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WHAT COMES NEXT: CENTRAL ASIAN VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS AND DRUG TRAFFICKING AFTER THE FALL OF KABUL

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Abstract. The withdrawal of the international forces from Afghanistan will likely increase the role of Central Asian violent extremist groups in the production and transit of illicit goods to and from Afghanistan. While violent extremist groups will maintain the capacity to inspire and perhaps, even carry out limited attacks in Central Asian republics in the short to medium term, their capacity will be limited. Conversely, given the Taliban's control of the majority of Afghanistan, these same groups will play an increasingly important role in the multi-billion-dollar drug trade stemming from the country. The future of Afghanistan is still far from decided but Central Asian violent extremist organizations will likely play a role in whatever is to come.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Central Asia, Drug-trafficking, Narcotics, Violent Extremism.*

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ЕРТЕҢ НЕ КҮТІП ТҮР: КАБУЛ ҚҰЛАҒАННАН KEЙІН ОРТААЗИЯЛЫҚ ӘСКЕРИ-ЭКСТРЕМИСТІК ТОПТАР МЕН ЕСІРТКІ ТРАФИГІ

Сьюзан Эллиот, Ричард Хогланд, Дэниел Леманн

Андатпа. Халықаралық күштердің Ауғанстаннан шығарылуы Орталық Азиядағы экстремистік топтардың Ауғанстанға және Ауғанстаннан заңсыз тауарлар шығару мен транзиттегі рөлін арттыруы мүмкін. Алайда, жауыққан экстремистік топтар Орталық Азия республикаларында қысқа және орта мерзімді перспективада шабыттандыру және тіпті шектеулі шабуылдар жасау қабілетін сақтап қалса да, олардың мүмкіндіктері шектеулі болады. Керісінше, Ауғанстанның көп бөлігін Талибан бақылауын ескере отырып, дәл осы топтар есірткінің көп миллиардтық саудасында маңызды рөл атқарады. Ауғанстанның болашағы әлі шешілген жоқ, бірақ Орталық Азиядан келген экстремистік ұйымдар рөл атқаруы мүмкін.

Түйін сөздер: *Ауғанстан, Орталық Азия, есірткінің заңсыз айналымы, есірткі, зорлық-зомбылық экстремизмі.*

ЧТО ПОСЛЕДУЕТ ПОСЛЕ: ЦЕНТРАЛЬНО-АЗИАТСКИЕ ВОИНСТВЕННО-ЭКСТРЕМИСТКИЕ ГРУППЫ И НАРКОТРАФИК ПОСЛЕ ПАДЕНИЯ КАБУЛА

Сьюзан Эллиот, Ричард Хогланд, Дэниел Леманн

Аннотация. Вывод международных сил из Афганистана, вероятно, увеличит роль воинствующих экстремистских групп в Центральной Азии в производстве и транзите незаконных товаров в Афганистан и из Афганистана. Хотя воинствующие экстремистские группы сохраняют способность вдохновлять и, возможно, даже проводить ограниченные нападения в республиках Центральной Азии в краткосрочной и среднесрочной перспективе их возможности будут ограничены. И наоборот, учитывая контроль талибов над большей частью Афганистана, эти же группы будут играть все более важную роль в многомиллиардной торговле наркотиками. Будущее Афганистана еще далеко не решено, но воинствующие экстремистские организации из Центральной Азии, вероятно, сыграют в этом свою роль.

Ключевые слова: *Афганистан, Центральная Азия, незаконный оборот наркотиков, наркотики, насильственный экстремизм.*

Introduction

After the fall of Kabul, Central Asian governments, like many governments elsewhere, nervously prepare their security forces and hedge their relationships with the Taliban. Groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union

(IJU), and Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) number between a few dozen and several hundred members, including both fighters and families accompanying them [1]. In one of the most recent UN reports, due to the IMU and IJU's dependence on the Taliban, they were called "formerly relevant terror

groups.” [2] Despite this, Central Asian violent extremists’ influence on regional criminality is potentially significant. The importance of familial ties in Afghan drug smuggling means that cross-border connections can facilitate easier transit. Given that the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team reports that most of the Central Asian violent extremist groups in Afghanistan number in the hundreds or less, and are often working with relatives, their organizational structure seems more conducive to drug smuggling than waging a sustained conflict against a state. Now, the Taliban’s new role in Afghanistan poses a question for the future of these smaller groups. Given the size, funding, and goals of these organizations it is important to discuss how they are structured to respond to the seismic shift that occurred in Afghanistan in August 2021. This paper addresses how these organizations have functioned in the past, and the possible methods for combatting the serious illicit activity described.

The Taliban allegedly ordered a halt to all independent military operations of its subsidiary groups, which put a strain on the smaller organizations’ finances[3]. If the Taliban maintains its organizational integrity, then the subordinate Central Asian organizations will likely retain their current status as small groups restricted from operating too independently. In this case, some groups may look to other larger umbrella organizations, most notably the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), to support their agenda. However, the Taliban has responded brutally to defections in the past, allegedly executing members of the IMU after such an instance[4]. The IMU has since realigned itself with the Taliban, and the general consensus remains that IS-K and its affiliates are diminished in Afghanistan. [5] IS-K and the Taliban are competitors,

but the surge in IS-K attacks during 2021 while the Taliban gained ground against the Afghan government culminating in the attack against U.S. forces and Afghan civilians in Kabul on August 26, indicates that currently the Taliban are still not able to entirely suppress their rival or guarantee security in Afghanistan even after their victory against the government[6].

There are currently two major routes for smuggling through Tajikistan: the Khatlon Route and the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast route[7]. Because of security on the Tajikistan side of the GBAO border, drug runners cannot smuggle large quantities across the border. Taliban-controlled border posts will make large-scale transit easier, cheaper, and faster than the alternatives.

To the west, KIB allegedly has a presence throughout the districts in Afghanistan’s Faryab Province that borders Turkmenistan[8]. After the Taliban seized control of the border town of Aqina, northeastern smuggling routes could change as well[9]. KIB already allegedly creates income via smuggling food and fuel across the Turkmenistan border. Despite serious penalties for drug smuggling in Turkmenistan, these networks could be used to KIB’s advantage for further profits[10].

In the past, Iranians have been caught attempting to smuggle drugs into Turkmenistan, which highlights another potential link between the Taliban, the Islamic Jihad Union, and Iranian smugglers[11]. The United States previously placed a member of the IJU under sanctions for serving as a key smuggler between Afghanistan and Mashhad, Iran[12]. While the Iranian government harshly prosecutes drug use and routinely seizes large amounts of opiates, there are long-standing credible accusations that elements of the Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) participate and profit from the drug trade originating in Afghanistan[13].

In this paper, the authors draw on Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown's analysis on the situation in Afghanistan and its drug production, Dr. Mark Galeotti's description of Central Asian criminal networks, and Dr. Edward Lemon's explanation of the security and governance in Central Asia. Additionally, two of the authors spent extensive time in the region and have provided some of their insights on policy issues, though no information here reflects direct interviews or conversations with people in the region.

Research Methods

Given the changing and sensitive nature of the subject the research methodology was limited in scope. Research was done through a textual analysis of primary and secondary sources focused on the presence of drug traffickers and violent extremists in Afghanistan and its bordering states. Information on drug seizure data came from accessing the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Center's weekly reports. All information used in this article is open-source and publicly available. Further information came from looking through publicly available UN and U.S. sanction lists to identify possible connections between known violent extremists and drug trafficking organizations. Future research into this arena would benefit from field work if possible and consultation with policymakers in the region.

Results

It is estimated that the Taliban profit between \$300 million and \$1.6 billion through narcotrafficking[14]. However, this is just a fraction of the \$28 billion retail value

of heroin in western Europe originating from just one smuggling route in eastern and north-eastern Afghanistan[15]. While there has reportedly been a consolidation of drug trafficking organizations along the northern route that could concentrate profits to a few key groups, it is unclear what role the Taliban plays in this[16]. The lack of information surrounding the drug trade, the organizational nature of the Taliban, and its affiliates makes it difficult to pinpoint specific earnings, but the drug trade is undoubtedly an important aspect of terrorist financing in Afghanistan.

With the Taliban's newfound control of much of the country, it is likely that its involvement in the drug trade and its taxes on independent drug labs, traffickers, and poppy farmers will increase. The Taliban's lack of access to cash (given that the IMF, United States and others froze access to Afghanistan's international accounts) could also cause the group to rely increasingly on illicit trade. Although the Taliban announced that it banned further opium production in the country on August 18, questions remain about the enforceability of such a ban[17]. The previous Taliban ban on opium production in the 1990's proved politically costly, and the Taliban is far from a monolithic organization today [18]. Abandoning such a profitable business during a time of economic crisis might not be feasible.

The Northern Route through Central Asia is slightly less lucrative than other routes through Iran, Turkey and the Caucasus, but even so, the wholesale markets in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia increase the value of Afghan heroin roughly seven-fold. Typically, after smuggling the drugs through Tajikistan, drug runners transfer opiates to networks of Central Asian kingpins who take the goods to Russia or the Caucasus. From there, the drugs are either

sold for consumption or moved into Europe [19].

The relative fragmentation of the northern route means that militant groups in Afghanistan make their profit quickly; in other words, they do not need much retail success to gain funds because they are generally not responsible for the retail sale of the drugs at their final destinations. The Tajikistan and Turkmenistan borders then become the most important points of transit along the northern route. The relationship between the Taliban and the drug traffickers in the region raises questions about the future of the area. However, given the role of Central Asian extremist groups in smuggling, their presence in northern Afghanistan, and the Taliban's territorial gains, much of the trafficking will likely continue to run through these violent extremist groups.

From the start of April until mid-July, the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC), a UNODC project to synchronize counter-narcotics policies and information sharing among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia, reported that there was approximately 1520 kilograms of opiates, methamphetamine, and precursor chemicals seized by government officials in the Central Asian countries along the northern route (excluding Turkmenistan where no information was available).¹ CARICC reported another 527 kilograms seized in Armenia and Azerbaijan during that same time period, mostly along border crossings with Iran or near the port of Baku. Though informative, these seizure numbers are not definitive and should not be used to estimate the total amount of drug trafficked through the states. While none of the reports

speculate on the origin of the drugs seized, given the proximity of these countries to Afghanistan, it is likely many of the drugs came from there.

Despite the relatively small presence of these Central Asian violent extremist groups, they still have played important roles in terrorist finances. In the past, members of the IJU have been linked with a smuggling route along the Southern Opium Route through Iran, where they possibly collaborated with Iranian officials to exchange Afghan opiates for weapons[20]. Jamaat Ansurullah, a Tajik extremist group based in Kishim, Tashkan, and Warduj is responsible for smuggling through Tajikistan, which is the main point of entry into the Northern Route[21]. While the IMU has been largely absorbed into the Taliban and retains little individual autonomy, in the mid 2000's it turned to criminality to support itself, and it is possible that transnational criminal ties remain[22]. Many Central Asian violent extremist groups have taken up a presence in Northern Afghanistan along border areas. The proximity of these groups to Central Asia is undoubtedly worrying, but narcotrafficking and smuggling are the most significant threats these groups pose to the region.

The seizure of the Sher Khan border could change existing drug routes and make larger smuggling options more viable due to better infrastructure now available. This makes it possible that the Northern Route will see increased use, since the Taliban has focused on seizing control of Afghan drug routes in their most recent offensives[23]. Up until this point, the Sher Khan Border Crossing has been an important but not the main point of entry for opiates into Tajikistan[24]. It is too early to tell if the Taliban will be able

¹ Data from the weekly CARICC updates, only including seizures of 1 kilogram or more

to use the dry port to increase the amount of heroin and opium smuggled out of the country, but it would not be surprising, now that they control Afghanistan.

Jamaat Ansurullah, an offshoot of the IMU, has clashed with Tajikistan's border guard in the past while smuggling drugs. Further incursions by the Taliban or other extremist groups into Tajikistan could serve to harden the normally porous border between the two countries, which would jeopardize lucrative drug routes. Corruption in the Tajikistan Border Guard service has been a problem in the past and could continue to be a problem in the future. However, if there were concerns that the Taliban or Taliban-affiliated terrorist groups smuggling fighters into the country, there might be genuine efforts by Moscow and Dushanbe to tighten border controls.

The seizure of Aqina in Faryab, combined with KIB's Central Asian connections could make drug trafficking a more prominent challenge there too. The extent of drug smuggling through Turkmenistan remains unclear, but there are likely several routes that cross through the country. Opium and heroin entering Turkmenistan are likely destined for transfer through the Caucasus then further into Europe and Russia via Turkmenbashi port[25]. Increasingly, Azerbaijan has been used as a country of transit to bring drugs from Afghanistan to Georgia and then onward in Europe. Azerbaijan receives drugs smuggled from Iran, Turkmenbashi Port in Turkmenistan, and Atyrau in Kazakhstan.

Throughout the conflict in Afghanistan, drug trafficking consistently remained a driver of cross-border violence with Afghanistan's neighbors[26]. In northern Afghanistan, traditionally drug trafficking organizations aligned themselves with local militias and warlords as opposed to

the Taliban directly, but with the Taliban now controlling Afghanistan, this could change[27].

Discussion of the Results

The Taliban has made overtures countries in the region to assuage concerns. The Taliban's political leader responsible for negotiations with the United States, Mullah Abdul Baradar, offered assurances to Uzbekistan[28]. Additionally, Baradar travelled to Turkmenistan to discuss potential investment opportunities. Most countries remain relatively quiet about the specifics of their conversations with the Taliban, but the Taliban's declaration banning opium production can be viewed as a gesture by the group to the international community to gain legitimacy. Given questions about the Taliban's control over its sub-groups and regional commanders, and the Taliban's history of overpromising and under-delivering, such assurances can be viewed with some skepticism[29]. But, as several experts have pointed out, at its core the Taliban is primarily concerned with internal Afghan affairs[30].

Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan is heavily guarded, and the Uzbekistan government has generally refused to shelter fleeing anti-Taliban fighters, although immediately after the collapse of Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul there were conflicting reports of Afghans crossing into Uzbekistan. Tashkent's tight-lipped approach towards accepting Afghan refugees perhaps signals their commitment to non-interference with the Taliban. Conversely, Tajikistan has sheltered Afghanistan government soldiers fleeing the Taliban and has warned that upwards of 10,000 refugees might cross over the border[31]. The mass movement of refugees will create new challenges in the region that might intersect with existing

problems, but Russia has pledged to support Tajikistan and maintain its border integrity, which could mitigate some of these effects[32]. To that end, Russia has recently conducted several military exercises with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan along the countries respective Afghan borders. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization have both carried out numerous military exercises in Central Asia in response to the situation in Afghanistan and will likely continue such exercises if the Taliban appears unable to guarantee internal security in Afghanistan [33]. Additionally, preplanned exercises like the SCO's "Peace-Mission-2021" on September 11, have now taken on an extra importance in light of security concerns[34].

These groups remain a very real point of concern for the Central Asian Republics, but as the United States reassesses its security priorities in the region, it should focus on border security, good governance, and law-enforcement collaboration. Central Asian violent extremist groups will find it exceedingly difficult to mount a large-scale campaign against a country without explicit Taliban approval and support. Instead, these groups will likely seek to recruit small cells or lone terrorists to attack soft targets, as has been the case in the past. At the same time, they might seek to increase their role in narco-trafficking. From 2019 to 2020, several provinces in which Central Asian extremist groups were present experienced a marked increase in poppy production.

There are several avenues that governments in the region and abroad can take to combat drug trafficking and mitigate the harms of it. First, the governments can build civil society capacity for treating addiction. Reducing demand along the Northern Route can restrict the ability of

traffickers to turn a quick profit. The further drugs need to transport to market, the higher likelihood there is that they will be intercepted. In Afghanistan, drug treatment programs have proven to be impactful; greater services rendered to addicts elsewhere could help address the demand side of this challenge[35]. Cooperation with the Agha Khan Development Network, an international development agency already active in Tajikistan, especially in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, to build economic support systems with Tajikistan could tap into existing networks of civil society organizations and increase the human security necessary for national security.

Second there needs to be increased support for border posts: The United States already works with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on issues of border security, and this cooperation should be increased and improved. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs previously assisted in creating border outposts for Tajikistan and worked with the UNODC to refurbish Kyrgyzstan's existing outposts[36]. Continuing to provide better technology, especially at major crossings, could hinder the flow of drugs. The United States-funded Sher Khan Bandar border crossing was equipped with scanners and technology to combat drug trafficking, and this did seem to prevent large-scale smuggling, despite a high level of traffic, as evinced by major trafficking routes avoiding Sher Khan Bandar to this point. The relative success of the controls at this border crossing could be replicated on either side of the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, and on Tajikistan's side of the border with Afghanistan. While this would not prevent drug smuggling, it would raise the cost and difficulty.

In addition to high-tech scanners and methods of detection for border posts, the United States can also ensure that border posts are equipped with basic necessities like running water, heat, and places for the border guards to rest in Tajikistan. Many border crossing posts are extremely remote, and necessities will help border guards to stay at their posts for longer periods of time.

Finally, states should expand the frequency and scope of border patrol workshops. The OSCE in Dushanbe already has a mandate to work with states to improve their border security. U.S. funding dedicated to training courses via the OSCE Center on preventing cross-border smuggling, combined with funding to bring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Border Security personnel to Dushanbe to participate, could increase regional collaboration and strengthen cross-border efforts to combat transnational criminality.

Conclusion

The nexus between criminal activity and violent insurgency will remain strong in Afghanistan and neighboring areas of the world. The presence and participation of violent Central Asian extremist organizations in trafficking and smuggling provides them with a source of funding and expands networks beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Narcotrafficking will likely emerge as a particularly troubling security threat for the Central Asian states and the United States.

The full effects of the events in August will not be known for some time. But while the ruling faction in Kabul has changed, the conditions in Afghanistan and neighboring countries that foster drug smuggling have

not. The Taliban have achieved victory, but that triumph leaves many affiliated groups, like violent Central Asian extremist groups with an uncertain path forward. The groups' transnational intentions, historical actions, and need for funding make them ideal conduits for new drug traffickers in Central Asia.

Any initiatives to prevent further narcotrafficking along the Northern Route must be spearheaded by the Central Asian Republics themselves, with support from the highest levels of their governments. By supporting legitimate efforts to curb narcotrafficking, the United States would be combatting a key source of terrorist financing that could otherwise endanger American investments and personnel in the region or be exported to other regions. Additionally, the United States would undermine a pattern of criminality in the post-Soviet world that has repeatedly hindered U.S. goals and its ability to work with partner governments[37]. The United States cannot solve the issue of drug trafficking, but it can give Central Asian governments the tools and information necessary to do it themselves while emphasizing the importance of good governance in long-term problem avoidance. A multi-vector approach, including cooperating with the UNODC and OSCE to increase the scope of existing initiatives, will enable the United States to work with partner governments to prevent narcotrafficking from undermining national and international security.

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