

RESEARCH PAPER  
DECEMBER 2018

# Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia:

## Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?

Edward Lemon

Vera Mironova

William Tobey

Foreword by Simon Saradzhyan

**Russia Matters**

THE U.S.-RUSSIA  
INITIATIVE TO PREVENT  
NUCLEAR TERRORISM



**Russia Matters**

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Cover photo: From a border outpost near Khorog, Tajikistan, a young conscript looks out over remote stretches of northern Afghanistan. Credit: David Trilling.

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*This research paper is a joint product of the Russia Matters project and the U.S.-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism.*

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# About Russia Matters

Russia Matters is a project launched in 2016 by Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The project's main aim is to improve the understanding of Russia and the U.S.-Russian relationship among America's policymakers and concerned public. It does so by showcasing the best expertise on Russia and its relationships with the rest of the world by providing top-notch analysis, relevant factual data and related digests of news and analysis. Initially, the project's contributors and institutional partners will be primarily U.S.-based and its main platform for pursuing its goals will be this website.

The specific aims of Russia Matters are to help:

- U.S. policymakers and the general public gain a better understanding of why and how Russia matters to the United States now and in the foreseeable future and what drivers propel the two countries' policies in areas of mutual concern;
- Ensure that U.S. policies toward Russia are conducive to the advancement of long-term U.S. vital national interests, but that they also improve cooperation in areas where interests converge and mitigate friction in areas of divergence;
- Foster a new generation of Russia experts.

Russia Matters likewise endeavors to build bridges between academe and the policymaking community.

It is our sincere hope that this endeavor will help advance a viable, analytically rigorous U.S. policy on Russia guided by realism, verifiable facts and national interests without sacrificing opportunities for bilateral cooperation.

# About the Authors

**Edward Lemon** is the DMGS-Kennan Institute Fellow at the Daniel Morgan Graduate School. Dr. Lemon was previously a Mellon Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. He gained his PhD in international studies from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom in 2016. In his research, he examines authoritarian governance, religion, security and migration in Eurasia. He is currently writing a book on transnational repression and counter-extremism in Tajikistan. Since 2009, he has spent almost three years working and conducting fieldwork in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Poland. Dr. Lemon has briefed a range of international organizations and government agencies on security issues in Central Asia. His comments and interviews regularly appear in the international media. His research has been published in *Central Asian Survey*, *The RUSI Journal*, *Caucasus Survey*, *Central Asian Affairs*, *Foreign Affairs* and *The Review of Middle Eastern Studies*. He is editor of *Critical Approaches to Security in Central Asia* (Routledge, 2018).

**Vera Mironova** is a visiting scholar in Harvard University's Economics Department, and is also affiliated with the Davis Center. From 2015 to 2018, she was an International Security Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Her research explores individual level behavior in conflict environments and how exposure to violence affects individual attitudes and decision making. She has conducted field work in active conflict zones (Yemen, Iraq, Ukraine and Palestinian territories) and post-conflict regions: the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo and Croatia), Africa (DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi), Central Asia (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), Asia (Bangladesh and Myanmar) and the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan).

**William Tobey** is a senior fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and the director of Belfer's U.S.-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism. He was Deputy Administrator for Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation at the National Nuclear Security Administration from 2006-2009. There, he managed the U.S. government's largest program to prevent nuclear proliferation and terrorism by detecting, securing, and disposing of dangerous nuclear material. He also served on the National Security Council Staff under three presidents, in defense policy, arms control and counter-proliferation positions. He has participated in international negotiations ranging from the START talks with the Soviet Union to the Six Party Talks with North Korea. He also has ten years of experience in investment banking and venture capital. He serves on the Nuclear and Radiation Studies Board of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. He chairs the board of the World Institute for Nuclear Security.

# Acknowledgements

This paper combines separate contributions from three authors: Edward Lemon provided the results of his field research with Central Asian migrants in Russia between July 2014 and June 2015, as well as tallies of attacks and fighters and extensive research of the scholarly literature and media reports; Vera Mironova provided the results of her field research, comprising numerous interviews with Russian- and Arabic-speaking ex-fighters in Iraq, Turkey and Ukraine in 2013-2017; William Tobey researched and wrote the section on Central Asian threat vectors for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons. Russia Matters founding director Simon Saradzhyan conceived the idea for the product and gave feedback throughout the process. Russia Matters editor Natasha Yefimova-Trilling tied the texts into a single whole, editing and providing some additional research. All the above individuals would like to thank Russia Matters web coordinator and editorial assistant Angelina Flood for her design work and research support and Russia Matters student associates Daniel Shapiro and Irina Yarovaya for their research support.

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**Cover Image**

From a border outpost near Khorog, Tajikistan, a young conscript looks out over remote stretches of northern Afghanistan. Credit: David Trilling.

# Foreword

**Simon Saradzhyan, Founding Director, Russia Matters**

In the fall of 2016 Fletcher School professor Monica Duffy Toft and I were completing work on an issue brief<sup>1</sup> in which we argued that the Islamic State should be further rolled back and dismantled rather than allowed to remain in the hopes that it would somehow become a normal state. IS was already in retreat at the time, having lost much of the territories it had once controlled in Syria and Iraq. Watching this made me, like many other analysts of political violence, wonder what surviving foreign fighters—which, at the time, included an estimated 5,000-10,000 individuals from post-Soviet Eurasia—would do next if IS and other jihadist Salafi groups in the Levant disintegrated.. To ascertain their next moves, one had to begin by discerning what made them leave their home countries and eventually go to IS in the first place, and whether/how their motivation may have evolved in the course of their stay with the group. As someone focusing on Eurasia, I was particularly worried about what nationals of the Central Asian states would decide to do next and what impact their decisions and actions would have as some of the regimes in these countries were considerably more fragile and, therefore, more vulnerable than, say, Vladimir Putin's government. Another reason behind my interest in the subject is that the threat by violent extremists hailing from Central Asia had not been, in my view, as thoroughly examined as that posed by jihadists in and from Russia's North Caucasus. Specifically, I had three sets of questions in mind: (1) What causes nationals of Central Asia to take up arms and participate in political violence and what might those of them who have gone to fight in Iraq/Syria decide to do next?; (2) if they decide to return to post-Soviet Central Asia en masse, can this region become a major source of violent extremism that transcends borders, and possibly continents, in the wake of IS's demise?; and (3) is there a threat that chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear materials stored anywhere in Central Asia will be used by the returning nationals of Central Asia or others for purposes of WMD terrorism (considering that al-Qaeda has sought nuclear weapons and IS has used chemical weapons) and, if so, how serious is this

threat? We asked three scholars to answer these questions. Vera Mironova is best known for her research on individual-level behavior in conflict environments and her fieldwork involving extensive interviews with former and active fighters. Edward Lemon is known for his research examining the intersection of authoritarian governance, religion, security and migration in Eurasia, along with his fieldwork in the region. Finally, William Tobey offers unparalleled expertise and years of experience in the U.S. government's nuclear security and nonproliferation initiatives. Fortunately, they all agreed to delve into the issues, refining my initial questions in ways that made their answers even more illuminating than I had hoped for. The results of their tremendous efforts are presented here, skillfully fused into one narrative by Russia Matters editor Natasha Yefimova-Trilling with assistance from our project's editorial assistant and student associates, in what I think is an insightful paper on the threat of violent extremism within and emanating from Central Asia.

# Executive Summary

In the summer of 2018, the scenic, impoverished Central Asian nation of Tajikistan appeared in international headlines when Islamic State terrorists claimed credit<sup>2</sup> for the killing of four Western cyclists who were run over by a car, then shot and stabbed to death. This was the first known terrorist attack on foreigners in Central Asia since a suicide bombing<sup>3</sup> of the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan in 2016, and it appears to have been inspired by IS propaganda, though we do not know how much the group was involved in planning the attack, if at all. The violence serves as a jarring reminder that Islamist radicals from the five Central Asian nations once under Moscow's control—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—have become noteworthy players on the field of international terrorism. Thousands of radicals from formerly Soviet Central Asia have traveled to fight alongside IS in Syria and Iraq; hundreds more are in Afghanistan. Not counting the fighting in those three war-torn countries, nationals of Central Asia have been responsible for nearly 100 deaths in terrorist attacks outside their home region in the past five years. But many important aspects of the phenomenon need more in-depth study.

This research paper attempts to answer four basic sets of questions adapted from the ones mentioned in the foreword: (1) Is Central Asia becoming a new source of violent extremism that transcends borders, and possibly continents? (2) If so, why? What causes nationals of Central Asia to take up arms and participate in political violence? (3) As IS has been all but defeated in Iraq and Syria, what will Central Asian extremists who have thrown in their lot with the terrorist group do next? And (4) do jihadists from Central Asia aspire to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction? If so, how significant a threat do they pose and who would be its likeliest targets?

None of the answers is as straightforward as we would like, and far more attention should be paid to the differences and similarities among the five Central Asian states. But key findings generated by our research include the following:

- The civil war in Syria and the rise of IS in the Middle East have spurred an increase in the number of Central Asians participating in extremist violence beyond their home region; however, comparatively speaking, the international threat should not be exaggerated: Although Central Asians make up about 1 percent of the world's population, they were responsible for 0.14 percent of the world's terrorist attacks in the past decade, based on data from the Global Terrorism Database. <sup>4</sup>
- While the causes of radicalization vary widely, field research by two of the authors, as well as other scholars, suggests that two significant factors are (a) real and/or perceived injustices or failures that lead to an extreme rejection of society and (b) affinity for “a culture of violence.” These factors can overlap with a search for adventure and/or a sense of belonging and meaning. Contrary to popular belief, relative poverty, religiosity and lack of education do not seem to be strong predictors of radicalization.
- These authors' research also suggests that a significant number of Central Asian extremists who went to fight in the Middle East became radicalized abroad, primarily while working in Russia or Turkey.
- Other scholars' research suggests that recent terrorist attacks and plots with a jihadist agenda in peaceful countries have more often been the work of local residents without combat experience than by former combatants.
- The next steps of Central Asian jihadists in foreign combat zones are exceedingly difficult to predict. Those who manage to escape from Iraq and Syria will have three basic options: to continue their fight in a different conflict zone, Afghanistan being the most likely; to go back to Central Asia, which does not seem like an option many find appealing; and to settle in a third country, whether to live peacefully or to keep fighting.
- The evidence indicates that Afghanistan-based militant groups, most notably the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), are targeting Central Asian recruits. But the inflow of foreign fighters is less intense than to Syria and Iraq in 2014-2015.
- While lone attackers attempting to commit acts of violence—whether inspired by radical propaganda or other factors—will

continue to be difficult to identify before they do damage, policymakers and law-enforcement authorities would be wise to cooperate across borders in tracking those Central Asian extremists who plug into networks of like-minded radicals and/or criminal groups.

- Much work needs to be done to provide better security for the radiological sources in use in Central Asia; however, the threat vectors for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons involving Central Asia appear not to pose an imminent danger either within the region or outside it.

# Central Asia and International Terrorism Today

Nationals of the five Central Asian states once under Moscow's rule have been prominent in the global landscape of violent extremism in two ways in recent years: by taking part in combat on the side of jihadist groups like the Islamic State and by plotting and/or carrying out terrorist attacks in non-war zones inside and outside their home region. Quantitatively, relative to the region's population, the available data suggest that Central Asia as a whole accounts for a disproportionately high percentage of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, but a disproportionately low number of terrorist attacks worldwide. This is a very generalized summary, to be sure, accounting neither for individual variation among the five countries nor for the non-quantifiable aspects of violent extremism, but it is a starting point. It is also a basis to say with confidence that Central Asia has become a source of violent extremism that transcends borders and continents.

As far as foreign fighters are concerned, prior to the start of Syria's civil war in 2011 the former Soviet republics of Central Asia had periodically seen trickles of citizens leaving to fight for radical causes abroad, mostly in Afghanistan/Pakistan. But the expanding war in Syria, and the rise of IS there and in Iraq in 2013, opened the doors for Central Asians to engage with extremist violence on a much larger scale than before. While coming up with accurate figures is next to impossible, a tally of the most recent estimates of how many fighters have gone to Syria and Iraq from ex-Soviet Central Asia ranges approximately from 2,000 to upwards of 4,000, totaling perhaps one-third to nearly one-half of the contingent from the former Soviet Union<sup>i</sup> and 5-10 percent of "foreign terrorist fighters" worldwide, to borrow the European Commission's terminology.<sup>5</sup> Considering that the ex-Soviet Central Asian states account for less than 1 percent of the world's

<sup>i</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin said (<http://tass.com/politics/932573>) in February 2017 that some 9,000 nationals of the former Soviet republics had joined the militants in Syria, up from his estimate (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50515>) of 5,000-7,000 in October 2015 and down from the June 2016 estimate of 10,000 given by Nikolai Bordyuzha, head of a Russia-led security alliance; in November 2017 The Soufan Center estimated (<http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>) the number at 8,717 in Iraq and Syria. Both counts may have included an unspecified number of noncombatant family members and the Soufan figure included perhaps as many as 1,000 Uzbek fighters in Afghanistan.

population,<sup>6</sup> this figure suggests a disproportionately high representation among the foreign-fighter contingent in the Middle East.

<b>Country of Origin (2017 est. pop.)<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>High Estimate (Year)</b>	<b>Low Estimate (Year)</b>	<b>Fighters per 100K of Population</b>
Kazakhstan (18 mln)	600 <sup>8</sup> (2017)	150 <sup>9</sup> (2015)	0.8-3.3
Kyrgyzstan (6.2 mln)	595 <sup>10</sup> (2016)	>295 <sup>11</sup> (2016)	>4.8-9.6
Tajikistan <sup>12</sup> (8.9 mln)	1,699 <sup>13</sup> (2018)	941 <sup>14</sup> (2017)	10.6-12.3
Turkmenistan (5.6 mln)	400 <sup>15</sup> (2015)	360 <sup>16</sup> (2015)	6.3 – 7.1
Uzbekistan <sup>1</sup> (32.4 mln)	>1,500 <sup>17</sup> (2016)	200 <sup>18</sup> (2015)	0.6->4.6
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>4,195</b>	<b>&gt;1,946</b>	<b>2.7-5.8</b>

**Table 1: Estimated Number of Central Asian Fighters Who Have Gone to Iraq and Syria.**

An equally confounding problem for counterterrorism analysts is the potential for violence among individuals from Central Asia residing outside their home region who have not fought in combat zones or undergone intensive military training. Between 2014 and 2017, according to our tally, men from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan carried out five high-profile terrorist attacks in New York, Stockholm, Istanbul, St. Petersburg and Karachi, four of them just last year. While two of those cases (Pakistan and Turkey) involved assailants with significant military training, two of the other attacks (Sweden and Russia) were perpetrated by men who may have tried but failed to join IS, though evidence in the Russia case is spotty; and the fifth attacker, in the U.S., clearly had no combat experience or military training with extremist groups. Three of the attacks took place in countries with significant Central Asian diasporas: Russia (3-7 million), the U.S. (about 250,000), Turkey (100,000-200,000) and Europe (under 100,000). Overall, in the past five years terrorist attacks carried out by perpetrators from Central Asia have killed more people outside the region than inside it over the past decade—96 versus 91, not counting attackers. (See tables below.)

That said, as noted above, citizens of Central Asia have been involved in relatively few of the world's recent terror attacks. Based on data from the EU Terrorism Situation and Trend reports<sup>19</sup> for 2014-2017, Central Asians perpetrated just one of the 65 attacks in the European Union,<sup>20</sup> one of the 77 attacks in Turkey, one of the 27 attacks in the United States and one of the 153 alleged attacks in Russia.<sup>21</sup> The more comprehensive Global Terrorism Database,<sup>22</sup> or GTD, based at the University of Maryland, includes at least two other fatal attacks in Russia reportedly committed by Central Asians, though available details on these are spotty. They include an attack on police in the city of Astrakhan (some perpetrators reportedly<sup>23</sup> born in Kazakhstan or were Russian-born ethnic Kazakhs), as well as the widely reported<sup>24</sup> beheading of a four-year-old by an Uzbek nanny whom investigators said could have been mentally ill. Worldwide, between 2008 and 2017, Central Asians were involved in 68 of the 48,546 terrorist attacks recorded in the GTD, excluding those that took place in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan—or just 0.14 percent.

Aside from actual attacks, Central Asian nationals have been detained in numerous incidents on suspicion of plotting attacks or aiding those who might carry them out. As noted below, some of these cases may involve political manipulation or shoddy investigative work. In the U.S., which has a relatively robust legal system, as well as a practice of counterterrorism stings,<sup>25</sup> several terror-related cases have centered on suspects from Central Asia. For example, three Brooklyn men—one citizen of Kazakhstan and two of Uzbekistan—were arrested<sup>26</sup> in 2015 on charges of conspiring to give material support to IS; according to the State Department,<sup>27</sup> in 2015 an Uzbek refugee was sentenced to 25 years in prison by a U.S. court after planning bomb attacks for which he sought advice from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU,<sup>ii</sup> and in late 2016 a Dutch-Turkish citizen was convicted in the U.S. for serving as an IMU fundraiser and facilitator; this

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ii The IMU emerged from Adolat, an Islamist political party founded in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley in 1991 by Tohir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani. The organization launched a series of raids into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 from its base in Tajikistan. Eventually the IMU moved to Afghanistan, where it sustained heavy losses following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 and never fully recovered or developed the kind of sophisticated messaging/recruitment strategies that IS has. A splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), claimed credit for attacks in 2004 in Bukhara and Tashkent, killing 16, not counting the attackers themselves. Since then, it has had limited operations in Central Asia.

June a refugee from Uzbekistan residing in Colorado was found guilty<sup>28</sup> of trying to aid the Islamic Jihad Union, a splinter group of the IMU.<sup>iii</sup>

Year	Location	Affiliated Group	Fatalities	Origin of Perpetrator(s)
2014	Karachi	IMU <sup>2</sup>	39 <sup>29</sup> (inc. 10 attackers)	Uzbekistan <sup>3</sup>
2016 (March)	Moscow	--	1	Uzbekistan
2017 (Jan.)	Istanbul	ISIS	39	Uzbekistan
2017 (April)	St. Petersburg	--	14 (inc. 1 attacker)	Kyrgyzstan <sup>4</sup>
2017 (April)	Astrakhan	ISIS	2	Kazakhstan
2017 (April)	Stockholm	ISIS	4	Uzbekistan
2017 (Oct.)	New York	ISIS	8	Uzbekistan
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>107 (inc. 11 attackers)</b>	

**Table 2: Attacks by Central Asians Outside the Region (with Fatalities), 2008-2017.**

These disturbing numbers have led some scholars to contend that the international terrorist threat emanating from Central Asia is “a reality that cannot be ignored,”<sup>30</sup> while media headlines have declared the region to be a “growing source of terrorism”<sup>31</sup> and “fertile ground”<sup>32</sup> for recruitment. While radicalization clearly does occur in Central Asia, some research suggests that the primary recruiting ground for Central Asian fighters among jihadist groups may be in Russia among the millions of Central Asian migrants there<sup>iv</sup>; this, however, is not a consensus view. In Central Asia itself, recruitment has been particularly active in the agricultural south of Tajikistan (Khatlon province),<sup>33</sup> isolated mining and oil-drilling cities in

iii See footnote above.

iv The number of Central Asian migrants in Russia is a matter of some debate, ranging from about 3 to 8 million, and difficult to calculate because of the seasonal nature of migration and the significant share of migrants who do not register with authorities, let their registration lapse or get Russian residency or citizenship during their stay. U.N. data (<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.shtml>) has placed the number of Central Asian migrants in Russia at about 5 million in 2010, 2015 and 2017 (the most recent years for which data are available). In the first nine months of 2018, Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs registered (<https://мвд.рф/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/item/14852910/>) nearly 6.4 million Central Asians and “de-registered” over 4.1 million, leaving a net difference of more than 2.2 million; in 2017 the numbers (<https://мвд.рф/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/item/12162171/>) were 7.7 million registered and 4.9 million “de-registered,” with a net difference of 2.8 million; in 2016 they were (<https://мвд.рф/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/item/9359228/>), respectively, about 6.7 million, 4.2 million and 2.5 million. It is not clear whether these figures include repeat registrations or how well they reflect absolute numbers. They clearly do not include migrants without registration.

the western Kazakh desert (Zhezkazgan, Aktobe, Atyrau) and in predominantly ethnic Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan's Ferghana Valley.<sup>34</sup>

The destructive potential of violent extremists from Central Asia may be amplified by their ability to cooperate with other groups, particularly from elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, though not only. Some Central Asians have risen to positions of authority within IS and other international terrorist organizations, expanding their networks and clout: Most notably, Col. Gulmurod Halimov, the U.S.-trained head of Tajikistan's paramilitary police, or OMON, rose to become the Islamic State's "minister of war" after spectacularly defecting to the group in May 2015. Also in 2015, the IMU—which has long worked with al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and claimed joint responsibility<sup>35</sup> with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan for the 2014 airport attack in Karachi—declared its allegiance to the Islamic State. The extremist group Imam Bukhari Jamaat, labeled by the U.S. State Department as "the largest Uzbek fighting force in Syria," and possibly a second, much smaller Uzbek group, cooperated with al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham to overrun Idlib in July 2015.<sup>36</sup> These examples notwithstanding, it is also worth noting that wartime alliances are often unstable, as illustrated by the acrimonious split in 2013 within Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar between fighters from the Caucasus and from Central Asia.

As noted above, the number of fatalities resulting from terror attacks by Central Asian jihadists outside the region has exceeded the number within it, but that does not mean acts of domestic terrorism have been insignificant. It is interesting to note that, unlike the instances of extremist violence abroad, most of the 18 deadly attacks within Central Asia in 2009-2018 targeted government officials, including police, rather than civilians.<sup>v</sup> This is clearly reflected in the fatality counts: 80 representatives of the state, 11 civilians and 50 attackers. Moreover, four of the five Central Asian countries have been shaken by other forms of political violence, claiming well over 1,500 lives between 2005 and 2012. (Insular Turkmenistan has had neither political violence nor terror attacks that we know of.)

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<sup>v</sup> This dataset was assembled based on a modified version of the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, including only attacks that a) were initiated by terrorist groups and b) caused fatalities.

Year	Location	Group(s) Claiming Responsibility	Group(s) Blamed by Government	Fatalities	Breakdown: State/Civilian/Attacker
2009	Uzbekistan (Khanabad / Andijan)	Islamic Jihad Union	Islamic Jihad Union	2	1/0/1
2009	Tajikistan (Isfara)	IMU	IMU	1	1/0/0
2010	Tajikistan (Khujand)	Jamaat Ansurallah	Jamaat Ansurallah	4	3/0/1
2010	Tajikistan (Kamarob)	IMU	IMU	25	25/0/0
2012	Tajikistan (Khorog)	--	--	1	1/0/0
2014	Tajikistan (Khorog)	--	--	1	0/0/1
2015	Tajikistan (Dushanbe / Vahdat)	--	IRPT <sup>37</sup>	39	14/0/25
2018	Tajikistan (Danghara)	IS	IRPT5	8	0/4/4
2015	Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek)	--	Jaysh al-Mahdi <sup>38</sup>	1	1/0/0
2016	Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek)	--	Turkestan Islamic Party / al-Nusra Front <sup>6</sup>	1	0/0/1
2011	Kazakhstan (Aktobe)	--	Organized Crime	1	0/0/1
2011	Kazakhstan (Aktobe)	--	Organized Crime	3	3/0/0
2011	Kazakhstan (Atyrau)	Jund al-Khalifa <sup>39</sup>	--	1	0/0/1
2011	Kazakhstan (Taraz)	Jund al-Khalifa	--	7	4/2/1
2012	Kazakhstan (Almaty)	--	Jihadist Salafis	14	14/0/0
2012	Kazakhstan (Almaty)	--	--	1	1/0/0
2016	Kazakhstan (Aktobe)	--	IS	21	4/3/14
2016	Kazakhstan (Almaty)	--	Jihadist Salafis	10	8/2/0
<b>TOTALS</b>				<b>141</b>	<b>80/11/50</b>

**Table 3: Attacks by Central Asians Within the Region (with Fatalities), 2009-2018.**

Despite the abundance of media reports and other research available, many questions about Central Asians' developing role in international terrorism remain unanswered, and any quest for those answers will be complicated by several factors. One is the extent to which various actors—including authorities in all the countries concerned—have manipulated or exaggerated the terrorist threat and can continue to do so.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Tajikistan's official position<sup>41</sup> on this summer's fatal attack on the cyclists has been that it was perpetrated by the country's main political opposition group,<sup>42</sup> banned in 2015, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan; this claim persisted despite a video posted by the IS media outlet Amaq showing four of the attackers pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. In another example of muddied waters, after Kazakhstan's deadliest attack thus far, in Aktobe in June 2016, the authorities could not agree on a narrative, vaguely stating<sup>43</sup> that the attack had been "ordered from abroad" without providing evidence or details. Uzbekistan, according to the U.S. State Department,<sup>44</sup> "routinely uses security concerns related to terrorism as a pretext for detention of suspects, including of religious activists and political dissidents." Another global problem with access to reliable information is that violent extremists who work alone or in small groups often undergo radicalization out of public view, making them particularly difficult to identify before they do damage. The United States has experienced this repeatedly, including the cases of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers—ethnic Chechens who had spent part of their childhood in Kyrgyzstan<sup>vi</sup>—and the Uzbek immigrant who killed eight people<sup>45</sup> in New York with a rented truck in 2017. In light of these constraints, it is important to recognize the limits of what we can actually know about the transnational threat coming from Central Asia.<sup>46</sup>

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vi Jacobs, Bruce, "Kyrgyz Former Neighbors Talk About Tsarnaevs, North Caucasus Ties," RFE/RL, April 20, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tsarnaev-childhood-family-kyrgyzstan-chechnya-daghestan/24963691.html>. Not counted in this paper because the connection to Central Asia is so tenuous.

# Drivers of Radicalization

Each individual's exact pathway to terrorism is different and catchall explanations of recruitment fail to reflect the complex dynamics at play. It is possible, however, to make some general observations about why Central Asians join terrorist groups. Perhaps surprisingly, research has indicated that poverty, lack of education and high levels of religiosity do not necessarily correlate with susceptibility to recruitment; conversely, the evidence suggests that many recruits are better off financially and better educated than the average person in Central Asia,<sup>47</sup> and also not particularly religious prior to radicalization. Instead, leitmotifs in fighters' biographies include a culture of violence—whether through previous combat experience, petty crime or combat sports—and disillusionment or de-socialization stemming from unfulfilled aspirations, a sense of injustice, disengagement from social support networks, a diminished sense of self-worth or some combination of these factors.

Many of the cases of Central Asian fighters for whom we have sufficient evidence to draw conclusions about their radicalization mirror a phenomenon observed by French political scientist Olivier Roy in Europe among first-generation migrants and their descendants—namely, that a diminished sense of status, accomplishment, fulfillment and/or social connectedness leads individuals to reject society, and radical ideologies provide justification for an extreme but empowering form of that rejection. Thus, Roy argues that we are seeing “not the radicalization of Islam, but the Islamization of radicalism.”<sup>48</sup> For Roy, “the typical radical is a young, second-generation immigrant or convert, very often involved in episodes of petty crime, with practically no religious education, but having a rapid and recent trajectory of conversion/reconversion.”<sup>49</sup>

Studies among Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik communities—including field research conducted by two of this paper's authors—indicate that, often, recruits to extremist militant causes have experienced real and/or perceived personal injustices or failure as migrants, whether through discrimination, failed romantic relationships, thwarted career aspirations or other experiences of powerlessness.<sup>50</sup> Here, it is important to note that migration in and of itself does not cause radicalization: Central Asians

have been migrating to Russia for more than 20 years, while joining terrorist organizations is a more recent phenomenon affecting a small fraction of migrants. Among that minority, however, their experience as migrants can be a significant catalyst for their radical rejection of society and embrace of political violence. An example from Edward Lemon's fieldwork in Moscow in 2015 is illustrative of this. In April of that year, young Tajik construction workers were living in converted shipping containers as they built a new overpass near Moscow's Spartak stadium for the 2018 soccer World Cup. They recounted how recruiters whom they believed to be from Chechnya had come around their encampment calling people to Islam. One young man, whom they called Nasim, was drawn to the group:

*He arrived in Moscow back in 2013. He was a smart guy, spoke good Russian and wanted to find a good job. But he couldn't. So he ended up in construction. In 2014, he went home and married a girl from his village. But soon after he came back. The marriage was not good. He became more angry and bitter. When the recruiters came, he found their promises attractive. He never prayed before or talked about religion, but now he talked about jihad. One day he disappeared. The next thing we heard he was in Syria.*

One Uzbek former fighter who joined Islamic State on his own initiative told a similar story of disillusionment in a long interview with another of this report's authors, Vera Mironova. In describing his journey from Moscow to Syria, Mohammed (not his real name) became visibly frustrated recalling the discrimination he experienced in Russia, where he came when he was 16. "People considered us second-rate," he said, noting as an example that he could not approach local girls because they would never consider him, or any other poor, uneducated migrant from Central Asia, as a possible partner. (In Syria Mohammed married a 16-year-old Kazakh girl who came there with her family.)

Like Nasim and Mohammed, many young Central Asians who have experienced personal failures and marginalization start to feel alienated and disillusioned with their lives—whether abroad, at home or in an adopted country where they have settled as immigrants. Terrorist groups, including IS, have capitalized on this potential for resentment in their messaging,

specifically targeting vulnerable individuals and offering them the promise of a different life. Such groups offer recruits meaning, a collective identity and individual fulfilment. Islamic State, in its propaganda, also claimed the absence of any discrimination in its fledgling caliphate, pointing to the equality of all Muslims. The heroic image of jihadis projected by such organizations, the promise of a wage and welfare, the adventure and brotherhood of membership in a violent extremist group can be appealing to a small minority of disillusioned individuals.

As noted above, a sense of injustice or disillusionment strong enough to lead to radicalization can arise among non-migrant Central Asians as well, often nudged along by the region's repressive and corrupt governments. For example, a key recruiting ground in Kyrgyzstan, as mentioned before, has been the Uzbek community in the Ferghana Valley. This ethnic minority bore the brunt of interethnic violence in 2010, sometimes facilitated<sup>51</sup> by local officials and followed<sup>52</sup> by little government effort to investigate or hold perpetrators accountable. More broadly, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have some of the worst corruption<sup>53</sup> and least reliable<sup>54</sup> systems of justice in the world. They have also tended to regulate religious practices with a heavy hand. All the Central Asian ex-fighters interviewed by Vera Mironova mentioned the severe restrictions on religious freedoms in their home countries and for some this was a factor in their decision to leave. Both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, for example, have either explicit or de facto limitations on men's right to wear beards and women's right to wear hijabs. Some of the Uzbek interviewees also pointed out that they had been under surveillance by local law enforcement for their religious activities, so they felt like they had no option but to leave.

For most recruits from Central Asia, however, religion seems to play a limited role in their lives until they begin to be exposed (and receptive) to extremist content. They often discover or rediscover Islam with a neophyte's zeal, rapidly embracing a simplistic, good-versus-evil *takfiri* narrative that pits believers against non-believers. Evidence from the Tajik case reflects this. Most of them leave behind close-knit communities and an authoritarian system where the government has closely monitored and restricted religious practices for the past hundred years. They find themselves in migrant communities where religion in its different guises is

discussed more openly. While most maintain close links to their relatives and communities at home, some become alienated in their new environment<sup>55</sup> and seek new sources of connection or meaning. Contrary to Islamophobic stereotypes, those with high levels of religious knowledge have often proved integral to counter-radicalization efforts.<sup>56</sup>

Our field research also indicates that there seems to be a link, in some cases, between recruitment to wage jihad in the Middle East and a prior connection to what the Russian scholar Vitaly Naumkin calls a “culture of violence,” whether through crime, combat, violent sports or some combination of these. In one example, a Tajik named Anvar had served a short prison sentence for theft as a young man and then migrated in 2013 to Russia to work on a construction site in Moscow. He spent much of his free time at a gym, training in mixed martial arts. An IS recruiter operating out of the gym began grooming him, making him believe it was his duty as a Muslim to go to Syria; Anvar left to join IS in early 2014. Some of the most prominent fighters hailing from Central Asia were battle-hardened veterans, as described in more detail below. Many recruits had been petty criminals in their youth.<sup>57</sup> Tajik militant leader Nusrat Nazarov, for example, had been a drug dealer in Kulob.<sup>58</sup> Others have been active in combat sports.<sup>59</sup> Alan Chekranov, a Tajik fighter prominent on social media, was a three-time national champion in mixed martial arts.<sup>60</sup> Naumkin contends that terrorism offered these men an opportunity to express their masculinity and live out violent fantasies.<sup>61</sup>

It is also worth pointing out that many Central Asians are pulled into violent extremist groups through their social networks, recruited by people who know them.<sup>62</sup> Such networks work through both offline and online contact. After Nasim left for Syria in 2014, for example, he was joined by two other individuals from his village in southern Tajikistan. In some villages in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan entire extended families, numbering up to 40, have left for Syria and Iraq.

Finally, it is worth noting that those who choose violent forms of radicalism may confront very different logistical challenges: Carrying out an unsophisticated terrorist attack—for example, mowing down people with a vehicle—takes less planning and involves fewer chances both to

be interdicted and to have a change of heart than does joining a terrorist group in a foreign country, which requires obtaining travel documents, crossing multiple borders and paying for the journey.

# What Might They Do Next?

In examining the question of Central Asian militants' next steps, most analysts of international security have focused on the extremists affected by the decline of ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham—formerly known as the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate—in Syria and Iraq. We will do the same. What will happen to these men and their families if their host groups lose all their territory in the region? Surviving ex-fighters have three basic options other than detention by local authorities: join a violent group in another conflict zone, migrate to a peaceful country or return home, with the latter two options possible both for those who want to demilitarize and for those who want to keep the fight going. All of these scenarios require money and connections to leave the region, doing which has become increasingly difficult<sup>63</sup> over the past few years. After the IS stronghold of Raqqa fell in 2017, prices for smuggling non-Arab foreigners out of Syria rose to around \$10,000 per adult, and about one-third that for a child, so not many people could afford it, especially those with families. Moreover, people from Central Asia often look different than other jihadists in the region, so it was harder for them—even compared to fighters from other parts of the former Soviet Union, like Russia—to pass unnoticed through government or Kurdish checkpoints.

Existing evidence suggests that a mass return to Central Asia remains unlikely, largely due to local authorities' heavy-handed policies.<sup>64</sup> Our tally from earlier this year, based on open sources, showed only about 300 returnees to all five countries combined, not including non-combatant family members.<sup>65</sup> Some analysts have even speculated that sending radicalized citizens to fight in Syria and Iraq may benefit the regimes in the region, helping them transfer the threat of Islamic terrorism out of their own countries.<sup>66</sup> In all of the Central Asian states, an influx of former fighters would certainly pose a huge challenge in terms of demobilization and reintegration. Jailing ex-combatants en masse could create new problems: In November 2018, IS reportedly claimed responsibility<sup>67</sup> for a prison riot in Tajikistan that left at least 23 dead.<sup>68</sup> While that claim has not been verified, Tajikistan's foreign minister said the unrest was provoked by members of extremist organizations.<sup>69</sup>

This leaves the other two options: new war zone or third country. As noted at the beginning of this report, the most likely conflict zone for migration would seem to be Afghanistan, while the peaceful countries that could serve as sanctuaries for ex-fighters include Ukraine, Turkey and potentially some European Union states.<sup>70</sup> According to various reports,<sup>71</sup> over 800 Central Asians have been killed in the Middle East. If the numbers of dead and returnees, given above, are accurate, this would leave between 850 and over 3,000 survivors, including an undisclosed number in prison.<sup>72</sup>

In order to better predict where certain individuals could go next, it may be useful to consider why they went to the Middle East in the first place. In general, the migration of Central Asians to join IS and other radical violent groups in Syria and Iraq can be divided into three “waves” as described below. Readers should note, however, that this is very much a generalization. For example, at the time of the first wave, made up largely of veteran militants, there were also some early recruits who had been working or studying in Syria at the time that protests broke out in early 2011.

- The first wave, primarily in 2011-2012, mostly included people with combat experience in Tajikistan’s civil war (1992-1997) and Afghanistan/Pakistan (Waziristan), with the Taliban and Taliban-affiliated groups. These men went with the explicit goal of fighting. At that point, in the very beginning of the armed conflict, there were no major armed coalitions, only many separate groups, or jamaats, of foreign fighters largely segregated by language. With time, some of those groups merged with IS, while others continued fighting against Bashar al-Assad’s forces as semi-independent formations, sometimes in an alliance with the al-Nusra Front. According to former IS fighters interviewed by Vera Mironova, these people were among the most professional and experienced foreign combatants in Syria. Many of them started, as did other Russian-speaking fighters, in the Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar under the command of Omar (or Umar) al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia, and followed him to IS after he became a military commander for the jihadist group. Because of their experience, many assumed positions as trainers. For example, according to one interviewed ex-fighter, his military base had a Kazakh sniper

instructor who had cut his teeth in Waziristan and several Uzbek experts in explosives and topography, who also had come via Waziristan.

- The second wave, roughly in 2012-2014, was made up largely of fighting-age males with no combat experience, coming mostly from Russia and Turkey where they had been working. While some were actively recruited, others travelled on their own initiative and sometimes had a hard time getting to the Syrian battlefield. For instance, Mohammed, the Uzbek who recalled feeling like a second-class citizen in Russia, said in an interview that he had been working and studying in Moscow when events in Syria caught his attention and, although he was not religious, he felt the need to go fight against Assad. It was easier said than done. First, he asked around at mosques, but was kicked out because people assumed he was a mole or provocateur working for the Russian security service. Then he searched on Russian-language social media and eventually found people already fighting in Syria. At first, they also did not believe him, but ultimately agreed to take him in if he flew to Turkey. He bought a ticket and soon joined Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar, later moving to al-Nusra and then to IS. It's worth noting that not everyone wanted to fight for IS, which some fighters accused of excessive violence or misguided religious ideology. As of August 2018, within the anti-Assad rebel bloc, Central Asians were fighting with the Turkistan Islamic Party, Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad and Liwa Mujahedeen wa Ansar, among other groups. Although they are considered semi-independent, they often coordinate their military activities with al-Nusra, which publicly cut its ties to al-Qaeda in 2016 and changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.
- The third wave of people, which trickled in with the first two but intensified significantly after the declaration of a caliphate in 2014,<sup>73</sup> included whole families, together with women and children, eager to start a new life in what they saw as a newly established country, a Promised Land for Muslims. Central Asia has long experienced widescale out-migration, so the idea of moving to a different country was not new. Many of these people sold their apartments and cars back home and bought houses in IS-controlled

territory. They took along schoolbooks to continue their children's education in their native language. They even took their diplomas and other educational certificates—further suggesting that their goal was a new life, not a suicide mission. Some of the men did not go through boot camp or own a weapon. In the Middle East they managed to live relatively normal lives, working as engineers or social workers, caring, for example, for the families of killed IS fighters. In short, for many this was a “one-way journey,” whether seeking adventure, martyrdom or a new life.<sup>74</sup>

Based on Vera Mironova's research, Central Asian fighters who have managed to leave IS can be divided into two basic subgroups: those who had given up on the idea of a caliphate, or had grown disillusioned with the ideology of IS, and those from the IS leadership and intelligence service (Amni<sup>vii</sup>) who left with money and are considering regrouping in another geographic area. The former include a small, elusive group sometimes called the “excessive” takfirists, who consider IS insufficiently stringent in its pursuit of sharia-based rule. Many of these are currently living peacefully and working in civilian occupations in their countries of hiding; some are even actively working to discourage potential IS supporters. The second subgroup is a dangerous one. These ex-fighters are looking for countries with weak security where they could take control of territory, such as Afghanistan.

Among the world's existing conflict zones, it is indeed Afghanistan—with its geographical proximity and linguistic affinities with Central Asia—that appears to be a logical destination for ex-fighters and new recruits alike.<sup>75</sup> Three radical groups operating there have roots in post-Soviet Central Asia: the Tajik group Jamaat Ansurallah,<sup>viii</sup> which pledged allegiance to IS in 2017 after having once been affiliated with al-Qaeda, which, in turn, had been strong in Afghanistan prior to 9/11; Uzbekistan's IMU, often

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vii Based on Vera Mironova's research, the Amni included a large number of Uzbek IS members.

viii Jamaat Ansarullah was formed in 2010 by a former opposition commander in Tajikistan's civil war, Amriddin Tabarov. Following Tabarov's death in 2015, his son-in-law Mavlavi Salmon took over. Jamaat Ansarullah claimed responsibility for the 2010 suicide bombing against a Ministry of Internal Affairs building in Khujand, Tajikistan. Their current strength is estimated to be around 100 fighters. See: <https://ctc.usma.edu/converging-factors-signal-increasing-terror-threat-tajikistan/> and Giustozzi, Antonio, *The Islamic State in Khurasan*, London: Hurst and Company, 2018, pp. 156-7.

referred to by Afghan officials as Jundallah; and its splinter group, the Islamic Jihad Union, or IJU, which has a base<sup>76</sup> in Sar-e Pul, less than 100 miles from the border with Turkmenistan, albeit with an estimated 25 fighters. All these organizations, however, have been weakened by years of war, and it has been the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) that has been most active in trying to recruit fighters from Central Asia.<sup>77</sup> The group declared its existence as an affiliate of IS in January 2015.<sup>ix</sup> Like IS, it has developed a sophisticated media presence outmatching the Taliban's<sup>78</sup> and it has targeted Central Asian recruits directly: In March 2018, for example, the group released a video in which Uzbek fighters called on militants in Syria and Iraq to join it.<sup>79</sup> ISKP's messaging, like IS's, stresses the purity of its Salafi ideology and the obligation of believers to engage in jihad and romanticizes life as a fighter. ISKP propaganda also projects a transnational cause centered on apocalyptic narratives from the Prophet Muhammed about jihadis from Khorasan winning a decisive victory near the end of times.<sup>80</sup> ("Khorasan" is a Persian word referring to the territory of modern-day Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia.) For recruits from Central Asia, the ISKP's promises of expansion into the region may be more appealing than the Taliban's nationalist vision, which focuses strictly on Afghanistan and has ruled out northern expansion.

The ISKP's actual strength, in numbers and influence, remains contentious and hard to ascertain.<sup>81</sup> Over its nearly four years, the ISKP extended its presence beyond its initial base in Nangarhar province to establish control of two districts in Jowzjan in northern Afghanistan, only to be routed there by the Taliban in July 2018. Russian officials have consistently emphasized the group's might, with a top Russian military commander estimating in April 2018 that the ISKP has 10,000 fighters.<sup>82</sup> A U.S. military spokeswoman said<sup>83</sup> around the same time that the group was believed to have only about 2,000 fighters, and the general in charge of U.S. Central Command, Joseph Votel, said earlier that year that "Moscow has exaggerated the presence of the ISIS-K threat."<sup>84</sup> According to U.N. estimates, 3,500 to 4,000 militants are fighting with ISKP, with 750 of them originating in Central Asia.<sup>85</sup> Afghan officials, meanwhile, have estimated that the ISKP has 3,000 foreign fighters alone.<sup>86</sup> (In August 2017 a senior Afghan security official put the number<sup>87</sup>

<sup>ix</sup> ISKP should not be confused with "Khorasan group," an allegedly al-Qaeda affiliated group of fighters in Syria first identified by the U.S. government in 2014. See: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.6994bdb-511cd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6994bdb-511cd).

of foreigners fighting for both IS and the Taliban in his country at roughly 7,000, most of them from Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; this is much less than the estimates of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, which have run as 40,000.<sup>88</sup>) The ISKP has faced all matter of challenges: With its coercive approach to governance and unpopular policies, such as publicly banning poppy cultivation while benefiting<sup>89</sup> from the trade, the group has struggled to gain a foothold in Afghanistan. Three of its emirs have been killed<sup>90</sup> and, in November 2017, NATO claimed that U.S. forces had killed 1,600 of its militants.<sup>91</sup> Fighting with Taliban factions has also weakened the organization, despite occasional attempts at détente.<sup>92</sup> Veteran Afghanistan researcher Antonio Giustozzi concluded<sup>93</sup> in late 2017 that the ISKP, damaged by infighting, dependency on external funding and setbacks in the Middle East, “is past its peak in Afghanistan, if not in terms of military capabilities, certainly in terms of jihadist image.”<sup>94</sup>

For now, the flow of foreign fighters to Afghanistan seems insignificant when compared with the peak of IS recruiting from Central Asia in 2014-15. Moreover, if IS’s proto-caliphate in Syria and Iraq became attractive to some foreigners when it controlled significant territory and really had come to resemble a state, Afghanistan’s radical groups do not seem to offer that: While the Taliban remains extremely powerful, it has full control of only 4 percent of the country’s provinces, according to a BBC estimate<sup>95</sup> from January; around the same time, Afghan officials reportedly said<sup>96</sup> that rebels control 14.5 percent of the country’s territory, while another 29 percent is contested by both sides. The ISKP controls far less territory<sup>97</sup> than that, mostly in eastern Afghanistan on the border with Pakistan, and the group has not managed to create the same state functions as IS did in its heyday in Syria/Iraq. That said, the damage it inflicts locally is substantial: According to an October 2018 U.N. report<sup>98</sup> on Afghanistan, the ISKP accounted for more than half the year-on-year increase in civilian casualties caused by “anti-government elements” in the first nine months of the year (and 25 percent of the absolute total of such casualties), while Nangarhar province, its home base, recorded the most civilian casualties for that time period, with 554 deaths and 940 injured.

There is no question that Central Asians are among the foreigners fighting in Afghanistan. In addition to the Uzbeks and Tajiks in the Taliban,

many of the non-Afghans in today's ISKP<sup>x</sup> are militants from Pakistan and Uzbekistan who have fought in the region since the 1990s. According to Giustozzi,<sup>99</sup> in the summer of 2017, the ISKP split into two factions, one of them led by an ethnic Uzbek former IMU commander known as Moawiya,<sup>100</sup> or sometimes referred to in press reports as Mawlavi Habib ul-Rahman; his men were mainly Central Asians—including members “of the Omar Ghazi Group (an offshoot of the IMU which fully joined IS) and Shamali Khilafat, a group made up of Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks”—and his group claimed to have 3,800 members. There is also evidence that fighters from other Central Asian republics have joined the group, particularly from Tajikistan, which shares with Afghanistan both a border and closely related languages (Tajik and Dari). In the summer of 2018, for instance, over 100 IS fighters from Moawiya's group,<sup>101</sup> including<sup>102</sup> children, surrendered<sup>103</sup> to Afghan authorities after combat with the Taliban. The local governor said<sup>104</sup> there had been numerous foreign fighters in the group, Uzbeks and Tajiks among them, who had not surrendered and may have wound up with the Taliban. (A video<sup>105</sup> that reportedly circulated days later on pro-Taliban social media seemed to show 25 captured Central Asian fighters not only from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but a few from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well.) Indeed, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon claimed in May 2018 that dozens of his citizens had joined the ISKP.<sup>106</sup> That same month Kabul extradited to Tajikistan three alleged IS sympathizers, who had crossed into Afghanistan from Iran, a route of major concern to Afghan authorities.<sup>107</sup> (Linguistically, Tajik and Dari are closely related to Farsi.) About 10 cases of Tajiks entering the country via Iran have been reported in the media since mid-2017—for example, that of 18-year-old Shodidjon Boyev, who had worked as a labor migrant in Russia before trying to travel to Syria via Turkey. Having failed to reach Syria, he reportedly<sup>108</sup> traveled to Iran before crossing into Afghanistan in December 2017 and ending up in an IS training camp.

Ex-fighters could also settle in a stable third country. After leaving IS, many fighters end up in Turkey, which shares a border with Syria, but in 2016 Ankara started a crackdown on ex-IS fighters on its territory. (Egypt, Georgia and Malaysia have likewise gotten stricter than before.) In Turkey,

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<sup>x</sup> In its early stage the ISKP was largely made up of Pakistani militants from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who had been forced across the border by two Pakistani military offensives.

some fleeing militants get detained for extradition to their homeland; others are offered the option of buying a ticket to a third country where a visa is not required.<sup>109</sup> Given that Ukraine has a visa-free regime with most post-Soviet states, and was once a place where fake identification papers were relatively cheap and easy to buy, it has become a transit zone for many Russian-speaking ex-fighters, but is unlikely to be their final destination. Many of the ex-fighters interviewed by Vera Mironova said they aimed to travel to former Soviet republics where they could find work and blend in more easily in their ethnic communities, but most hoped to settle ultimately in Western Europe, and some have already entered Europe illegally. It is difficult to predict where exactly these fighters will go because many of their decisions hinge on changes in government policies and illegal networks to buy documents, which they monitor closely. As noted above, these people could try to embark on a peaceful life, disillusioned with jihad, or they could plot attacks, whether of their own volition or following someone's orders.

Thus far, IS-related attacks and plots outside of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have more often been the work of local residents sympathizing with the group than of former foreign fighters.<sup>110</sup> Militants from Central Asia seem to follow this pattern to some extent—the stark exceptions being the 2014 Karachi attack, carried out by IMU militants, and the Istanbul attack of 2017: Abdulkadir Masharipov, who killed 39 revelers in a nightclub on Jan. 1, 2017, had trained in an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan in 2011 and confessed to carrying out the attack on orders from Islam Atabiyev, a Russian, Raqqa-based IS leader also known as Abu Jihad.<sup>111</sup> The Stockholm attack in April 2017 was something of a “hybrid”: It was carried out by Rakhmat Akilov who had been deported back to Sweden from Turkey in 2015 after he was caught attempting to join IS.<sup>112</sup> The charges against Akilov stated that he had been in contact with more than 30 Islamic State fighters in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan prior to the attack; according to Akilov's testimony, he had been “prepared” by Abu Dovud, the nom de guerre of Tajikistan native Parviz Saidrakhmonov.<sup>113</sup> Claims to a connection with foreign fighters in the St. Petersburg case are more tenuous: The accused suicide bomber, Akbarzhon Jalilov, had migrated with his family to the city and lived there from 2011 to 2015. In November of that year he reportedly<sup>114</sup> moved to Turkey, where he lived until December 2016 when he was

deported for overstaying his visa and moved back to St. Petersburg. Russia's state-owned TASS news agency [reported](#)<sup>115</sup> within days of the attack that law-enforcement officials suspected that he may have left Turkey for Syria and trained with IS. One early, [unverified claim](#)<sup>116</sup> of responsibility came from a little known group claiming links to al-Qaeda; [other media reports](#),<sup>117</sup> citing unnamed Russian and Kyrgyz security sources, said the suspected mastermind of the attack was, like Jalilov, an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan, who commanded a group of Central Asian fighters in Syria and was suspected by Kyrgyz authorities of organizing the 2016 attack against the Chinese Embassy. Russian investigators have [reportedly](#)<sup>118</sup> accused Jalilov's alleged accomplices of receiving and then passing on money for the attack from "an active member of an international terrorist organization" in Turkey.

Most Central Asian ex-fighters hoping to return to a peaceful life seem wary of heading back to their home countries. As noted above, our tally showed only about 300 returnees. The region's governments, like Russia's,<sup>119</sup> have often been heavy-handed with returning ex-fighters and have not been keen to develop re-integration policies for those who engaged in combat. The governments of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, for example, 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. Tajikistan has introduced an amnesty program, but its success seems to be limited: While dozens of ex-fighters have been pardoned,<sup>120</sup> a provincial police chief said earlier this<sup>121</sup> year that, of 72 amnestied fighters, 34 had returned to IS. According to several former IS members now in hiding, comrades who were extradited to Russia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have never been heard from again. The ex-fighters are particularly afraid of torture at the hands of authorities back home, which made many of their brothers-in-arms opt to stay in Syria and die there. So real was the fear of torture or "being disappeared" that one ex-fighter awaiting extradition from Turkey to Tajikistan slit his wrists before he could be returned, according to his cellmate in a deportation prison in Istanbul.

# Central Asian Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Terrorism Threat Vectors

Central Asia could be relevant to the threat of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) terrorism<sup>xi</sup> in several ways. First, because the region was the home of significant Soviet-era production and testing activities, it could be a source of material. Second, because many of the Islamic State's foreign fighters came from the region those who survive the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and return to it could potentially bring with them CBRN expertise and nihilist motivations gained from IS efforts.<sup>xii</sup> Third, because large and sensitive Russian facilities are located close to the region, and the borders are relatively porous, Central Asian countries could be used as a haven or transshipment point to exploit any thefts from Russian facilities; for example, the closed city of Ozersk, which contains one of Russia's largest nuclear weapons-related facilities with thousands of weapons' worth of fissile material, lies less than 175 miles from Russia's frontier with Kazakhstan—the world's longest contiguous land border.<sup>122</sup>

## Central Asia as a Potential Source of CBRN Material

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are all “states parties” to the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions and the Nonproliferation Treaty, which prohibit them from holding stocks of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. There are, moreover, no current, public and credible claims that any of these countries are violating those treaty obligations.<sup>123</sup> Thus, the regional threat of diversion or theft of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons or materials from *existing state programs* is negligible.

xi As a term describing the threat, CBRN, though cumbersome, is both more specific and more accurate than the somewhat vague Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), which lumps together threats with very different levels of potential lethality and other effects.

xii Another area possibly worthy of investigation involves cross-border smuggling routes at the crossroads of Tajikistan, Iran and Afghanistan. See, for example, “Trump's Iran Sanctions Trigger a Booming Cash-Smuggling Business,” Bloomberg, Sept. 13, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-13/trump-s-iran-sanctions-trigger-a-booming-cash-smuggling-business>.

Central Asia was, however, the home of significant Soviet-era nuclear weapons activities. The Soviets mined and milled 10,000 tonnes of uranium in Tajikistan.<sup>124</sup> They set off over 450 nuclear detonations at Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan.<sup>125</sup> About a tenth of those tests were of such low yields that the fissile material was left “readily recoverable” should terrorists have been sufficiently knowledgeable and motivated to take it.<sup>126</sup> The Soviet authorities also left behind in Kazakhstan 600 kilograms of 90-percent-enriched uranium, mostly in the form of metal chunks and oxide pellets—enough for about two dozen nuclear weapons—at the unsecured Ulba Metallurgy Plant,<sup>127</sup> and spent fuel containing 10 tonnes of highly enriched uranium and 3 tonnes of weapons-grade plutonium in a relatively unsecure facility at Aktau on the shores of the Caspian Sea.<sup>128</sup>

Central Asia was also beset by Soviet biological weapons activities. Voz-rozhdeniye Island, a biological-weapons test site straddling present day Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, is the world’s largest dumping ground for anthrax agent. Soviet scientists and technicians moved hundreds of tonnes of the deadly brew there in 1988 to cover up the illicit Soviet biological-weapons program, from their production facility at Sverdlovsk.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, another one of at least six Soviet biological-weapons production plants operated at Stepnogorsk, Kazakhstan—the only one outside of Russia—and was capable of churning out about 300 tons of agent in 220 days.<sup>130</sup>

When the Soviet Union dissolved, this lethal mess fell to the fledgling Central Asian republics. Fortunately, their governments welcomed U.S. cooperative threat-reduction assistance<sup>131</sup> and signal nonproliferation successes followed—sometimes in cooperation with Russia, including in the return of fresh and spent highly enriched reactor fuel from Central Asian research reactors.

Only a short distance ahead of metal scavengers active in the area, the U.S. and Kazakh governments completed work in 2012 to secure the highly enriched uranium and plutonium left from Soviet nuclear tests, under a project that spanned the Bush and Obama administrations.<sup>132</sup> Earlier, Project Sapphire removed 600 kilograms of highly enriched uranium from Ulba in 1994.<sup>133</sup> The U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration funded

a massive effort to repackage and transport spent fuel from the BN-350 reactor at Aktau to a secure storage site in northeastern Kazakhstan completed in 2010.

The United States also facilitated the dismantlement of the biological facilities at Stepnogorsk, remediation of the dumping ground on Vozrozhdeniye Island and deployment of physical protection and accounting measures in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>134</sup> This has largely negated the threat posed by biological facilities and materials abandoned by the Soviet Union.

Thus, the legacy of nuclear and biological materials left by the Soviet Union and the implicit threat that they could fall into terrorist hands were effectively addressed by international cooperative efforts to consolidate, secure and dispose of the material.

Radiological sources remain in Central Asia and, if stolen, could be used in unconventional attacks by terrorists. They have been less well addressed by cooperative threat-reduction efforts because they serve ongoing and important industrial and medical purposes. Approximately 1,000 Category 1-3 radiological sources are currently in use in Central Asia, with the overwhelming majority in Kazakhstan.<sup>135</sup> Generally located in hospitals, universities and industrial sites, these sources are often less well-protected than nuclear facilities.<sup>136</sup>

## **Returning Fighters as a Source of CBRN Threat**

The fate of defeated Central Asian fighters from the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups will obviously play a critical role in their ability to spread an IS-related CBRN threat.

From 2014 to 2017, the Islamic State produced and used chemical weapons in 37 separate attacks,<sup>137</sup> but there is only one recorded incident of an IS chemical-weapons capability being transferred outside of Iraq or Syria, and it was to Australia,<sup>138</sup> with no public evidence of participation by Central Asians.

IS also surveilled the home of a Belgian nuclear official, although the purpose of that action remains obscure. In 2015, the IS publication *Dabiq* alluded to an interest in nuclear terrorism. The article with murky intent and provenance warned: “Let me throw a hypothetical operation onto the table. The Islamic State has billions of dollars in the bank, so they call on their wilāyah in Pakistan to purchase a nuclear device through weapons dealers with links to corrupt officials in the region. The weapon is then transported overland until it makes it to Libya, where the mujāhidīn move it south to Nigeria.”<sup>139</sup>

No concrete plots or preparations by IS to obtain nuclear weapons or material, however, have been discovered and publicly disclosed. Moreover, even in 2015 when IS controlled far more people, resources and territory than they do today, David Albright and Sarah Burkhard concluded that “Daesh’s public boasts and fantasies about its easy pathways to nuclear weapons should be dismissed.”<sup>140</sup> In Mosul, Iraq, IS controlled facilities that housed two large Cobalt-60 radiological sources, but, possibly unaware of what they had, the militants left them unmolested.<sup>141</sup>

Thus, there is no publicly available evidence that any fleeing Central Asian Islamic State fighters are linked to any IS CBRN efforts in Syria or Iraq, or that they have undertaken such activities after their departure from IS-held territory. While mindful of the need to avoid *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, it does not appear that the out-migration of Central Asian IS fighters from the Middle East poses a current CBRN terrorism threat vector.

## **Proximity of Sensitive Russian Facilities to Central Asia**

Much of Russia’s nuclear archipelago is strewn across the Urals, originally chosen by Stalin’s secret police for the region’s isolation and therefore security. These vast facilities house sufficient fissile material for thousands of nuclear weapons in hundreds of buildings.<sup>142</sup> The closed cities are no longer embedded in a totalitarian police state. They now face changing demographics and the emergence of ideologies that might undermine the security of the facilities. According to the Carnegie Moscow Center’s Alexey Malashenko and Alexey Staroshin: “There have been significant

changes in the composition and distribution of Russia's Muslim community during the era of President Vladimir Putin. In particular, as Islam expands in the Ural Federal District, religious and political life there is evolving. Much of this expansion is due to the arrival of Muslim migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and some migrants bring with them religious radicalism—a challenge that requires a more effective official response.”<sup>143</sup>

While the threat that stolen Russian materials could be transferred to Central Asia—or used elsewhere—for terrorist purposes is a plausible concern, no publicly available evidence reveals such a plot. Russia attracts millions of Central Asians as seasonal workers and manual laborers, many of them in Russia illegally. Because of their status, these workers are often exploited and abused by their employers, contributing to the possibility that their migrant experience fosters extremism.<sup>144</sup> While such workers are unlikely to have direct access to weapons-usable materials, they could form a network to be employed by insiders to smuggle pilfered material out of Russia for fabrication into a viable weapon or transshipment to another region. As noted above, the closed city of Ozersk lies within 170 miles of the Kazakh border. Theft from these facilities, albeit mostly non-nuclear, is a common occurrence.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, smuggling of arms and narcotics in the region is so prevalent that it threatens, according to one researcher, to “curtail Central Asia's development.”<sup>146</sup> Authorities have interdicted trafficking of radiological sources from Russia into Kazakhstan, although the purpose of the smuggling is unclear.<sup>147</sup>

## **Net Assessment**

When the Soviet Union dissolved, Central Asia was left with a large inventory of CBRN materials and facilities. Cooperative threat reduction efforts by the U.S. government and those of Central Asian states eliminated or greatly reduced the vulnerability of that material.

Moreover, it is likely that any terrorist group that succeeded in obtaining CBRN weapons or materials would seek a target more lucrative than a Central Asian state.

It is plausible that CBRN material stolen in Russia could be taken to Central Asia for transshipment or fabrication into a usable weapon.

Much work needs to be done to provide alternatives to or better security for the radiological sources in use in Central Asia.

The international spread of perhaps thousands of Central Asian IS fighters could pose a severe security threat. Their activities bear close scrutiny, particularly to ensure that they do not attempt to use knowledge that might have been gained in Iraq or Syria regarding CBRN attacks. Moreover, ongoing vigilance in securing sensitive facilities is critical, as complacency leads to vulnerability.

Nonetheless, so far, from publicly available information, the CBRN threat vectors involving Central Asia appear not to pose an imminent peril either within the region or externally.

## For Further Consideration

As we have noted throughout this paper, the threat of violent extremism emanating from Central Asia has raised many as yet unanswered questions. Research on the topic is complicated by the many overlapping, sometimes tangled lines of inquiry worth pursuing: Some violent actors are radicalized at home, others abroad; some choose to perpetrate violence in low-cost ways as lone actors, while others go to great lengths to travel to distant war zones; getting access to those who have participated in jihadist violence is not easy; official assessments of the threat are often warped by political considerations; the list of complicating factors goes on.

That said, it is worth restating some of our basic conclusions:

- The turmoil in Syria and the rise of IS allowed thousands of Central Asians to take part in extremist violence outside their countries of residence, and perhaps inspired violent actions by a small number of individuals who did not travel to the war zone; however, nationals of Central Asian countries have been behind only 0.14 percent of attacks recorded in the Global Terrorism Database over the past decade, while making up about 1 percent of the world's population.
- Research suggests that two significant causes of radicalization are (a) a rejection of society based on real and/or perceived injustices or failures and (b) experience with or attraction to “a culture of violence,” whether through previous combat experience, violent sports or crime.
- A large number of Central Asians fighting in the Middle East seem to have been radicalized outside of Central Asia, while working as labor migrants in Russia or Turkey.
- It is extremely difficult to say what Central Asian jihadists' next moves might be. The three main options seem to be: move on to a different conflict zone, with Afghanistan as the likeliest destination; return to Central Asia, where local governments are not rolling out the welcome mat; move to a third country, which requires money and/or connections, whether to abandon the fight or pursue it further.

- IS's Afghanistan branch is actively recruiting Central Asians but the flow of fighters is much lower than to the Middle East three or four years ago.
- Based on other researchers' work, recent terrorist attacks and plots in the West have more often been the work of local residents than itinerant former IS fighters.
- Tracking networked jihadists will require international cooperation among law-enforcers and other stakeholders.
- There does not seem to be an imminent danger of WMD attacks emanating from Central Asia, although better security is needed for radiological sources in use in the region.

The questions that still need to be answered are myriad. A good list of them can be found at the end of the December 2017 report "Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria:<sup>148</sup> Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia" by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. A few that interest us in particular include the following:

1. We have a good understanding of how Central Asians have been recruited, but why are certain individuals more susceptible than others?
2. Here we have focused on the 0.005 percent of the region's population who have joined violent extremist groups, and on the relatively small number of attacks they have committed. But what factors have made 99.995 percent of the population not take this route and put up with hardships without resorting to violence?
3. On a practical level, will countries in Central Asia take back their citizens who are currently in prison in the greater Middle East? (Formally they refuse to do so; however, it is possible that some of these people may have been quietly let back into their countries of origin if considered "useful" by the authorities.)
4. Finally, what are the salient distinctions among the five Central Asian countries in the context of radicalization and international terrorism?

Until we know more in answer to these and other questions it seems like a fool's errand to make policy recommendations. Nonetheless, a few obvious suggestions do come to mind for officials and the various international and non-governmental organization working in the relevant fields:

- Examine the decision-making processes of fighters who joined IS and other extremist groups as closely as possible. If they left their country, why? How did they choose their destination, militant group and/or targets? What made violence attractive? And so on. Interview them directly with the help of trained professionals to learn about the underlying problems that pushed them to jihad.
- Find ways to reduce the perceived injustices that can make individuals vulnerable to recruitment, such as corruption, abuse of power by law enforcement and other officials and discrimination against certain groups, e.g., ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan. (Further strengthening community policing may be one step in this direction.)
- Provide better security for the radiological sources in use in Central Asia.
- Ensure that information about potential terrorist threats is not skewed by Central Asian governments to get more money for military equipment or counterterrorism measures or to justify heavy-handed practices.
- Since so many Central Asian jihadists are recruited as labor migrants, help develop sustainable modes of improving economic opportunities at home where they will continue to have social support networks while earning a living.

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