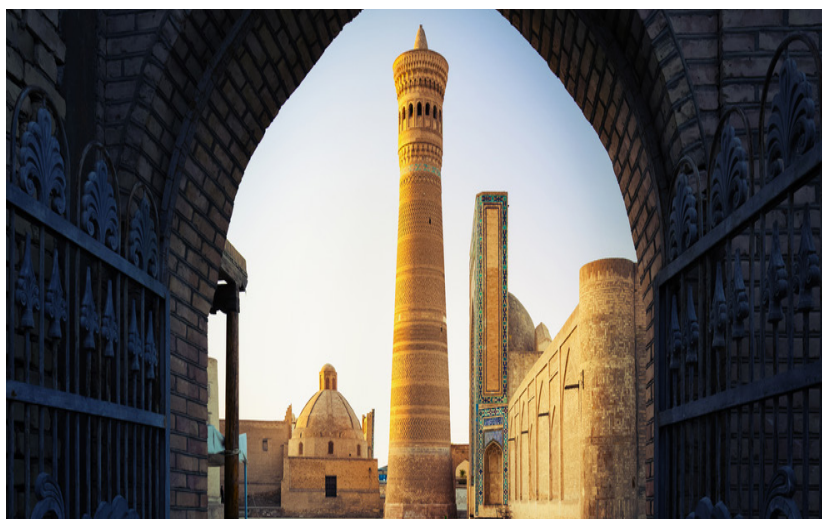


# Central Asia: Facing Radical Islam



**Erlan Karin**

February 2017

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# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

*Russie.Nei.Visions* is an online collection dedicated to Russia and the other new independent states (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). Written by leading experts, these policy-oriented papers deal with strategic, political and economic issues.

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- *The Soldiers of the Caliphate: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Group*, Astana, The Kazakh Institute of Strategic Studies, 2016.
- *Successor or Succession? Transferring power in Kazakhstan*, 2014.

## Summary

This article examines the global, regional and internal threats and challenges currently faced by Central Asian republics. The author sets out a number of complex security dilemmas in the region which have been caused by a whole set of domestic and external factors. Having analysed the geopolitical situation of the Central Asian republics, their domestic political make-up and current trends, he sets out various strategies for developing the region as part of the so-called “Great” and “Small” games. Particular attention is paid to the ongoing situation in Syria, which is having a significant effect on the regional security system. As the boundaries of the Syrian conflict have expanded, Central Asian countries have faced a threat from their own citizens, who, having gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, are forming new radical cells on these countries’ territories. Guaranteeing stability and security in Central Asia involves stepping up cooperation on both regional and global scales.

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# Introduction

Twenty-five years after the fall of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence by the republics of Central Asia, the issue of guaranteeing stability and security still looms large on Central Asia's agenda.

In the post-Soviet period, Central Asia has always been regarded as significant from a security point of view. The Central Asian states played along with this perception and turned it to their advantage, putting forward various proposals to safeguard stability and security. External players also concealed their interests in the region in the language of guaranteeing security and, while suggesting that the region unite in various security structures, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), spoke out from time to time about the need for joint action to repel new threats.

Attempts to seek out and assign the region a new meaning beyond simply being a "buffer zone" between different geopolitical forces or an outpost on the road of threats from Afghanistan have not been particularly successful. Central Asia therefore continues to be regarded as a potentially unstable region.<sup>1</sup> Various unresolved problems—from inter-ethnic clashes to territorial and water disputes—have also built up over this period and could grow into domestic, or even regional, conflicts.

For a long time, terrorism and extremism were not seen as serious threats to regional security. For a time, Central Asian governments even denied that the threat of terrorism existed because they did not want to indirectly acknowledge that some of the preconditions for terrorism were present in the region. If radicalism, extremism and terrorism were discussed, it was only in the context of external threats, while the idea of terrorist threats originating from Afghanistan was more common. Therefore it came as something of a surprise to local societies and to Central Asian governments themselves when they began to notice that radical groups were operating in the region. It is no coincidence that in a number of countries, the people sometimes criticise the authorities for

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Translated by Cameron Johnston.

1. O. Tanrisever, *Afghanistan and Central Asia: NATO's Role in Regional Security since 9/11*, Amsterdam, IOS Press, 2013, p. 38.

their delayed reaction to new threats and the inability of Central Asian states to combat the radicals.

The danger now, though, is that the first wave of poorly trained radicals may be replaced by fighters who have experienced war in Afghanistan and Syria, and acquired considerable military experience there. No evidence has yet come to light of terrorist organisations like “Al Qaeda” and the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) being present in the region. Or at least, there is no direct link between the recent terrorist attacks and these groups’ activities. Nevertheless, what they are doing in Syria and Afghanistan is likely to inspire radicals in Central Asia.

Increasing geopolitical tension, ongoing instability in neighbouring Afghanistan, the war in Syria and the appearance of new radical cells in Central Asia all serve to amplify threats and risks to the regional security system. What is more, the geopolitical situation is deteriorating against a background of growing domestic instability in Central Asian countries. A transition of power is taking place in Uzbekistan and, consequently, political elites are inevitably being replaced. In Kyrgyzstan, a political struggle is underway between the current authorities and the opposition in the run-up to the 2017 presidential elections. Consequently, new dividing lines are appearing within the elites and society, and domestic turbulence is growing. We are therefore seeing a new focus in security policy, with domestic political problems coming to the fore. Again, less attention is now being paid to the new threats and challenges presented by radicals.

All of this generates new dilemmas for Central Asian security. Both societies and elites face new questions. What is more important, internal or external threats? How to respond to the emerging threats? Is it better to take decisive action now or take the long view and focus on neutralising those factors which cause radicalisation? Not only the security and stability of the region but also the prospects of the states themselves depend on resolving these dilemmas.

# Central Asia: internal and external threats

Following the events of September 11 and the beginning of the US military campaign in Afghanistan, Central Asia found itself on the metaphorical front line of the fight against international terrorism.<sup>2</sup> The deployment to Afghanistan of troops from the international coalition made the region much more important than it had been before.<sup>3</sup> The Central Asian republics acted as go-betweens in setting up and protecting military bases, as well as in supplies and transportation. After coalition forces began their withdrawal from Afghanistan, however, the spotlight on Central Asia began to dim. At the same time, China's actions in the region have grown more noticeable as Russia and the United States have become less active, while any changes to the existing balance of power may carry with it risks to the region's stability and security.

The geopolitical situation is changing at a time when the domestic politics of Central Asia's states is undergoing a paradigm shift. The appetite for political protest is growing within society and more conflicts are taking place among elites. A changing of the guard is being felt across the region, most acutely in Uzbekistan, one of Central Asia's most densely populated states, which has recently elected a new President.<sup>4</sup> The region's security dilemmas are therefore caused by a mix of external and internal factors.

## The "Great Game"

Most experts traditionally look at Central Asia through the prism of the so-called "Great Game", or rivalry between Russia, China and the US. In reality, however, these countries are not at loggerheads in the region, even if their interests do not always align. External players preserve a strategic

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2. E. Wishnick, *Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia*, Carlisle Barracks, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002, p. 2.

3. "Pomoshchnik Gossekretaria SShA Robert Blejk—o kontseptsii prisutstviia SShA v Tsentral'noj Azii" [US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake—on the thinking behind the US presence in Central Asia], FerganaNews, 27 July 2012, [www.fergananews.com](http://www.fergananews.com).

4. "Shavkat Mirziyev naznachen vrio prezidenta vrazrez s Konstitutsiei" [Shavkat Mirziyoyev appointed acting President contrary to the Constitution], Radio Ozodlik, 9 September 2016, <http://rus.ozodlik.org>.



balance and see no interest in destabilising the region since any resulting conflict could spread to the Caucasus, Xinjiang, or the countries of South Asia.

For the United States, Central Asia states represent a buffer on the road to Afghanistan and a reliable, tried-and-tested transport route. The US cooperation therefore involves security and economic development. Contrary to the view of some experts, the United States is not fully withdrawing from the region and it is likely to cement its presence by implementing alternative strategies. Judging by what the new President, Donald Trump, has said about a policy of isolationism, the region is unlikely to be of serious interest to the incoming administration. Central Asia will be mainly considered through the prism of relations with Russia and China. Attempts to ensure stability and security in the region will consist in eliminating causes of radicalisation and resolving the Afghan question.

Fears and stereotypes surround Chinese policy in Central Asia, not least over the likelihood of widespread expansion. The people of the region approach their neighbour's projects with extreme caution. China therefore fears being suspected of geopolitical ambition and the desire to dominate: consequently, it is not interested in forming any regional unions, including with Russia. Beijing will push ahead with its policy of increasing economic cooperation and continue to invest in infrastructure projects across the region. China is pragmatic and cautious, and expects its investments to have a snowball effect. For China, investing in the economies of Central Asian states is not simply a gesture of goodwill or a charitable act but a down-payment on its own security.

By developing or supporting the economies of Central Asian states, therefore, China is trying to nip the preconditions for radicalisation in the bud and prevent Central Asia from becoming a new flashpoint. That is why China is continuing to extend the capabilities and resources of the anti-terror wing of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and to attract Central Asian countries to participate in it.

Russia remains the leading geopolitical force in Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> That said, it is involved to varying extents at different times and it goes through active and passive phases. At a time when its economy is ailing, Russia is unlikely to have the resources needed to carry out any significant projects. It is therefore unable to compete with China in terms of investments and

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5. S. Peyrouse, "Russia-Central Asia: Advances and Shortcomings of the Military Partnership", in S. Blank (ed.) *Central Asian Security Trends: Views from Europe and Russia*, Carlisle Barracks, PA, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2010, p. 8.

carrying out large economic projects. The so-called “division of labour” suits Moscow, with China being responsible for the region’s economy and Moscow for its security.<sup>6</sup>

Be that as it may, Central Asia will be of strategic value for Russia, particularly vis-à-vis guaranteeing security. Yet Russia’s intervention in the Syrian conflict has encouraged Central Asian jihadists to see the region, and Russia itself, as a new target.

Stability in Central Asia spells security for Russia itself and serves as a shield against the potential spread of conflicts from the Middle East and South Asia. Russia will therefore preserve its influence in the region. Moscow focuses its efforts on the political-military domain, lending help to guard borders and expand cooperation in counterterrorism. Russia is also prepared to cooperate with other world players to guarantee regional and global security.

At present, the “Great Game” in Central Asia is unlikely to result in destabilisation because the preconditions for direct competition between the major international powers are lacking. Nevertheless, their rivalry could intensify if the Central Asian states themselves stoke competition and upset the current equilibrium by, for instance, suddenly establishing intimate relations with any one of them. The transfer of power that has begun in a series of Central Asian states could turn into a “bone of contention” between the major players. By trying to exert their influence over the new regimes, Moscow and Washington could find themselves in a new geopolitical rivalry. Even more dangerous is the “Small Game” in Central Asia. Rash initiatives by local elites could also provoke competition among regional powers, such as Iran and Turkey, bringing new conflicts and contradictions to the region. These states are more “emotional” in making political decisions. Hence the real risk that the region could be destabilised.

## Internal Threats

Over their quarter century of independence, the republics of Central Asia have laid firm foundations for the state. Yet the problem of identity, both at home and abroad, remains a serious challenge. It remains difficult for the Central Asian republics to find their way when it comes to geopolitics. This explains the lack of coherence in the foreign policy strategies that they employ, ranging from neutrality and isolationism to a multi-vector

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6. “Tsentral’naia Aziia—2020: chetyre strategicheskikh kontsepta” [Central Asia—2020: four strategic concepts], Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Astana, 2015.

approach. Moreover, the identity crisis within Central Asian states is caused by their ongoing search for the image that their societies and countries want to project. After independence, they neglected political transformation and self-determination. They remain infused by contradictory discussions about the importance of identifying oneself with a nation or religion. Rising nationalism and radicalism reflect long postponed issues of national identity. In this context, Islamism is logically taking a stronger hold in the region.

The drawn-out and unresolved nature of the Afghan question have also led to a rise in religious radicalism in Central Asian countries. Since the mid-2000s, local terrorists have repeatedly carried out attacks in the Central Asian republics under the influence of “jihad”. The “Arab Spring” uprisings also stirred up a new wave of radicalisation in the region. The large-scale emigration of citizens to the conflict zones, the possible return of experienced fighters and the destructive influence of internet propaganda may, in the short term, expose the regional security system to the greatest of pressures.

Certain radical forces are taking advantage of this ideological and security chaos, and unsolved social problems to gain adherents. Since the appearance of jihadi terrorism in Afghanistan and Syria, the growth of islamisation in Central Asia has become a domestic threat to the stability of Central Asian states’ political systems.

The region now faces numerous and multifaceted threats. A deterioration of the social and economic situation could rock the stability of the political system. In Kyrgyzstan, a complex political situation is unfolding, with serious conflicts within the local political elite being uncovered in the run-up to the presidential election campaign. In Tajikistan, the opposition is being squeezed out of legal politics, while the precarious balance reached at the end of the civil war is being violated. The attempt by leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan to resist harassment by the authorities ultimately resulted in it being declared illegal.<sup>7</sup> The recent change of government in Central Asia’s most densely populated state, Uzbekistan, also carries some risks to regional security.<sup>8</sup>

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7. A. Sarkorova, “V Tadjikistane zapreshchena Islamskaia partiia” [Islamic party banned in Tajikistan], BBC, 29 September 2016, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

8. “Shavkat Mirziyaev naznachen vrio prezidenta vrazrez s Konstitutsiej” [Shavkat Mirziyoyev appointed acting President contrary to the Constitution], Radio Ozodlik, 9 September 2016, <http://rus.ozodlik.org>.

These political processes show that there are new dividing lines within elites and societies. Regional elites must understand that authoritarian regimes do not respond to the new situation and are not always capable of reacting effectively to domestic threats. That is why the expectations surrounding political modernisation in the region are so high.

The countries of Central Asia have institutionalised their political systems to varying degrees. Whereas Kazakhstan has succeeded in building relatively strong political and state institutions, traditional norms remain pregnant in the politics of the other republics. In essence, Central Asia is caught between tradition and modernity: it is losing its grounding in tradition but not reaching the necessary levels of modernisation.

# A new wave of radicalisation

We are currently witnessing a new stage in radicalisation in Central Asia, brought about by both internal and external factors. Domestically, the main drivers of radicalisation are social and economic problems such as unemployment, poverty and corruption.<sup>9</sup> External reasons for the new wave of radicalisation include growing worldwide geopolitical tension and the appearance of new hotspots.

## The Syrian conflict

The war in Syria created the conditions in which a new type of terrorist group, ISIS, could appear. ISIS has changed the face and scale of the terrorist threat and its actions have exposed the vulnerability of the regional and global security systems. The large-scale terrorist attacks carried out in Paris in January and November 2015 showed that the radicals were not only capable of operating in their own region, the Middle East, but had also become a serious threat for the whole world.

Through its actions, ISIS helped to activate “sleeping” cells and so-called “lone wolves”. It was under the influence of radical propaganda by extremist groups that a terrorist attack was carried out in Kazakhstan in June 2016.

Another notable feature of the Syrian conflict has been the large number of foreign citizens taking part in the fighting. The number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is rising steadily. In June 2016, the US State Department announced that more than 40,000 fighters from 100 countries were fighting in Syria.<sup>10</sup> The number of fighters in Syria is greater than the combined total of those who joined terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia in any year over the past 20 years.<sup>11</sup> Some of these fighters return to their home countries to organise acts of horrific violence.

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9. T. Lynch, M. Bouffard, K. King, G. Vickowski, “The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy”, Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Perspectives*, No. 21, October 2016, p. 4. <http://inss.ndu.edu>.

10. “Over 40,000 Foreign Militants from 100 Countries Fighting in Syria—US State Department”, RT, 3 June 2016, [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com).

11. “13,463 terrorist attacks were carried out worldwide in 2014”, Gruzia Online, 28 June 2015, [www.apsny.ge](http://www.apsny.ge).

The Syrian crisis has exposed divides between great powers over security and world politics, and has also had serious knock-on effects in foreign policy. Russia's military involvement in Syria contributed to a deterioration of relations with Turkey. The United States and its allies also disagree fundamentally with Russia over the situation unfolding in Syria. The global players in the Syrian conflict are putting the strength and effectiveness of the regional and international security systems to the test.

## Central Asia in the terrorist groups' sphere of interest

The new wave of terrorist activity is taking place dangerously close to the countries of Central Asia. The Taliban has asserted itself in Northern Afghanistan, a country where ISIS is also known to be present. Central Asia, however, is not currently a major priority for activity by the well-known terrorist organisations. Be that as it may, competition to mark one's presence and the struggle for new recruits are very concerning since they may serve to activate Central Asian terrorist groups. Armed with ideas and finances, Central Asian groups such as the "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (IMU) and Jamaat Ansarullah may strengthen their action. The activity of Al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria and Afghanistan may awaken "sleeping" cells across the region.

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have already faced similar threats in the past. In 2004, for instance, members of the "Islamic Jihad Union" (IJU) carried out suicide bombings in the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent. In 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, members of the extremist religious group "Jaish al-Mahdi" claimed responsibility for organising several attacks. In 2011 in Kazakhstan, the group "Jund al-Khalifat" claimed responsibility for a series of attacks carried out in several different cities. These groups were all closely connected to the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, having received shelter from them, as well as access to weapons and combat experience. Due to the US invasion of Afghanistan, however, the Taliban became less capable and its resources were severely restricted. This, in turn, led to the weakening or disappearance of several Central Asian groups.

Even though the major terrorist groups do not appear to be present in the region, the fact that Central Asian citizens are swelling their ranks

creates potential long-term threats. Several of these have already started to become a reality.

Over the past three years, Central Asian citizens have created a number of ethnic brigades in Syria and Iraq, which form part of well-known terrorist organisations like ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the latter being previously linked to Al Qaeda). Hundreds of Central Asian citizens now fight in their ranks. One of these brigades, the Central Asian group Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, organised the attack on the capital of Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2016. So at a time when jihad is being waged in Syria, a new generation of radicals is growing up and Central Asian fighters are increasingly tending to occupy leadership positions.

Central Asian states must therefore pay close attention to current events in Afghanistan and Syria, the processes by which fighters move about and the activities of new radical cells in Central Asia. This will allow them to reduce the potential threat that terrorism poses to the region.

## Foreign fighters: the Central Asian angle

The countries of Central Asia are confronted to the problem of their own citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq. Admittedly, the number of Central Asian fighters and the scale of their participation in the hostilities are often somewhat exaggerated.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the problem is real. The governments of Central Asia are now seriously worried, therefore, about their citizens returning home having received combat experience, as well as about the fate of fighters' widows and young children. What is more, current events in the Middle East have once again put a spotlight on the activity on Central Asian radical groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Turkistan Islamic Party and others.

The war in Syria generated a new wave of radicalisation in the region. In contrast to other foreign fighters, however, those from Central Asia:

- are part of conflicting radical groups in Syria and are more likely to fight against each other. The war in Syria is not only being waged against the current President, Bashar al-Assad: a bloody struggle is also underway between different militarised groups for territory, resources and power. This conflict sees Central Asian fighters, within ISIS, Al Qaeda or "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham", taking up opposing sides in the war and fighting against each other;

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12. "Tsentral'noaziatskie boeviki v Sirii" [Central Asian fighters in Syria], Analytical report of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Astana, 2016.

- form into separate ethnic groups, or “jamaats”. They do not only join the large radical groups but also establish their own ethnic brigades or group together with fighters from other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries;

- mainly left as entire families. Around 150 families have left Tajikistan alone, while 63 have left Kyrgyzstan. If most of the fighters have already died, the question of what will happen to the remaining widows and children is particularly acute. Some of them remain in the warzone, while others leave for Turkey, Egypt and other countries. These desperate people could become the next target for terrorist groups’ recruiters and set off a new wave of radicalisation;

- often take up leadership positions within the terrorist groups. Central Asian and Iranian fighters occupy senior positions in the various groups, despite being few in number. According to the UN, Central Asian fighters, as well as ethnic Chechens from Russia, are represented among the senior commanders of ISIS and “Jabhat Fateh al-Sham”. These commanders who have seen war in Syria may go on to replace the current generation of leaders at some point in the future;

- are an easy target for terrorist recruiters as migrants (especially in Russia). In conditions of high unemployment and intermittent earnings, and in search of social justice, unhappy migrants may fall for the radical ideology of terrorist groups;

Different reports and studies give different figures for the number of Central Asians fighting in Syria and referring to them is thus fraught with difficulty. Unfortunately, no clear data exist and different sources use different figures. Disputes between experts about the number of fighters distract from the heart of the problem, for even if only tens of people had gone to fight, that would still be a cause for concern.

## Kazakhstan

The Kazakh population has been one of the first targets of jihadi propaganda campaigns across the region. Over the past three years, ISIS has posted several video clips involving Kazakhs. In its first video-statement, ISIS stated that Kazakh citizens were coming to Syria in droves. Subsequent ISIS videos covered the life and activities of Kazakh fighters. Most concerning of all was that underage children of Kazakh fighters were used for propaganda purposes. In January 2015, for instance, ISIS released a further video in which a boy of ten or slightly older “executes” two supposed FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service) agents.



It should be noted that the boy doing the “executing” had earlier given a video interview about Kazakhs fighting in Syria, which came out in November 2014. He also featured in the first ever video about Kazakhs leaving to fight jihad in Syria, which came out in October 2013. It was one of the first cases of terrorist propaganda in which an underage child had subjected people to illegal acts. Experts believe that the video was staged with certain aims in mind, one of them being to intimidate members of the secret services and spread the word about the “Caliphate’s” young generation.

The Kazakh authorities announced in March 2016 that around 200 Kazakhs were currently fighting in Syria and Iraq<sup>13</sup>, and living alongside wives, widows and children.

With the threat growing, Kazakhstan is taking steps to prevent more of its citizens from engaging in terrorism. A law was signed in April 2014 which imposed a prison sentence of 3 to 7 years for “deliberate illegal activity by a Kazakh citizen in armed conflicts or military operations on the territory of a foreign state, if there is no sign of mercenarism”. In May 2014, a resident of Almaty, Kazakhstan, was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for taking part in terrorist activity in Syria.

## Kyrgyzstan

The threat of terrorism is particularly high in Kyrgyzstan. Experience would suggest that most returnees do not try to try to accommodate themselves to a new or old way of life but set about planning large-scale attacks designed to intimate the population and the authorities. In February 2014 alone, for instance, in the course of two special operations, the Kyrgyz security forces arrested 10 natives and residents of Osh region who had been planning a series of attack on Kyrgyz territory. Reportedly, some of them received training in terrorist camps in Syria and were directly involved in military operations. Earlier, in September 2013, fighters arriving from Syria were also arrested: they had intended to organise explosions on Kyrgyzstan Independence Day and at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. One of them turned out to be a Kazakh, while two others were from the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan.

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13. S. Kaukenova, “200 kazakhstantsev vmeste s sem’iami voiuut v Sirii i Irake—sektretar’ Sovbeza” [200 Kazakhs, together with their families, are fighting in Syria and Iraq—secretary of the Security Council], Vlast.kz, 2 March 2016, <https://vlast.kz>.

According to the latest official figures, around 571 citizens have left to fight in Syria<sup>14</sup>, including 63 families<sup>15</sup> and around 100 underage children.<sup>16</sup> Nearly 80% of them are ethnic Uzbeks.<sup>17</sup>

In July 2015, the President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambayev, signed into law amendments to the country's legal code which made it a criminal offence for citizens to take part in armed conflicts abroad. You can now be imprisoned for up to twelve years for committing such crimes.

## Tajikistan

Of all the Central Asian countries, Tajikistan has experienced the greatest upsurge in the number of citizens leaving to fight, it having increased fivefold between 2014 and 2015 from 200 to 1000.<sup>18</sup> The problem is regionally-specific because most of those who have left for Syria come from the country's southern regions. In 2014, criminal cases were launched against 35 residents of Tajikistan's Sughd region who had taken part, or tried to participate, in military operations in Syria.<sup>19</sup> Of these, 17 were arrested and a search is underway for the remaining.

In the first six months of 2016, Tajik law enforcement agencies arrested 368 members of terrorist organisations<sup>20</sup>: 133 were members of ISIS, 18 of the Muslim Brotherhood and 10 of the Turkistan Islamic Movement.

Because its citizens are so heavily involved in military operations in Syria, Tajikistan was one of the first countries in Central Asia to toughen up legislation vis-a-vis those who take part in armed conflicts outside the country. Under a Presidential Order signed on 24 July 2014, fighters or

14. N. Ganyeva, "Vneshie i vnutyennie factory" [External and internal factors], *Terrorizm.kg*, 25 March 2016, <http://24.kg>.

15. I Marchenko, "V Sirii i Irake pogibli 45 grazhdan Kyrgyzstana" [45 Kazakh citizens have died in Syria and Iraq], 24.KG, 8 September 2015, <http://24.kg>.

16. N. Ganyeva, "Iz Kyrgyzstana v Siriiu vyvezli okolo 100 detej" [Around 100 children have been taken from Kyrgyzstan to Syria], 24.KG, 31 May 2016, <http://m.24kg.org>.

17. I. Parazhchuk, A. Val'samaki, "Zaderzhannykh uzbekov podozrevaiut v popytakh vyekhat' v Siriiu" [Arrested Uzbeks suspects of trying to leave for Syria], Radio Azattyk, 9 November 2015, <http://rus.azattyq.org>.

18. M. Mukhammadradzhab, "V otnoshenii desiati jitelej Sogdijskoj oblasti zaveli ugolovnye dela za uchastie v dzhikhade" [About 10 residents of Sughd region sued for participation to jihad] Radio Ozodi, 15 October 2014, <http://rus.ozodi.org>; "Rakhmon: "Bolee 1000 tadjikov voiiut v Sirii i v Irake" [Rakhmon: "Over 1000 Tajiks are fighting in Syria and Iraq"], Radio Azattyk, 25 January 2016, <http://rus.azattyk.org>.

19. "Prokuratora ob uchastii zhitelej Sogda v Vojne v Sirii" [Procurator on the involvement of Sugd residents in the war in Syria], Radio Ozodi, 6 January 2015, <http://rus.ozodi.org>.

20. N. Barkhom, "V Tadjikistane snizhaetsia vyezd molodiozhi v Siriiu" [In Tajikistan, the exodus of young people to Syria declines], SA Online, 23 August 2016, [www.inozpress.kg](http://www.inozpress.kg).

recruiters may be imprisoned for between twelve and twenty years. In October 2015, a resident of Sughd region was sentenced to sixteen years of imprisonment for fighting in Syria and recruiting people to ISIS. In December 2015, meanwhile, seven Tajik citizens were sentenced to between seven and twenty seven years imprisonment for draping a monument in the ISIS flag. Three of them were minors.

Meanwhile, media reports suggest that “disaffected fighters” who willingly return to Tajikistan from Syria without having fought or intended to take part in the war may return home freely and resume a peaceful life. There are several cases in which this has occurred: two residents of Sughd region who returned from Syria were released.

## Turkmenistan

Unfortunately, the lack of openly-available information about fighters from Turkmenistan makes it impossible to pick out any trends. Many Western analysts continue to put forward figures based on information presented by Syrian officials in 2013. It is said that around 190 citizens of Turkmenistan are fighting in Syria as part of various different terrorist groups. Nevertheless, the number of people leaving for the warzone is rising. It should be noted, however, that even experts sometimes confuse citizens of Turkmenistan with other ethnic groups (Turkmens/Turkomans) living in Syria and Iraq. Some of the figures may therefore be somewhat unreliable.

## Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has a particular history of religious extremism. IMU was one of the first combat-ready terrorist groups in Central Asia. Then other regional terrorist cells appeared, such as the IJU, Jamaat Ansarullah and Jund al-Khalifah.

The next stage in the evolution of Uzbek radicals was the war in Syria. Large Uzbek military formations such as the Imam Bukhari Battalion and Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad are currently reinforcing their positions as the advance detachments of the well-known terrorist organisation Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a former Al-Qaeda cell in Syria.

Turkish human rights activists believe that around three to three and a half thousand Uzbek citizens are fighting in Syria.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, meanwhile, members of the National Security Service stated that “500-600 people

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21. “Boeviki Uzbekistana v Sirii zanimaiutsia reklamoj “Islamskogo gosudarstva” [Uzbek fighters in Syria advertise “Islamic State”], Radio Ozodi, 4 November 2014, <http://rus.ozodi.org>.

from Uzbekistan are fighting on ISIS's side. Although we do not have reliable information about the total number of Uzbek citizens who have moved to the area under ISIS's control".<sup>22</sup> It was also stated that ISIS is trying to recruit professionals and qualified workers, not those who can only "pull a trigger".<sup>23</sup>

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22. "IGIL verbuet kvalifitsirovannykh rabotnikov iz Uzbekistana" [ISIS recruits qualified workers from Uzbekistan], Stan Radar, 4 September 2015, [www.stanradar.com](http://www.stanradar.com).

23. *Ibid.*

# The rise of terrorist threats in the region

Some phenomena revealing the increased activity Central Asian terrorist groups are extremely worrying.

Firstly, the mere fact that Central Asian citizens are fighting for Al Qaeda or ISIS in Syria and Iraq can reinforce the interest of the major terrorist groups for the opportunities that the region may present.

Secondly, to achieve recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of the terrorist groups' leaders, Central Asian fighters are striving to excel themselves in combat and resorting to the most brutal of methods. The children of Central Asian fighters have been used in a series of ISIS videos to carry out demonstrative public executions.

Thirdly, given the potential for Central Asian fighters to reinforce their positions in the Al Qaeda or ISIS hierarchy, we could see a gradual changing of the guard as Central Asians take up crucial positions in the major terrorist groups. In future, therefore, there is a threat that these groups may redirect some of their activity towards Central Asia.

Finally, the possible heightening of the terrorist threat in Central Asia is linked to the return of home-grown fighters. Cases have already been reported of people who, having received military training in Syria, intended to carry out terrorist attacks in their home countries.

The processes underway in the Middle East and Afghanistan are exerting increasing influence on the geopolitical space of Central Asia.

## Central Asian armed groups in Afghanistan and Syria

Most of the well-known Central Asian military units are closely linked to Afghanistan in general and the Taliban in particular. History, religion and the proximity of the Afghan border all played their part, as did the changing political landscape to an even greater extent. In Afghanistan, these groups received sanctuary, experience of combat and the opportunity to gain a foothold in the so-called "global jihad".

## ***The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)***

For twenty years, IMU was one of the major, combat-ready, terrorist groups in Central Asia and it had contacts not only with the Taliban but also with Al Qaeda. Initially, it sought to overthrow Islam Karimov's government and establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. However, having participated in the Afghan conflict, IMU members began to espouse cosmopolitan (as opposed to national) values.<sup>24</sup> The Syrian crisis changed the group's activity and its future existence. In 2015, the leader of IMU, Usman Ghazi, swore loyalty to ISIS and criticised the Taliban, noting that the movement's leader, Mullah Omar, had died fourteen years previously and accusing the Taliban's leadership of "lies, Afghan-isation and nepotism".<sup>25</sup> These statements led to a schism within IMU and a showdown of a faction of it with the Taliban. In December 2015, internet sites affiliated to the Taliban announced that IMU's leader, and several of its members, had been killed in a clash with Taliban fighters. It marked the destruction of IMU's most important unit. In June 2016, however, several IMU fighters announced that IMU was still in existence and that they remained loyal to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, the group is not as influential or broadly-based as it was when it first appeared.

## ***The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)***

The IJU is made up of another group of fighters who broke away from the IMU. Information about this radical cell is highly contradictory. Indeed, such were the doubts about the existence of the group that many regarded it as all but the brainchild of the Uzbek secret services. IJU claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks in Tashkent in 2004, however, thereby demonstrating its seriousness of purpose. According to experts, it was the first terrorist group in Central Asia to use suicide bombing as a tactic.<sup>26</sup> For a long time, IJU developed in an Afghan mould and its ideology gelled over time with Al Qaeda's strategy. For a time, it is believed, IJU's chief strategist was Abu Leith al-Libi, one of Usama's bin Laden's

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24. A. Gurkov, "Islamskoe dvizhenie Uzbekistana rasshiriaet svoiu geografiiu" [The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan expands its footprint], DW, 24 December 2009, [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com).

25. "Taliby pasprostranili fotografiuu iakoby miortvogo Usmana Gazi" [Taliban distributed photograph of the supposedly dead Usman Ghazi], Radio Ozodlik, 11 December 2015, [www.ozodlik.org](http://www.ozodlik.org).

26. F. Dzhani, "Chto takoe 'Soyuz islamskogo dzhikhada': vyдумka spetsluzhb ili 'dochka' 'Al'-Kaidy'?" [What is the "Islamic Jihad Union": an invention of the secret services or a "daughter" of Al Qaeda?], FerganaNews, 28 September 2009, [www.fergananeews.com](http://www.fergananeews.com).

main field commanders.<sup>27</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the group tried to operate on a global scale. In 2007, members of IJU were arrested in Germany: they had been planning an attack on the Ramstein airbase, a US military facility in the state of Rhineland Palatinate. The fighters who returned from Syria to Kyrgyzstan in autumn 2013 were also members of IJU, suggesting that the group, which had earlier been deployed in Afghanistan and Pakistan, was now actively engaged in transferring fighters. Several members of another group—Jund al-Khalifat—who were connected to IJU, were arrested in Turkey as they tried to reach Syria. Thus, to this day, IJU represents a serious problem for Central Asian states.

### ***Jamaat Ansarullah***

Reports suggest that Jamaat Ansarullah (the Society of Allah's Soldiers) was founded in 2006 by Tajik fighters who had split off from the IMU.<sup>28</sup> The group made itself known in 2010 when it claimed responsibility for an explosion in Khujand, the capital of Sughd province in September that year. The Tajik authorities also accuse the group of taking part in an ambush in the Rasht valley, which resulted in the death of 20 soldiers. In 2011, a video was published in the group's name appealing to the Muslims of Tajikistan to take up jihad against state policy. Despite all this, doubts were raised about whether Jamaat Ansarullah really existed but these were undermined by the official position of the Tajik authorities. In May 2012, the country's high court ruled that Jamaat Ansarullah was banned on the territory of Tajikistan.<sup>29</sup> Open sources indicate that the group is active in Afghanistan. Currently, the 50-60-strong group is most active in the Afghan province of Badakhshan and maintains links with the Taliban.<sup>30</sup> Reports also suggest that some members of Jamaat Ansarullah have joined the 'international jihad' in Syria.<sup>31</sup>

Central Asian fighters go to Syria establish their own ethnic detachments, or jamaats. Due to a dearth of funds and weapons, however,

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27. G. Steinberg, "Soiuz Islamskogo dzhikhada': portret terroristicheskoy organizatsii" [The "Islamic Jihad Union": portrait of a terrorist organisation], 4 October 2013, <http://antiterrortoday.com>.

28. N. Barkhom, "Dzhamaat Ansarullakh' vozrozhdaetsia" ["Jamaat Ansarullah" is reborn], CA Online, 8 December 2015, [www.inozpress.kg](http://www.inozpress.kg).

29. "Dzhamaat Ansarullakh' ob'iaвлен vne zakona" ["Jamaat Ansarullah" declared illegal], Radio Ozodi, 3 May 2012, <http://rus.ozodi.org>.

30. "Tadzhikskie boeviki aktivizirovalis' v Badakhshane" [Tajik fighters become active in Badakhshan], Lev Gumilev Centre, 6 December 2016, [www.gumilev-center.af](http://www.gumilev-center.af).

31. "Tadzhikistan boretsia s terrorom" [Tajikistan fights against terror], Anti Terror, 27 June 2014, <http://counter-terror.kz>.

the Central Asian jamaats are forced to act under the auspices of large terrorist groups. We now know about several of these military formations.

### ***Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (Jannat Oshiqлари)***

The group was formed relatively recently, in 2014, by an ethnic Uyghur and citizen of Kyrgyzstan, Sirojiddin Mukhtarov<sup>32</sup> (also known as Abu Saloh). It is known that the group is very active in Kyrgyzstan where it recruits and sends fighters off to Syria. Thirty-five people left for Syria from Osh province alone in 2014-2015 to join Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad. Current data suggests that the group is 180-200 people strong<sup>33</sup>, with most of them hailing from the Osh, Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Jalal-Abad (Pakistan) regions, as well as China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In September 2015, the group was incorporated into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front, which had been allied to Al Qaeda in Syria), and together they took part in operations against Russian forces in Syria. In September 2015 for instance, the group claimed responsibility for an attack on Russian forces in Syria.<sup>34</sup> And although this Central Asian group is now one of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's main operational formations, the group has not abandoned its goal of organising jihad in Central Asia. In August 2016, the State National Security Committee of Kyrgyzstan announced that the group was implicated in the car bombing of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Imam Bukhari Battalion (KIB)***

Currently, the Uzbek Iman Bukhari Battalion (Kateebat Imaam Al-Bukhari, KIB) is the largest Central Asian military formation in Syria and it is made up mainly of citizens from Central Asian states. Up to 400 Uzbek citizens are fighting in KIB's ranks<sup>36</sup>, according to the Turkish media, and most of them have experience of military operations in Afghanistan. The founder of

32. "Organizatory vzryva v kitajskom posol'stve skryvaiutsia v Turtsii i Sirii?" [Are the organisers of the blast at the Chinese embassy hiding in Turkey and Syria?], Belyj Parus, 7 September 2016, [www.parusk.info](http://www.parusk.info).

33. A. Isaev, "Terroristy zapreshcheny ofitsial'no" [Terrorists officially banned], Delo.kg, 28 May 2015, <http://delo.kg>.

34. T. Joscelin, "Al Qaeda brigade claims attack on Russian forces in Syria", Threat Matrix, 30 September 2015, [www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org).

35. "Ustanovleny organizatory i ispolniteli terakta v posol'stve Kitaia v KR—GKNB" [The organisers and executors of the terrorist attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan—GKNB], Kyrgyz telegraph agency, 6 September 2016, <http://kyrtag.kg>.

36. "Suriye'de Savaşan Özbekistanlı Direnişçiler" [Uzbek rebels fighting in Syria], IncaNews, 6 February 2014, [www.incanews.com](http://www.incanews.com).



KIB, Salahuddin, “fought alongside [Uzbeq radical Islamists Juma] Namangani and [Tahir] Yuldashev and joined IMU in 1999”<sup>37</sup>, suggesting that KIB has its roots in IMU. Salahuddin moved to Syria in 2011 and within three years, he had formed his own detachment, Imam Bukhari Battalion. Media reports from November 2014 indicate that KIB was fighting in ISIS’s ranks. In September 2015, however, it became clear that KIB had joined Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, some claim that the group, which first made a name for itself in Syria, is in contact with the Taliban.

### ***Sabri Jamaat***

Early in 2014, Sabri Jamaat, a Tajik-Uzbek military formation in Syria, led by Khalid ad-Dagestani, released a video stating that it had joined ISIS.<sup>39</sup> The decision to join ISIS was taken after Jabhat Fateh al-Sham tried to take Sabri Jamaat’s anti-aircraft weapons. Later, however, the group gave no public sign that it was active in Syria.

Central Asians are also fighting in other groups dominated by Russian-speakers, such as the so-called Crimean Jamaat, as well as the Chechen group Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar.

## **Online propaganda**

Widespread propaganda on the internet is crucial in contributing to the successful recruitment of Central Asian fighters. On the popular video-sharing platform YouTube, one can freely search for and view a huge number of professional and amateur videos about the activities of different terrorist groups. These propaganda clips are very popular and have been watched more than 100,000 times.

Virtual recruitment is therefore becoming a powerful tool of manipulation and it is more and more difficult to track. Whereas state security services used to be able to block resources containing terrorist or extremist content, they do not always succeed now in taking countermeasures because most terrorist groups have shifted their focus to

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37. M. Eniseev, “V Uzbekistane osuzhdeny eshchio bol’she ekstremistov” [Yet more extremists convicted in Uzbekistan], SA Online, [www.inozpress.kg](http://www.inozpress.kg).

38. C. Weiss, “Uzbek groups part of new offensive in southern Aleppo”, Threat Matrix, 7 July 2016, [www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org).

39. B. Roggio, “Central Asian Jihadist Group Joins ISIS”, Threat Matrix, 7 May 2014, [www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org).

social networks such as Twitter, where they propagate an ideology of war and jihad.

Moreover, fighters are becoming less active in the Russian portion of the internet, including on the social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. One reason could be that the account holders have died, another might be greater monitoring of social networks by the Russian law enforcement agencies. In recent months, therefore, ISIS has shifted “some of its propaganda and recruitment work to the crypted mobile messaging service Telegram”.<sup>40</sup>

Terrorist groups are widely and actively taking advantage of the opportunities that the internet affords: they are nimble and professional in their use of information technologies and know how to turn “public relations” to their own ends. In 2015, special structures within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation intercepted more than 57,000 websites that were being used to recruit Central Asian citizens.<sup>41</sup>

## **Terrorist attacks in 2016 (Aktobe, Bishkek)**

Predictions around the activation of sleeping cells and the negative influence of internet propaganda have started to come true, as the recent terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan graphically demonstrate.

On 5 June 2016, in the Kazakh city of Aktobe, a group of radicals carried out a series of attacks which resulted in the deaths of civilians and soldiers, as well as the attackers themselves. Radical internet propaganda was the main catalyst for the attack. The Kazakh secret services revealed that the group’s members had earlier listened to a speech, supposedly by an official member of ISIS, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, calling for jihad. Afterwards, the radicals decided to organise “jihad” in their country.

This terrorist attack was carried out by a group that was neither part of, nor affiliated to, any of the major terrorist groups. They acted without orders from any centre and had only indirect links with radical groups abroad. They listened to sermons by an ISIS ideologue, for instance.

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40. I. Parazhchuk, A. Klevtsova, “Tsentral’noaziatskie i rossijskie boeviki ukhodiut iz sotssetej” [Central Asian and Russian fighters leave social networks], Radio Azattyk, 6 November 2016, <http://rus.azattyq.org>.

41. “ODKB: Terroristy dlia verbovki v IGIL zhitel’j Tsentral’noj Azii ispol’zovali bolee 57 tys. Sajtov” [CSTO: to recruit Central Asian citizens to ISIS, terrorists used more than 57 thousand sites], Syrian Arab Information Agency, 15 September 2015, <http://sana.sy>.

It was an attack by a sleeping cell and the terrorist threat came from within. These conspiratorial cells present a very serious threat because they act spontaneously, without a definite plan. It is extremely difficult to anticipate their strategic goals and possible course of action. Sleeping cells can take us by surprise by coming alive at any moment.

The attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in August 2016 showed just how serious is the threat of terrorism from without. It showed that Central Asian radical groups deployed in Syria are both willing and capable of operating on their own states' territory. What is more, the attack in Bishkek brought home the possibility that internal and external threats could merge together. If this happened, the outcome would be serious and unpredictable. Central Asian fighters see the region as part of a single Islamic caliphate. The countries of Central Asia must therefore extend regional cooperation in counter-terrorism.

# Prospects

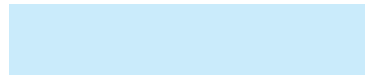
Current world trends mean that in the short term, Central Asian countries will likely strive to maintain the existing strategic balance of power. International and regional players with a stake in the region will safeguard its security, as far as they are able, in order to advance their own security interests.

In the medium term, the Central Asian republics will have to reckon with the influence of global political transformations. The way in which Central Asian political systems function is deeply ingrained and will hinder the formulation of adequate response to new problems. This inadequacy is primarily linked to domestic challenges. The five state of Central Asia must therefore focus their efforts on achieving certain goals, such as creating the conditions for further political and social modernisation.

Reducing radicalisation must remain one of the main priorities in guaranteeing regional security. This can only be helped by resolving acute social and economic problems, reining in corruption, reforming education policy, spreading counter-narratives more widely and blocking radical content in a timely manner. Other prophylactic measures might include tightening controls over the routes that citizens use to reach, and return from, combat zones. It is also important to take steps to monitor [...] the financing of terrorist groups by bodies which appear to perform charitable or other work not directly connected to the radical groups. It is crucial for Central Asian states to prevent terrorist activity from moving into their own countries.

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