed to reach Syria, he travelled to Iran, crossing into Afghanistan in December 2017. A further nine cases of Tajiks entering Afghanistan via Iran have been reported in the media since mid-2017.

ISKP's promises of expansion into Central Asia may be more appealing to recruits than the alternative nationalist vision of the Taliban, which has ruled out northern expansion. But at present this threat appears limited. Antonio Guistozzi, a leading expert on ISKP, concluded in late 2017 that the organization was damaged by in-fighting and setbacks in the Middle East, concluding that it "is past its peak in Afghanistan, if not in terms of military capabilities, certainly in terms of jihadist image."⁵¹ The flow of fighters to Afghanistan is insignificant when compared with the peak of ISIS recruiting from Central Asia in 2014–15.

Increasing Spillovers from Afghanistan

Central Asia shares a 2,387-kilometer river border with Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are the most vulnerable to spillovers from Afghanistan with long, poorly defended borders. Most border incursions and violent incidents are related to the estimated \$2 billion worth of opium and heroin being imported from Afghanistan, mostly through Tajikistan.⁵² But while the Taliban is involved in drug trafficking, it has a limited interest in de-stabilizing its northern neighbors, contrary to what many officials claim.⁵³

A more common occurrence has been sporadic spillovers from the fighting in northern Afghanistan.

The number of armed incidents occurring in the eight Afghan provinces bordering Central Asia has increased in recent years, especially with the scaling back of NATO's operations since 2014.

Figure 3: Violent Incidents on the Tajik-Afghan Border⁵⁴



Between 2011 and 2013, 38 armed incidents occurred on the Tajik-Afghan border. This figure doubled to 76 for the period between 2014 and 2016, with a further 29 incidents reported in 2017.⁵⁵ Fighting between the Taliban and Afghan military has also reached the border with Turkmenistan. In two incidents in 2014, for example, six Turkmen border guards were killed by Taliban militants.⁵⁶ But these incidents remain relatively rare. With the promise of foreign security assistance and the lucrative flow of narcotics, as security specialist George Gavrilis concludes, "proximity to Afghanistan for the Central Asian republics is more windfall than threat."⁵⁷





Central Asia's Salient Security Issue: Clumsy Counter-extremism

As terrorism expert Brian Jenkins has argued, predicting how the terrorist threat will evolve over the coming years is exceedingly difficult.⁵⁸ Previous events that analysts predicted could lead to an upsurge in terrorism, such as the NATO drawback from Afghanistan in 2014 and the death of longserving Uzbek president Islam Karimov in August 2016, did not substantially elevate the threat. Events beyond the region, such as the Islamic State's declaration of a "caliphate" in 2014 and the war in Afghanistan, have been more important in driving the levels of recruitment. The attack on cyclists in Tajikistan in August 2018 deviated from the patterns of attacks in Central Asia in targeting Western tourists. But, like the attacks in Kazakhstan in 2011 and 2016, the attackers used relatively unsophisticated methods and not a great deal of planning. Such incidents are difficult to prevent. Terrorist attacks by individuals and groups who have been inspired by extremist propaganda or have

personal grievances against the local regime will likely continue to occur on a sporadic basis.

Terrorism remains a security challenge for Central Asia that needs to be approached critically and taken seriously by policy makers. But the more pertinent issue within the region is not so much the success of terrorist groups in recruiting 0.005 percent of the region's population, but the effect that government counter-extremism efforts have had on the remaining 99.995 percent. The region's governments have used the specter of terrorism to strengthen their grip on power, restrict civil liberties, and repress their people. Recent focus groups conducted by Radio Free Europe with Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Kazakh participants pointed to the ways corrupt local officials and repressive law enforcement are generating grievances that have fueled extremist recruitment.⁵⁹ Clumsy counter-extremism is creating the very problem it claims to combat.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.

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