



Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia: An Overview of Radical Groups

SAGYNYSH AKHANTAYEVA

Deputy Director at the Scientific Research Center "Youth"
Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic Kazakhstan
asaga_83@mail.ru

ALIYA MUSSABEKOVA

PhD student, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Kazakhstan)
Chief Expert at Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan
aliya.mussabekova@gmail.com
ORCID No: 0000-0002-5600-169X

ABSTRACT. *In January 2019, the United States announced the defeat of the terrorist organization "Islamic State" (hereinafter referred to as ISIS). This marked an interim milestone in the years-long international fight against ISIS. However, zones of instability continue to attract radical groups. Today, they operate in Syria's Idlib province, Lebanon, Mali, and Nigeria. In addition, in 2021, the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, significantly changing the status quo in the broader Central Asia+ region. In October 2023, a military operation began in Gaza, which also set various terrorist organizations in motion and pointed to a global ideological divide. In the context of events in Syria and Afghanistan, which over the past decade have become centres of the so-called "global jihad," the potential threats and risks posed by terrorist and extremist organizations from Central Asia are of significant scientific interest.*

The purpose of this article is to analyse the activities of the main radical groups originating from Central Asia. The interest is primarily driven by the fact that an active process of institutionalization of Central Asian militant groups has taken place in Syria and Afghanistan, leading to the emergence of new associations. The study examines the conditions under which religious extremism spreads and presents a chronology of the formation of radical groups, as well as their place in the overall architecture of regional security. The novelty of this article lies in the assessment of existing trends, which suggest that religious extremism and terrorism will continue to be one of the main factors destabilizing the situation in the Central Asian region.

The ability of Central Asian countries to demonstrate resilience and leverage their internal strengths in addressing threats plays a crucial role in shaping the region's future as a secure, competitive, and prosperous part of the international landscape.

KEYWORDS: *religious extremism, terrorism, security, ISIS, terrorist groups, Central Asian militants, institutionalization, risks, radicalization.*

INTRODUCTION

Kazakh experts noted that Central Asia has never been considered a priority area of activity for international terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, but has been viewed more as a recruitment ground (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). Nevertheless, in the summer of 2014, the rapidly expanding terrorist organization "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" declared the expansion of its Islamic Caliphate's borders and published a geopolitical map. According to the group's plans, the countries of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were included in the Khorasan province of the ISIS Islamic Caliphate. Today, an "ISIS-Khorasan" cell operates in Afghanistan.

During the same period, Al-Qaeda also attempted to establish its ideological claims on Central Asia by creating a group with a similar name, "Khorasan." Yerlan Karin, in his book "Between ISIS and Al-Qaeda: Central Asian Militants in the Syrian War," notes that Al-Qaeda, through its "Khorasan" cell, only formally marked the region as within its sphere of interest, possibly to attract new recruits from Central and South Asia. Central Asia has never become a macro or micro center for the concentration of foreign militants, despite some participation in the Tajik civil war (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). Until 2017, there was no significant activity by international terrorist groups in the region (ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing of a police officer in Bishkek in October 2017 and the attacks in Tajikistan in 2018).

However, currently the problem of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia is increasingly brought to the forefront in national and regional discourses. On one hand, this is due to the emergence of new radical elements within the countries of the region (terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2016), which, in turn, exposes the problem of " sleeper " cells. Another risk is associated with the issue of Central Asian citizens returning from combat zones in the Middle East and Afghanistan. As a result, both within and outside the region, concerns about the increased risks of terrorist threats in Central Asia are becoming more frequent (Terrorist attacks, cyber shield, and risks to the economy, 2024), (U.S. and British intelligence agencies create conditions for instability at the southern borders of the CIS, 2023).

It is also important to note that Central Asian citizens have become a dangerous tool in the hands of international terrorist organizations. Between 2016 and 2017, several terrorist attacks were carried out by Central Asian radicals in other countries. In January 2024, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence reported that the explosions in the city of Kerman were carried out by suicide bombers from Tajikistan. In March of the same year, Tajik citizens became the main suspects in the case of a terrorist attack at the "Crocus City Hall" shopping centre in Krasnogorsk, Russia.

Given the observed dynamics of events, it is crucial today to understand how Central Asian countries will be able to overcome potential challenges from terrorist groups and strengthen regional subjectivity.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the problems of religious extremism and terrorism through the lens of the activities of key radical groups from Central Asia.

The following tasks were carried out:

The chronological stages of the formation of key radical groups were examined.

The role and potential of modern radical groups in regional security processes were analyzed.

The object of the study is the regional radical militant groups. The subject of scientific interest is the features of the radicalization process in Central Asian countries.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed several classical scientific methods, including analysis, synthesis, and comparison. A retrospective analysis was conducted to examine the process of radicalization in Central Asia. Through a comparative approach, the activities, formation, and institutionalization of the principal radical groups were thoroughly investigated.

The theoretical and methodological foundation of this research is rooted in the security-development nexus theory. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the intricate relationship between security concerns and developmental challenges in the Central Asian region. Applying this theory in the context of Central Asia allows for a nuanced understanding of how socio-economic factors contribute to the emergence and appeal of extremist ideologies among specific population groups (Lemon, E., 2018). For instance, researchers emphasize the connection between addressing governance, human rights, and socio-economic development and their potential to contribute to stability and mitigate the risks of radicalization in Uzbekistan. (Uzbekistan-UNSDCF 2021-2025).

The security-development nexus also presumes that effective counter-terrorism strategies must integrate development initiatives that address the root causes of extremism. This involves investing in education, economic opportunities, and political inclusion to foster resilience against radical ideologies (Hill, F., 2003).

In assessing risks and threats, expert forecasts concerning the stability of the regional security system in Central Asia were critically examined. Consequently, the concept of sustainable security serves as an additional analytical framework for understanding the region's developmental processes. This concept advocates for a multidimensional approach to security, encompassing not only military and law enforcement measures but also socio-economic and political reforms. Such an approach is particularly relevant in Central Asia, where the historical context of conflict and the socio-political

landscape demand a comprehensive understanding of security threats (Sharipova, D., Beissembayev, S., 2021).

Given the transnational nature of terrorism, sustainable security also calls for enhanced cooperation among Central Asian states and international partners. Collaborative efforts can address shared vulnerabilities and promote stability across the region.

Additionally, the Case Studies method was employed in this research, allowing for an in-depth analysis of various Central Asian radical groups. This method facilitated a detailed examination of their formation processes, growth trajectories, and the diverse patterns of their activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of radicalization has been a pressing concern for the Central Asian republics since their independence in the early 1990s. This phenomenon was notably influenced by events in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where various groups sought to establish an Islamic caliphate in opposition to the prevailing secular governance. While Uzbekistan managed to address this issue more peacefully, Tajikistan experienced a civil war from 1992 to 1997.

Today, many issues that arose during the initial stages of independence are being revisited and politicized. Additionally, the ongoing instability in neighboring Afghanistan exerts considerable pressure on the security system of the region. Therefore, the study of radicalization in Central Asian countries remains a critical topic within the academic and expert discourse.

In Kazakhstan, one of the leading researchers on the nature of religious extremism and terrorism is Yerlan Karin, who has published several books on the subject, including “Soldiers of the Caliphate”, “Between ISIS and Al-Qaeda: Central Asian Militants in the Syrian War”, and “Zhusan”. In these works, Karin traces the chronological development of Central Asian groups in Kazakhstan. Likewise, experts Marat Shibusov and Vyacheslav Abramov have produced a report titled *Terrorism in Kazakhstan: 2011-2012* (Shibusov, M., & Abramov, V., 2012), in which they attempt to outline the main lines of terrorist activity in the country. In addition, various well-known political scientists, sociologists, and historians such as Sultan Akimbekov, Gulmira Ileuova, Botagoz Rakisheva, Erkin Tukumov, Bolat Auelbayev, Dina Sharipova and Serik Beysembayev have provided expert assessments through analytical articles.

In Uzbekistan, significant contributions to the study of radicalization have been made by Bakhtiyor Babajanov, who has repeatedly highlighted key threats posed by radicals from Central Asia in his interviews (*Post-Soviet Wahhabism has found its niche in geopolitical confrontation*, 2013). Vladimir Norov has actively promoted the "Uzbek

model" of combating terrorism at both the national and regional levels (The "Uzbek model" of combating terrorism is attracting interest abroad, 2018).

The scholarly contributions of international experts on Central Asia are also noteworthy. American scholars such as Noah Tucker, Jacob Zenn, Marlene Laruelle, and Maria Omelicheva have focused on the processes by which Central Asian citizens become involved in radical activities. Martha Olcott, in her book "In the Whirlwind of Jihad", explores the complex relationships between religion, society, and the state (Olcott, M. B., 2012).

Russian experts, including Arkady Dubnov, Andrey Knyazev, Alexander Malashenko, Stanislav Pritchkin, and Andrey Kazantsev, have studied the conditions and causes of the spread of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia, emphasizing the political stability of the republics and their capacity to counter threats.

Chinese scholars, such as Ning Yu and Wang Tao, note that extremist organizations involving individuals from Central Asian countries are forming networked and even systemic structures. (Ning, Y., & Wang, T., 2021). While jihadist Salafism is considered the primary ideology of many modern extremist organizations, recent years have seen a trend toward the involvement of non-Salafis in radical movements. Zhang Ning, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, analyzes the consequences of the large-scale return of extremists from Syria and the Middle East to Afghanistan and Central Asia (Zhang, N., 2020).

Overall, it is important to note that the issue of radicalization has been the subject of extensive research, resulting in a substantial body of popular science books, academic articles, and other analytical materials. Thus, religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia are actively discussed and analyzed in all their manifestations both within the region and in the international expert community.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

Central Asia is a geopolitically significant region that draws international interest because of its abundant natural resources, strong economic and cultural connections with Russia and China, and its strategic location near Afghanistan, all of which present both unique challenges and valuable opportunities in the evolving global landscape.

Today, in the context of geopolitical fragmentation, the ability of nations to strengthen their national and regional agency has become increasingly significant. The current situation in Afghanistan poses a challenge to Central Asian countries' efforts to create a secure environment. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Afghanistan remains one of the primary hubs of terrorism, with a high incidence of attacks and casualties (Global Terrorism Index, 2024). In 2023, it ranked first globally.

Table 1. *Top 10 Countries Most Affected by Terrorism (2024 Global Terrorism Index) [14]*

Rank	Country	Index Score*
	Burkina Faso	8.57
	Israel	8.14
	Mali	7.99
	Pakistan	7.91
	Syria	7.89
	Afghanistan	7.82
	Somalia	7.81
	Nigeria	7.57
	Myanmar	7.53
	Niger	7.27

Source: *Global Terrorism Index 2024*

*(calculated on a scale from 0 to 10 based on the number of terrorist incidents, deaths, injuries, and hostages in each country)

The rise to power of the Taliban and their subsequent policies have contributed to a deterioration in security, impacting Uzbekistan's ranking, which fell to 70th place in 2022, while Tajikistan was ranked 50th (Global Terrorism Index, 2024). Previously, Uzbekistan had been among the countries with a score of zero on the index. In 2023, the rankings for these two republics improved slightly, with Uzbekistan at 77th place and Tajikistan at 69th. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan were among the 76 countries that maintained a zero score, occupying the last position, 89th, on the index.

Table 2. *Central Asian Countries in the 2024 Global Terrorism Index*

Rank	Country	Index Score *
	Tajikistan	0.871 (-1.335)
	Uzbekistan	0.423 (-0.297)
	Kazakhstan	0
	Kyrgyzstan	0
	Turkmenistan	0

*(calculated on a scale from 0 to 10 based on the number of terrorist incidents, deaths, injuries, and hostages in each country)

Given this security status quo, there is significant scholarly and public interest in assessing the risks and threats posed by internal " sleeper cells " and external radical groups. In this context, it is crucial to investigate the key drivers of radicalization and the conditions that facilitate the institutionalization of terrorist groups originating from these two republics. Historically, the evolution of such organizations can be segmented into phases based on their location: the Afghan and Syrian periods.

Afghanistan as the initial stage of institutionalizing radical groups from Central Asia

The first Central Asian radical groups emerged in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, filling the ideological and institutional void left by this historic event (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). In Uzbekistan, for instance, mass protests occurred, primarily focused on determining the country's governmental structure. In December 1991, during a massive rally in Namangan, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov has faced with demands of protesters to establish an Islamic Republic governed by Sharia law, abolish Article 51 of the Constitution, which enshrined the principle of a secular state, designate Friday as a day off, disband the pro-communist parliament, and schedule presidential and parliamentary elections for the spring of 1992. Tahir Yuldashev, leader of the "Adolat" party, was one of the main organizers of this public protest. In 1993, he fled to the Afghan-Pakistani region, where, together with another Uzbek citizen, Juma Namangani, he founded the first Central Asian jihadist group – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). As some experts note, the IMU later became the organizational foundation frame for groups such as the Union of Islamic Jihad, Jamaat Ansarullah, and Kazakh Islamic Jihad (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

By the time the Syrian war began in 2011, analysts noted that the IMU had become entirely dependent on the Pakistani Taliban, leading the group to focus its operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The organization lacked a strong leader and strayed from its original goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. To change this situation, IMU leader Usman Ghazi made the strategic decision to align with ISIS and pledged allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan swears allegiance to ISIS, 2015). According to Taliban reports, Ghazi was killed for breaking his oath of loyalty to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Ultimately, this decision led to the disintegration of the IMU. As one member of the group stated, "What the U.S. couldn't achieve in 14 years, the Taliban accomplished in 24 hours." In 2016, the remnants of the group, consisting of a few militants, declared their loyalty to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Today, the IMU no longer exists in its original form. However, its members significantly influenced the institutionalization of a new generation of radical groups.

In January 2019, four members of the terrorist organization "Jamaat Ansarullah," including the son of the group's former leader, Amriddin Tabarov, were extradited from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. The first mentions of this group appeared in September 2010 when it claimed responsibility for an attack on the RUBOP building in Khujand. The group, composed of Tajik militants, is believed to have split from the IMU and operated in Afghanistan. In 2012, Tajikistan recognized "Jamaat Ansarullah" as a terrorist organization and banned its activities within the country. According to Tajikistan's intelligence services, the group was involved in transferring Central Asian militants to Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, according to recent UN data, members of "Jamaat Ansarullah" have been recruited by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) operating in Afghanistan (Burke, J., 2024).

Another splinter group from the IMU was the Union of Islamic Jihad (UIJ). According to German researcher Guido Steinberg, in 2001, a radical faction within the IMU

demanded that the group's activities be extended to all of Central Asia and only then to Western countries ("Islamic Jihad Union": A portrait of a terrorist organization, 2016). In 2002, they announced the formation of the UIJ. In the spring of 2004, the group claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on Uzbek, Israeli, and American targets in Uzbekistan. However, in the following years, the group has not shown up in Central Asia any more.

Smaller groups of Kazakh and Kyrgyz militants were represented in minor factions like "Jund al-Khalifa" (responsible for the 2011 attacks in Kazakhstan) and "Jaishul Mahdi" (attacks in Kyrgyzstan in 2010). Despite being linked to a series of attacks in Kazakhstan in 2011, the well-known terrorism expert Yerlan Karin argues that "Jund al-Khalifa" is not a Kazakh group. The group's leader was a Belgian citizen of Tunisian origin. After his death in 2012, the group effectively ceased to exist. One Kazakh militant from "Jund al-Khalifa," Rinat Khabidolla, is reportedly in Syria.

The Kyrgyz organization "Jaishul Mahdi" first came to attention when 12 of its members were arrested for a terrorist attack near the Sports Palace in Bishkek. They were also accused of attacking an American citizen in Sokuluk, attempting to blow up the Bishkek Police Department building, and killing police officers and civilians (The "Jaish-ul-Mahdi" case gains new details, 2016). Currently, the absence of any signs of activity suggests that neither of these two organizations still exists.

Regarding Turkmenistan, there is limited information on the presence of specific paramilitary groups originating from the country. However, instances of Turkmen citizens engaging in radical activities abroad have been recorded. For example, in July 2023, a Turkmen citizen was arrested in Germany on charges of forming a terrorist group within Germany and providing support to the terrorist organization Islamic State (Islamists from Central Asia charged in Germany, 2024).

The chronology review of the development of Central Asian radical groups before the Syrian war leads to the following conclusions:

The first radical groups from Central Asia started as nationalist movements, and then transformed into jihadist movements of an internationalist nature.

The military actions in Afghanistan contributed to the initial institutionalization of these groups' activities.

Central Asian radical groups were never independent and often aligned with larger terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. They depended on them financially and received informational and military support.

Radicals from Central Asia have never given up hope of returning to the region and establishing their own caliphate.

Today, according to Andrey Serenko, head of the Center for the Study of Afghan Politics, Afghanistan poses a serious problem for the region, both in terms of the potential for a large-scale war and the possible expansionist jihadist policies of the Taliban (Serenko, A., 2023). The situation, especially regarding the status of women, drastically changed in 2021 after the Taliban came to power. One of the most alarming aspects is the deterioration of women's rights, particularly in the field of education. According to the UN, by April 2023, 80% of girls and young women of school age were not attending educational institutions, including 1.1 million girls of the age corresponding to secondary school education. (UN Women (2024).

The instability and violence emanating from Afghanistan could spill over into neighboring countries, risking the resurgence of radical groups and exacerbating existing security vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the Taliban's increasingly aggressive posture and ideological agenda may encourage the spread of extremist ideologies across borders, potentially inspiring like-minded groups within Central Asia to pursue similar goals. Radical groups have already begun to intensify their activities in the region. Notably, in November 2024, media reports indicated an attack on Chinese citizens in the Khatlon region, which borders Afghanistan. Furthermore, representatives of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have previously announced their intent to target Chinese citizens, institutions, and infrastructure across Central Asia. (Serenko, A. (2024).

The geopolitical implications of Afghanistan's situation are profound, as regional powers must navigate the delicate balance between security, economic interests, and humanitarian concerns. The possibility of increased refugee flows, the trafficking of arms and drugs, and the revival of insurgent activities pose urgent threats that require coordinated responses from Central Asian states and their international partners. In this context, addressing the root causes of instability and fostering resilience within Central Asian societies will be crucial to mitigating the risks posed by the Taliban's influence and ensuring a more secure and stable regional environment.

The Syrian conflict facilitated the involvement of a significant number of Central Asian citizens in radical activities

In 2011, the so-called "Arab Spring" contributed to the emergence of a new hub for various radicals from around the world – Syria. According to the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), Central Asia became one of the primary (third largest) "suppliers" of foreign fighters who fought for terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq (Zhirukhina, E., 2024). Various sources estimate that since the beginning of the conflict, over 4,000 individuals from Central Asia have traveled to the Middle East (The war that never happened: How Kyrgyz citizens who returned from Syria live now, 2019). Initially, they joined radical organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda or ISIS. However, they eventually began to form separate ethnic groups, which later evolved into well-known Central Asian factions, such as "Katibat Tawhid wal-Jihad" and the Imam Bukhari Brigade.

As previously noted, despite the de facto fall of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the traditional connections of this organization became the foundation for the unification of other radicals. One possible explanation for the emergence of the Imam Bukhari Brigade (IBB) is the fact that some of its members were previously part of the IMU. Another theory about the origins of the IBB is that its predecessor, the Seifuddin Uzbek Jamaat, was led by a former IMU member known as Abu Hussein. The group began attracting new radicals in 2012 and eventually evolved into the Imam Bukhari Brigade, choosing an inspiring name for the group in honor of Imam Bukhari, a ninth-century Islamic scholar who lived in Bukhara, located in modern-day Uzbekistan (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). In one of the latest mentions of the organization, it was reported that the group had relocated to Afghanistan (Rehabilitation of "deceived victims" returning from Syria begins in Uzbekistan, 2019).

Another group of Central Asian militants that gained prominence in Syria is "Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" (KTJ). From the outset, KTJ was a branch of the Syrian wing of al-Qaeda. According to some reports, the leader of KTJ was a native of Kyrgyzstan known by the alias Abu Saloh, whose real name is believed to be Sirojiddin Mukhtarov. According to Kyrgyz security services, Mukhtarov received theological education in Syria in the early 2000s. Upon returning to Kyrgyzstan, he worked as an imam's assistant at one of the mosques in Osh. In 2012, he joined the Imam Bukhari Brigade (IBB) in Syria, but later, from among its supporters, he founded KTJ (The leader of militants from Kyrgyzstan, Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov, was eliminated in Syria, 2022). Although KTJ's primary activities were in Syria, it gradually began to expand its operations beyond Syrian territory, with Central Asia being the first region affected by this strategy. The following facts support this assumption:

According to an official report by Kyrgyz security services, KTJ was responsible for the terrorist attack near the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in August 2016 (Anti-Terrorist Center of CIS Member States, 2016);

The Russian Investigative Committee considers KTJ to be involved in the organization of the terrorist attack in the St. Petersburg metro in April 2017 (The St. Petersburg attack led to Abu Salah, 2017);

In November 2023, a Kyrgyz citizen who was a member of KTJ was arrested (A Kyrgyz man was detained on suspicion of participating in hostilities in Syria, 2023);

In February 2024, it was reported that the Russian Federal Security Service detained 49 members of the terrorist network "Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, 2024).

Among the new Central Asian radical groups, "Malhama Tactical" stands out, which some experts call the first Islamist private military company (PMC). According to open sources, it consists of ten or more well-trained militants from Central Asia and the North Caucasus who specialize in training other militants. It is believed that this group was founded by

someone named Abu Rofik, a 24-year-old Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan, who was killed in an airstrike in February 2017.

The PMC gained notoriety in 2017 when international media described it as the first "Blackwater of Syrian Jihad" (Komar, R., Borys, C., & Woods, E., 2017). The group's uniqueness lies in its extensive and active promotion of its services across various digital platforms. For example, on its YouTube and Facebook pages, they released a series of training videos aimed at improvised or beginner groups. These "training films" demonstrated how to use less common battlefield weapons, such as M16 and M4 automatic rifles. The videos also provided instructions on how to make improvised grenades from discarded ammunition. In the materials presented, the group's instructors conducted online sessions on first aid, the use of grenade launchers, tactical hand signals, and ambush strategies in cases where direct consultation was impossible (Komar, R., Borys, C., & Woods, E., 2017). The militants' services were paid for. According to experts, "Malhama Tactical" represents a new phenomenon in the Islamic world, marking the beginning of the professionalization of jihad.

In addition to training various extremist groups in Syria, including "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham," "Ajnad al-Kavkaz," and the Islamic Party of Turkestan, they also played the role of special forces in various jihadist movements.

In Syria, as in Afghanistan, Central Asian terrorist groups were never independent organizations; they were strategically (ideologically) and tactically (financially and militarily) dependent on major international players such as al-Qaeda or ISIS. Alongside new Central Asian groups that emerged in the context of the Syrian conflict, remnants of the "old guard," such as "Jamaat Ansarullah," continue to operate in Afghanistan.

At the same time, Central Asian radicals periodically redirect their focus back to their home region, issuing various statements and attempting to orchestrate terrorist attacks. These actions serve not only as a means of asserting their ongoing relevance but also as a declaration of their intent to return and impose their own vision for the national future. By utilizing social media to amplify their messages, these militants aim to resonate with disenfranchised segments of the population, seeking to recruit new followers and destabilize existing political structures. Their efforts underscore a persistent ambition to reclaim influence in their home countries, driven by a belief that they can reshape the socio-political landscape according to their ideological frameworks. This duality – operating within global jihadist networks while simultaneously aiming for local impact – highlights the complexities of countering radicalization and terrorism in Central Asia, where the challenges of ideology, identity, and governance intersect.

The governments of Central Asian states recognize the aforementioned trends and have established institutions to develop practical counter-terrorism measures. A notable example of their contribution to combating international terrorism, as well as a key regional framework for collaboration, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Within

the SCO, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) plays a pivotal role in addressing the “three evils”: terrorism, extremism, and religious radicalism. Member states actively conduct military exercises designed to address scenarios involving international terrorism and cross-border threats, with the host country for each exercise rotating among the members.

Beyond these exercises and measures involving security forces, law enforcement agencies, and the protection of critical infrastructure and public spaces, SCO member states are also focused on developing an effective system to counter extremist ideologies. Particular attention is given to preventing the recruitment of youth into radical groups, which remains a significant concern for regional authorities.

Additionally, counter-terrorism strategies are being advanced within other multilateral frameworks, notably the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

In light of recent geopolitical shifts, there is a growing need to intensify regional cooperation, particularly in the areas of security, trade, and infrastructure development. Strengthening collaboration in these domains will better prepare regional actors to adapt to potential changes in the geopolitical landscape and reduce their susceptibility to external shocks.

CONCLUSION

The process of radicalization and the rise of terrorist organizations in Central Asia following the collapse of the USSR is intricately tied to both regional factors and broader global jihadist movements. The disintegration of the Soviet Union left a significant ideological and political vacuum in the newly independent Central Asian states. This void, combined with the challenges of constructing new national identities, prompted some individuals to turn to radical Islam as a potential solution. The aspiration to create an Islamic state became a central theme for certain factions, but these efforts often conflicted with the secular, authoritarian regimes that emerged in the region. The governments' repression of jihadist movements intensified, pushing many radicals to seek training and experience in international conflict zones, particularly Afghanistan and later Syria.

Afghanistan as a radicalization hub. Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the radicalization process, serving as a key destination for Central Asian militants during the 1990s. With the rise of the Taliban and the country's status as a safe haven for jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, Afghanistan became a central point for Central Asian radicals seeking ideological guidance and military training. The Taliban's rise to power created an environment conducive to the growth of global jihadist networks. Central Asian militants were able to join these groups, receiving not only combat training but also establishing crucial connections with other global jihadist movements. This relationship allowed these groups to strengthen their operational capabilities, bolstered by logistical support, financial resources, and advanced military training provided by the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Syria as a new epicenter. As the Syrian Civil War intensified, Syria emerged as the new epicenter of radicalization for Central Asians, drawing in a new generation of jihadists eager to participate in the broader global jihadist cause. Groups such as ISIS and the al-Nusra Front attracted many Central Asian fighters by offering both an ideological purpose and tangible opportunities for combat. The call for the establishment of an Islamic state resonated strongly with Central Asian radicals, who were drawn not only by the ideological promises of jihad but also by the material support offered by these larger terrorist organizations. The financial and logistical backing from global jihadist groups, including ISIS, further propelled Central Asians into the conflict, where they could participate in the establishment of what they viewed as a legitimate Islamic state.

Institutional transformations of Central Asian groups. Over time, Central Asian militant organizations underwent significant transformations as they integrated into the broader global jihadist movement. Groups aligned with ISIS, for instance, gained access to state-level resources, including sophisticated military training, financial support, and strategic guidance. This institutional integration allowed smaller, local Central Asian extremist groups to evolve into more organized, transnational networks. The involvement of these groups with larger, more resource-rich organizations like ISIS significantly enhanced their ability to operate across borders and execute increasingly sophisticated attacks, thus becoming integral players in global jihadist activities.

Security risks and " sleeper cells ". The return of foreign fighters from Syria and Afghanistan to Central Asia poses an acute security threat. Many of these fighters maintain their affiliations with international terrorist organizations, which raises the risk of re-establishing dormant " sleeper cells " within their home countries. These cells, often composed of returning militants, can destabilize the region by engaging in terrorist attacks or further propagating radical ideologies. The geographical proximity of Central Asia to conflict zones like Afghanistan, combined with the high level of ideological fervour that persists within returning fighters, amplifies the risks posed by these sleeper cells. In this context, Central Asian governments are confronted with a dual challenge: preventing the return of militants while addressing the underlying causes of radicalization, such as political repression, poverty, and religious extremism.

Strategic responses to mitigate terrorism risks.

To counter the growing influence of extremism and mitigate the risks posed by returning fighters, Central Asian states must adopt a comprehensive strategy that tackles both the symptoms and root causes of radicalization. Several concrete measures can help in this effort:

Prevention. Strengthening counter-radicalization programs that address underlying socio-political issues – such as unemployment, ethnic tension, and political disenfranchisement – is crucial in preventing individuals from turning to extremism. Ensuring that young people

have access to education, economic opportunities, and avenues for political participation can reduce the appeal of jihadist ideologies.

Community engagement. Engaging local communities in counter-radicalization efforts is equally important. By fostering dialogue, promoting tolerance, and providing alternative narratives to extremist ideologies, communities can play an essential role in preventing radicalization. Religious leaders should also be involved in countering radical interpretations of Islam, which often provide a justification for violence and terrorism.

International cooperation. Given the transnational nature of terrorism, Central Asian countries must enhance their cooperation with regional and global partners. This includes sharing intelligence, conducting joint counter-terrorism operations, and building the capacity of law enforcement agencies to detect and prevent cross-border terrorist activities. Stronger international collaboration will enable Central Asian states to more effectively tackle the threat posed by global jihadist movements.

By addressing both the local and international dimensions of radicalization and terrorism, Central Asia can move toward greater stability. However, this requires a multifaceted approach that integrates domestic reforms with regional and international cooperation. Each Central Asian country will need to tailor its strategies based on its unique political, social, and economic realities. This holistic approach is critical for ensuring long-term peace and security in the region.

REFERENCES:

Anti-Terrorist Center of CIS Member States. (2016). The State Committee for National Security of Kyrgyzstan identified the organizers and perpetrators of the attack on the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan. CIS ATC. <https://www.cisatc.org/news/8500>

Burke, J. (2024). Islamic State recruiting from Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries. Retrieved from "The Guardian", 2024 March 24 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/24/islamic-state-recruiting-militants-from-tajikistan-and-other-central-asian-countries>

Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. (2024). The FSB of Russia, in cooperation with Rosfinmonitoring and the Investigative Committee, eliminated an international resource channel for the "Katiba Tawhid wal-Jihad" terrorist group. FSB Press Center. <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10439924%40fsbMessage.html>

Global Terrorism Index (2024). IEP (Institute for Economics and Peace), p. 72-73. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>

Hill, F. (2003). Central Asia: Terrorism, religious extremism, and regional stability. Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia. Retrieved from The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20030723-1.pdf>

"Islamic Jihad Union": A portrait of a terrorist organization. (2016). Retrieved from Anti-Terror Today. <https://antiterrortoday.com/baza-dannykh/terroristicheskie-i-ekstremistskie-gruppirovki/soyuz-islamskogo-dzhikhada-gruppa-islamskogo-dzhikhada/386-soyuz-islamskogo-dzhikhada-portret-terroristicheskoy-organizatsii>

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan swears allegiance to ISIS. (2015). Retrieved from the Uzbek Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/27175205.html>

Islamists from Central Asia charged in Germany. (2024). Retrieved from Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-fig-predavili-obvinenia-islamistam-iz-centralnoj-azii/a-68910952>

- The "Jaish-ul-Mahdi" case gains new details. (2016). Retrieved from News-Asia. <http://www.news-asia.ru/view/9134>
- Karin, E., & Zenn, J. (2017). Between ISIS and al-Qaeda: Central Asian militants in the Syrian war. Astana Stratcom Team.
- Komar, R., Borys, C., & Woods, E. (2017). The Blackwater of Jihad. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/>
- A Kyrgyz man was detained on suspicion of participating in hostilities in Syria. (2023). Retrieved from 24.kg. https://24.kg/proisshestvija/279371_kyirgyzstantsa_zaderjali_popodozreniyu_vuchastii_vboevyih_deystviyah_vsirii/
- The leader of militants from Kyrgyzstan, Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov, was eliminated in Syria. (2022). Retrieved from Interfax. <https://www.interfax.ru/world/861443>
- Lemon, E. (2018). Talking up terrorism in Central Asia. Kennan Cable No. 38. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_38.pdf
- Ning, Y., & Wang, T. (2021). Social movements and political struggle in the Middle East: Concepts, mechanisms, and issues—Localization of Salafist studies. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1(82).
- Olcott, M. B. (2012). In the whirlwind of jihad. Carnegie Foundation.
- Post-Soviet Wahhabism has found its niche in geopolitical confrontation. (2013). Retrieved from the interview with B. Babadzhanov. *Regnum*. <https://regnum.ru/article/1626149>
- Rehabilitation of "deceived victims" returning from Syria begins in Uzbekistan. (2019). Retrieved from Central Asia News. https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/06/11/feature-01
- Serenko, A. (2023). The Taliban are preparing for a big war. Retrieved from Media.az. <https://media.az/politics/1067935344/andrey-serenko-taliby-gotovatsya-k-bolshoy-voynye-intervyu/>
- Serenko, A. (2024). Islamists in Central Asia start anti-China jihad. Retrieved from Novaya Gazeta. https://www.ng.ru/kartblansh/2024-11-24/3_9141_kb.html
- Sharipova, D., & Beissembayev, S. (2021). Causes of violent extremism in Central Asia: The case of Kazakhstan. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46(9), 1-15. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1872163>
- Shibutov, M., & Abramov, V. (2012). Report "Terrorism in Kazakhstan – 2011-2012". Almaty.
- The St. Petersburg attack led to Abu Salah. (2017). Retrieved from Gazeta.ru. <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/04/21/10638311.shtml>
- Terrorist attacks, cyber shield, and risks to the economy. (2024). Retrieved from the interview with the head of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Yermek Sagimbaev. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/knb/press/news/details/808632?lang=ru>
- United Nations Security Council (2011). Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ru/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan
- UN Women (2024). FAQs: Afghan women three years after the Taliban takeover. 20 August 2024. <https://eca.unwomen.org/ru/stories/explainer/2024/08/chasto-zadavaemye-voprosy-afganskije-zhenshchiny-spustya-tri-goda-posle-zakhvata-vlasti-talibanom>
- U.S. and British intelligence agencies create conditions for instability at the southern borders of the CIS. (2023). Retrieved from interview with the head of FSB, Bortnikov A. TASS. <https://tass.ru/politika/18971727>
- The "Uzbek model" of combating terrorism is attracting interest abroad. (2018). Retrieved from interview with the former minister of foreign affairs of Uzbekistan, V. Norov. *Gazeta.uz*. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/11/01/ismi/>
- Uzbekistan-UNSDCF 2021-2025. United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021-2025, 24 September 2020. <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Uzbekistan-UNSDCF-2021-2025.pdf>
- The war that never happened: How Kyrgyz citizens who returned from Syria live now. (2019). Retrieved from BBC Russian. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-47281602>
- Yudin, N. V. (2016). The "Security — Development" link: Issues of theoretical understanding. *Moscow University Bulletin. Series: International Relations and World Politics*, 1, 39–70.
- Zhang, N. (2020). Analysis of the Current Counter-Extremism Situation in Central Asia. *Collection of reports of the Northern Forum* (No. 2, Issue 280).
- Zhirukhina, E. (2024). Foreign fighters from Central Asia: Between renunciation and repatriation. ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/foreign-fighters-central-asia-between-renunciation-and-repatriation-24072>