



# ISIS and Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics

---

Ms Navroz Singh



## About the Author



**Ms Navroz Singh** is a Research Intern with the Vivekananda International Foundation, focusing on the Central Asian Republics. She is a graduate with honours in Political Science from Miranda House, University of Delhi a postgraduate diploma in Conflict Transformation and Peace Building from the Aung San Suu Kyi Centre for Peace, Lady Sri Ram College, University of Delhi.

# ISIS and Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics

## A Threat Expanding

The expanding threat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) looms large even as most states choose to remain in a state of denial over the presence of the extremist outfit on their soil. While countries in the Western 'heartlands' may be prime targets for attacks orchestrated and directed by the group, regions geographically closer to the outfits' so-called caliphate are most suited for direct recruitment into its organizational rank and structure. The erstwhile Soviet Republics of Central Asia, given their geostrategic proximity to the IS and domestic instability are emerging as the most favoured recruitment grounds to serve the terror group objectives which seeks to spread violence and instability in its immediate and extended neighbourhood.

An oft-quoted argument is that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed for the revival of radicalized strands within Islam in the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan after nearly seven decades of severe religious repression under the communists. It is believed that despite intense efforts by the communist regime to exterminate religious identity across the empire, Central Asian populations held on to their deeply Islamic culture systems and beliefs, handed down and nurtured over centuries. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian leadership invested heavily in building and restoration of mosques and other symbols of Islam as means of proclaiming their identity to be different from the Soviet system and enhancing their legitimacy in the eyes of the local populations. What better evidence of such strategies than the fact that the Uzbek President Islam Karimov made the pilgrimage to Mecca and was sworn on the Koran in what is interpreted to be a bid to use Islam for extracting support from his country's people.

These strategies however reflected no genuine intent on part of the leadership to revive Islam in its traditional form in the region, and were, more often than not, tools to gain legitimacy and attain certain carefully calculated political goals. Officially, the republics maintained the policy of crushing with a heavy hand, the growth of destabilising elements which sought to destruct the famed stability

and secularism of these states. And, a host of concurrent factors became the reason for the growth of radical elements within society to the detriment of the syncretic, tolerant historical cultures of the region.

Despite best intentions, the Hanafi school of Islam, the main conventional school of religious and legal interpretation in Central Asia, greatly favoured for its rational approach, strong traditions of dialogue and incorporation of local customs and traditions, came to be replaced, in certain pockets, with a highly intolerant, violent, exclusionary version adopted by the likes of the IS. Now, with radicalization on an upward swing, official figures cite the number of 'conservative' elements in society to be somewhere around a few hundred. However, at least 2,000 Central Asians are believed to have joined the Islamic State and the actual figure, writes Deirdre Tynan of the International Crisis Group, could be as high as 4,000. Increasingly marked by poverty and radicalization, the region has become a growing source of foreign fighters.

While the risks may still be in relative infancy, brushing aside the potentiality of violence may exacerbate the threat to a point of no return. The recent appearance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the region, which started with the emergence of the black flag of the so-called caliphate from a bridge in Tashkent, is gradually acquiring unprecedented proportions. A short while after this incident, Al-Baghdadi appointed a Tajik jihadi to be the 'Amir' of the Raqqa province in Syria. Towards the end of September, 2014, the leader of the Waziristan based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Usmon Ghazi, declared his group's allegiance to the IS. In one of the most significant events till date, the chief of Tajikistan's Special Forces, Gulmorod Khalimov, was seen in an ISIS propaganda video, dressed in black and holding a gun, and declaring his country's "un-Islamic" policies as the reason behind his departure to the caliphate's heartland. Media reports also suggested that the recent disappearance of a container holding 50 kilograms of Cesium-137 in Kazakhstan reflects the possibility that the extremist group is on a lookout for radioactive material.

Essentially, thus, in a region that was famous for its unique version of Islam, often termed as 'Folk Islam' - a secular, tolerant blend of the basic tenets of the religion fused with local cultural practices - a disturbing trend is ferociously raising its ugly head and a haunting question which persists is that, what factors have motivated such rapid radicalization of the region towards practices which, until much recently, never gained forthwith or mass acceptance among the region's

martial races, exceptions notwithstanding. As with the rest of the world, multiple perspectives have been put forth.

### ***“Congratulations: Your brother’s become a martyr”*: The Pull and Push Factors towards Violent Jihad**

Addressing this concern elicits multiple possibilities from the respondents, owing to the highly subjective nature of the phenomenon of radicalization. It is extremely problematic to generalize a definite trend given the variations in objectives, personality profiles of potential radicalists, motivators, socio-economic circumstances and the high degree of heterogeneity in the cultural and ethnic patterns of the region. Existing research on this subject reflects sharp polarizations: a part of the scholarship is absolutely dismissive of the threat as a potent security risk, and there are others who believe that the governments of these countries must be more cognizant of this threat, today, more than ever before, and undertake stringent measures to put up effective resistance. Further, while some believe that radicalization in these republics is a result of the global wave of Islamic terrorism after the emergence of the ‘Islamic State phenomenon’, others hold the opinion that such post-Soviet models of radicalization are myths generated to conceal domestic mismanagement and coercive repression of cultural and religious identities by the authoritarian governments at the helm of affairs since 1991-92. While some believe that religious manifestations peaked in the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet state, others are firm believers of the fact that religion as a way of life, as a political tool or as a mobilizing social force was in resurgence during the later Soviet years. Under Soviet rule, religious forces may have been dormant, but nowhere even close to being exterminated.

Without delving much into this argument, this paper seeks to analyse the trends, causes and repercussions of the most recent wave of radicalization in the Central Asian republics – that pertaining to the influence of the Islamic State.

## **The Trend**

The International Crisis Group, in a report published during the first fortnight of 2015, attempts to answer some of these questions based on a series of interviews with security experts, political analysts, state ministers, diplomats, religious leaders, politicians, and would-be migrants to the ISIS territories.

Prompted in part by the appeal of an ideology which is gaining heat globally, and by a perception of political marginalization and bleak economic prospects, Central Asia characterizes a region where complex forces are at play in determining the causes of radicalization. A deadly cocktail created by ethnic multiplicities, cultural fault lines, domestic instability, political authoritarianism, socio-economic underdevelopment and suppression of human rights results in the manifestation of collective frustrations, thus placing these countries in an extremely fragile position. Reinforcing this ‘fragility’ has also been the grand scheme of radical elements in the region – to foster the breakdown of what they perceive as ‘western’ systems of governance and secure the establishment of a “Central Asian Islamic” caliphate, with the latter being a extremely concerning and unsettling possibility.

The following table represents the ‘fragility index’ for the countries in Central Asia calculated on the basis of parameters such as ‘demographic pressures’, ‘refugees and internally displaced people’, ‘group grievance’, ‘human flight and brain drain’, ‘uneven economic development’, ‘poverty and economic decline’, ‘state legitimacy’, ‘public services’, ‘security apparatus’, ‘factionalized elites’ and ‘external intervention’. As is evident, all countries save Kazakhstan are considered to be under medium to high risks of instability.

Country	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan
Place in the world out of 178 countries (the lower the place, the bigger the threat)	60/178	57/178	83/178	64/178	113/178
Points (the higher the point, the larger the threat)	83.5	83.8	76	81.1	66.5
Category	High Warning	High Warning	Warning	High Warning	Low Warning

Foreign Policy Magazine: Most Fragile States Index, 2016

(Source: <http://foreignpolicy.com/fragile-states-index-2016-brexit-syria-refugee-europe-anti-migrant-boko-haram/>)

Therefore, a policy approach which protects the best interests of these states

and the region, contextualized by considering the unique opportunities and threats these republics face, becomes essential.

## Causes

In terms of individual motivations, 'ideological' support is the most important factor which shapes radical perceptions in the region. Socio-economic factors do play a part, however, secondary to the idea of the 'holy struggle' to advance Islam. Sympathisers of the IS in the region, motivated by an extremist version of religious ideology, interpret the terror group's brutality and severity in the application of a narrowly defined socio-political agenda as reflective of moral strength, in the face of what they believe is the 'hypocritical secularism' of their own rulers. The aspect of 'novelty seeking' is not entirely lost in the region. However, this principle remains largely in the shadows when more persisting and potent drivers of radicalization exist.

While some may seek to join the extremist ranks to gain combat experience, others may be pushed by bleak economic and social opportunities in their home countries as opposed to the 'glamorized' Islamic way of life portrayed by the IS propaganda. Mairambi Olimova, whose daughter's family relocated to Syria as a part of the recent wave of radicalization in their home state of Tajikistan, describes her last phone conversation with her daughter. She was informed that the family had been given \$30,000 for their journey to Aleppo. They had settled into a four-bedroom apartment with a television, refrigerator, and carpets. All this has been granted even though her husband barely takes part in any military activities. Rather, he inspects cars for alcohol and cigarettes, which the ISIS has banned. Additionally, the family is also given \$35 a month in child benefits for each of their three children. Her daughter ended the conversation by declaring that she believed that *"the Caliphate will come to Tajikistan, so that Muslims will be able to live with Allah."*

Identity stabilization persists as a significant cause of radicalization. During the Soviet period, vigorous efforts were made to completely wipe out religion and its identity manifestations from the public, and even the private sphere. Consequently, intellectual platforms of Islam vanished and the classic Islamic education systems based on the methodology of the Hanafi School was almost exterminated. After generations of implementing a failed communist experiment, the Muslim communities in Central Asia were at dangerously low levels of syncretic religious education. These communities, following Soviet social reengineering, came

across as the most striking examples of 'post-atheistic' societies. The danger which surrounds such societies is that, religion does not erode, only lives a temporarily dormant life. In this period of dormancy and the obvious lack of enlightened perspectives which are more likely to be inclusive and tolerant, what sustains religion in pockets is aggression, humiliation and revenge. Given a suitable trigger event, eventual manifestation is deadly, and Central Asia is learning its lessons the hard way. At the time of its independence, the Central Asian society was characterized by low levels of education in the foundational tenets of Islam, distorted traditions and a shattered identity. These factors, as many believe, created the most suitable conditions, over a period of time, for the emergence of radical and violent interpretations of Islam.

Today, ambiguous and uncontrolled religious schooling, perceived unfulfilled desires for social and political change, social marginalization, and lack of sustainable economic opportunities, among a host of other factors, contribute towards rapid radicalization of the youth in the region. Contrary to their domestic struggles, forces like the IS perpetuate a notion of politics gaining legitimacy from self-styled interpretations of religion which find resonance among the disgruntled populations. The twisted possibility of leading a life of 'morality 'in line with the 'true principles' of Islam, based on a thorough system of 'Islamic education', propels people who do not find acceptance of their opinions in their home states towards the pseudo-reality painted by the caliphate. In the psychological state of cognitive dissonance, without suitable social reinforcements, individuals surrender the power of rationalization to an ideological metanarrative, to the detriment of their selves and the social fabric. Unfortunately, before the consequences of their actions dawn upon them, escape is a farfetched reality.

An article published by The Guardian exemplifies this argument through the example of a Tajik man who had worked in Moscow on numerous occasions and said that if asked to, he would definitely join the ISIS. *"There's a caliphate there. You can live there as a Muslim and you don't have to fight, Allah be praised. You can go and be a part of the only state of Allah. Without homosexuals, lesbians and other filth."*

Keeping this in view, the significance of the need to generate, propagate and proliferate counter narratives which challenge the violent and exclusionary beliefs of the likes of IS needs to be considered. The art of piecing society together through tolerant syncretism, actively impressed upon people, enables the building of a natural antidote against the nefarious objectives of such terror groups, whose highly



flawed and disconcerting interpretations of religion require to be vehemently challenged and opposed through the multitude of social, political and cultural voices.

## **Radicalization of Women**

A trend increasingly on the rise, and frighteningly so, is the rapid radicalization of women in the Central Asian states.

Radicalization is believed to be the most effective in small, close knit networks of friends, relatives and acquaintances. This is the reason why the 'Social Movement' and 'Group Identity' principles most effectively define the causes of radicalization in this region. Within identified 'circles', the perpetuation and acceptance of a certain way of life as supreme and ethically rewarding in 'this life and the next' is the most compelling force of radicalization, as seen through most interviews published by the Crisis Group and other agencies. Women, whose journeys to Syria were cut short by intelligence agencies, revealed their plans to travel to IS controlled territories with their children, but leaving their husbands behind. For most, the prospects of a "devout life and an Islamic environment" for their children were the strongest calls. Almost no one indicated the slightest fear of death, for themselves or their children. Rather, they expressed satisfaction and joy when presented with the prospect of their children "sacrificing their lives for Islam" and transcending to the "world of eternity".

For these women, the opportunity cost of risking it all to travel to the terrorist mainlands was not an obstacle at all. Claiming to be frustrated with the living conditions in their homelands, many sought to justify their preference for risks of living and dying in an "Islamic caliphate" which catered to their "economic and religious needs", over living among apostates who dance to the tunes of the "infidel western world". The social impact of such a trend is indeed horrifying. The percentage increase of women who are involved in extremism related crimes has risen by a startling 22%. From only 1% of such crimes being committed by women about a decade ago, the number has increased to almost 23%.

One of the concomitant reasons associated with such tendencies is the inability of law enforcement agencies to undertake stringent measures against women and children particularly through tactics involving the use of force. This explains why extremist organizations look favourably upon recruiting women -

women are not checked as frequently and strictly as their male counterparts at international entry and exit check posts. Moreover, most contacts for recruitment are men in Russia or the Chechenan region who often incentivize young girls to marry them before making the journey to Syria. Several young women have unfortunately fallen in the trap and are living under despicable conditions of exploitation and brutality in the regions controlled by IS; sexual crimes are a wretched reality. With no means of contacting their families back home, return seems a distant possibility, and even if some manage to return, although the prospects are extremely bleak, acceptance within traditional family set ups is impossible.

## Geostrategic Compulsions



The strategic location of countries in Central Asia facilitates easy access to the caliphate controlled territories. The security infrastructure is not equipped enough to deal with recruitment which is conducted through well guarded, secretive, nuanced techniques. Recruitment, in person, often takes place in “rear markets” – closed pavilions with small, poorly lit shops which are the domain of cannabis dealers and currency exchangers. Several groups of recruiters frequent these secluded back alleys, going back and forth between the spots usually frequented by migrants and prospective employers. Visiting the area usually after dark, the

recruiters, in an attempt to persuade vulnerable recruits, would play on their vulnerabilities (which given the obvious lack of basic necessities are often not hard to spot) and go on to explain that in ISIS, fighting was not obligatory. Instead of a slavish existence, they believed that the Islamic caliphate “opened to them the possibility of leading a comfortable life.”

Recruitment mostly occurs in Russia, and for those who can economically afford to make the journey, in the Wahhabi hotlands of Saudi Arabia or Egypt. On the journey to Central Asia, Turkey is the penultimate destination. Citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan do not require a visa to travel to Turkey and citizens of Uzbekistan are issued a 30-day visa upon their arrival. Having made it till here, the journey forward is not much of a trouble, given the huge influx of tourists, traders and economic migrants who enter and exit the country daily. Furthermore, lack of coordination between law enforcement and security service agencies poses a major problem for the exchange of precise information about those headed for Syria. Beyond their homeland, ethnic divisions are reduced to a blur with the Central Asians, Russians, Chechnans, Caucasians, Daghestanis, Russians and Turks coordinating themselves into similar *jamaats* (factions).

## Migration

Migration in search of economic opportunities is a major propellant of radicalization. Migrants, most of them illegal, come in contact with source recruiters mostly based out of Russia or Arab countries, who have been trained in or have links with hardliner religious groups in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh. Most migrants are working under difficult economic conditions, are socially marginalized and ill paid despite working under dangerous job restrictions, and therefore seek a sense of relief, solace and community in religious groupings. Gulnazar Keldi, the author of Tajikistan’s national anthem, at a special session of the Tajik parliament lamented, “Many of our young people are busy with difficult work, their lives are very hard and they live in a foreign country. At this very point, people appear who promise good money and heaven on earth, and they attract them into the jihad.”

To quote the example of Nusrat Nazarov, the head Tajik in ISIS, from a report published by the Guardian, his radicalization started during the multiple trips he undertook to the Russian capital during the early 2000s. Chechnans loyal to the terrorist groups frequent the mosques in Moscow and impress upon unsuspecting believers the need for them to “go live in Syria, where the caliphate is”. Upon his

return from Moscow, Nazarov's younger brother recollects, Nusrat became more and more religious, repeated to those around him that his eyes had been opened to 'proper Islam' and that now his only objective was to fight for achieving the "holy aim through violent jihad."

The transformation from 'identity stabilization' through radical understandings of religion, towards 'identity glorification' by accepting the idea of waging a 'holy war' against "apostates" and "infidels" doesn't take too long. The consequences are deadly and deafening for not only the countries to which they have migrated, but also the countries of their origin. Given the lack of necessary security measures, most return to their homelands, radicalized and trained in the art of waging jihad. The absence of socio-economic support in their homelands upholds the circle of migration to 'promised lands' in search of 'worldly gold', which translates into 'out-worldly gains' sooner than later.

## **Profiling a Prototype?**

The dream of an 'Islamic Caliphate' appeals to a vast cross-section of people. No specific profile of a potential radical can thus be constructed. Moreover, repeated appeals made by the propagandists of the Islamic State expressing their need for educated doctors, nurses, educationists, computer professionals, enhances the possibility of recruitment from a vast and varied pool of individuals. The myth of a potential terrorist being an impoverished lunatic is thus defeated. Some wish to fight on the ground, others wish to facilitate the requirements of the foot soldiers. While their objectives and the means to attain these goals may differ, the pull of the ideology is an invariable constant. Recruits may be ex-servicemen, farmers, school dropouts, university graduates, women abandoned by their families or those who have abandoned their marital homes in search of a more fulfilling 'Islamic' life in the caliphate. Many are driven by the decisions of their states' leaders to allow Western forces, whom they perceive to be pursuing a nihilistic agenda against their 'Muslim' brothers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to set up bases in Central Asia. Despite the heterogeneity in profiles, all are essentially driven by the belief, which has been emphatically and craftily sold to them, that a "life in a homogenous Islamic society is more fulfilling than the one they lead in the post-Soviet economic and social model."

## Assessing the Actual Threat

Despite the euphoria surrounding an extremely legitimate threat, statistics indicate that Central Asian countries may not be the world's preeminent place for recruitment into terrorism. The numbers of fighters sourced by IS from these states are far from overwhelming when compared to the top MENA (Middle East and North Africa) or the European countries. Quoting figures from a report published by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, the figures of per capita volunteers from these states are: 1 in 14,400 Turkmen, 1 in 40,000 Tajiks, 1 in 56,000 Kyrgyz, 1 in 58,000 Uzbeks and 1 in 72,000 Kazaks. This implies that the total number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq when expressed as a percentage of the total population of their respective countries stands at 0.0001% for Kazakhstan, 0.007% for Turkmenistan, 0.002% for Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The regional average is a pretty heartening 0.002%. Compare this to the top five (Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Lebanon) MENA foreign fighter source countries. The regional average as a percentage of their populations taken collectively hovers between 0.08-0.011%. And to pitch this against the top five European fighter source countries (France, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), the average stands at 0.07% as a proportion of their populations taken together.

It would be interesting to note that these figures exist despite the populations of the Central Asian countries being predominantly (82.40%) Muslim (Sunni Muslims: 85% and Shia Muslims: 15%) as opposed to the European countries in which a meagre 12-12.5% of the total population practices Islam.

One of the reasons for such trends is the inadequacy of direct connectivity between the Central Asian states and the battlefields of the Middle East. Fortunately, positive social pressure is immense. Family members of those individuals who chose to relocate to IS controlled territories have expressed severe regret and disappointment over the decisions of their kin and have, in most cases, disowned them for prioritizing flawed individual ideological constructs and perceptions over the needs and advice of their families.

The Guardian reports the interview conducted by Daniil Turovsky (of Meduza, a part of the New East network) with Mairambi Olimova, mother-in-law of Loik Rajabov, who left for Syria with his family to serve the Islamic State. Without batting an eyelid she says, *"Most of all I want them (the Tajik authorities) to bring*

him (*Rajabov*) here, pour gasoline on his head, and set him on fire.” Similarly, Ibrohim, the father of Bobojon Kurbonov, one of the IS fighters killed in the battle for Raqqa in Syria in October 2013 is reported to have said,

*“What’s there to say? Why bother? I have disowned him. He never listened, did everything without permission. Then he went to Moscow in 2013. What did he go there for? How was I to know what he was doing there? I stopped talking to him after he left. When we came back, we didn’t see each other. Then he left again. I don’t understand how they could convince him to go (to Syria). He left his family – me, his children. He left and has dishonoured us all. I expected something like this from him. But I couldn’t strangle him myself, they’d put me away for that. And now, I am suffering because of it. It would have been better just to strangle him.”*

## **Analysing the Presence of ISIS in Central Asia: A Country-wise Study**

The trends of radicalization in Central Asia are unevenly distributed among the countries in the region. Radical tendencies are more pronounced towards the Southern, South-Eastern and North-Eastern parts of the region, with the heartlands being relatively secure.

### **Kazakhstan**

In *Kazakhstan*, the most developed of the five states, radicalization was not perceived as much of a threat until recently following a series of ISIS related incidents in the country, which have shocked the governments out of their self-induced slumber. On June 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, armed assailants attacked two arms shops to seize weapons and rammed a minibus through the doors of a National Guard base in the north-western city of Aktobe. President Nazarbayev termed the attackers as “foreign trained Salafi jihadists”, “politically motivated to destabilize the country” and overthrow the present regime. A month later, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, a regional court in Aktobe convicted 12 men for plotting attacks on behalf of the IS, and less than a week later, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, two armed gunmen killed two policemen and a civilian in Kazakhstan’s commercial capital, Almaty.

Kazakhstan has been considered the most stable and most secular amongst all the post-Soviet republics. For a society based more on clan membership and regional identity than transnational religious extremism, the recent trends are indeed alarming. The rise of radical interpretations of Islam in Kazakhstan occurred in three, almost successive stages. The process started in 1995 when such ideas started infiltrating into Kazakhstan from the Russian republics of Dagestan and Chechnya. During this period which continued till 2002, the republic was permeated with the ideas of *Takfir*, a radical ideology based on accusing fellow Muslims of apostasy. The second stage, is associated with the name of Sheikh Abduhalil Abdujabarov, and it is during this period that the ideas of Wahhabism and *Takfir* entrenched deeper into Kazakh society.

The third stage started in 2011 and continues till date, strengthening its violent resolve each successive year with support from the emergence of groups such as the Islamic State. Additionally, NATO's military operation against the al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the wars in the Middle East, facilitated the spread of such ideologies during this period. Most recruits claim allegiance to the Salafi school of Islam, which is relatively unpopular among Kazakhs who largely support the Hanafi School of Islamic law. The '*Tablighi Jamaat*', a missionary extremist organization which though is formally banned in the country, currently handles recruitment for ISIS from within the Kazakh territory.

Theoretically speaking, radicalization is the most prevalent in the Southern districts, which border Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. But ISIS related activity is also on a steady increase in the north and western parts of the country where radical *Jamias* are the most active. The northern parts witness a high degree of activity of ISIS related Caucasian networks from Russia. Volunteers are recruited both within the country, in mosques and *namazkhanas* and abroad, mostly in Russia.

The most recent statistics indicate that close to 300 Kazakh citizens are fighting in the ranks of the ISIS and the numbers are set to increase. With the government responding through increased repression in the name of secularism, one view predicts that radical elements are likely to strengthen when presented with alternatives which favour their worldview.

## Kyrgyzstan

*Kyrgyzstan* has witnessed two revolutions in the last decade. This political tumult and turmoil underlined the inherent weaknesses of the Kyrgyz state, which has been exploited to the hilt by recruiters: corruption, poverty, ethnic rivalries and clan based tensions, lack of democratic institutions and authoritarian laws, which are perceived by some to be anti-Islamic.

The number of Kyrgyz nationals estimated to have volunteered to join the IS varies between a hundred to almost six hundred. The route undertaken to reach the Arab warlands is largely the same: recruitment in mosques and close-knit radical units in Russia (where most of them work as migrants on construction sites), an interlude in Turkey, from where they are guided forward to their destinations in Syria.

What makes the Kyrgyz example most interesting is that majority of the recruitments take place in the southern part of the country, a territorial landmass dominated by the Uzbek minority which is historically more religious than the ethnic Kyrgyz and has faced violent repression in the past. Again, mostly, recruitment takes place in Russia, where the majority of the Kyrgyz migrants have settled. The accession of Kyrgyzstan to the Eurasian Economic Union in May 2015 ensured that the citizens of the country no longer have to apply for work permission to seek employment in Russia. To a limited extent, social networks as Odnoklasniki, V Kontakte and Facebook also facilitate recruitment and communication.

## Tajikistan

In the case of *Tajikistan*, currently there are two main radical groups in operation: the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Recently, the *Jama'ati Ansorullah*, with links to Pakistani madrassas, has also indicated its presence in Tajikistan. According to Muriel Atkin, who specialises in the role of Islam and nationalism in the political conflict in Tajikistan at the Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University, it is Sufi Islam which flourished in Tajikistan, based on decentralized and informal traditional Islamic practices. The cultural diversity within Tajikistan is immense. Home to not only Sunnis of the Sufi tradition, but also an Ismaili minority which is localized in the Badakhshan province, ninety percent of the Tajiks acknowledge their ideological association with the Hanafi school of Islam. In 2015, Tajikistan's Supreme Court declared that Salafi



Muslims were extremists and in referring to ISIS, the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon declared the organization as the “plague of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

Geographically, most recruitment into the ranks of ISIS takes place from the western and north-eastern parts of the country such as the Gissar Valley and the Ferghana Valley, where almost 90% of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous region, bordering Afghanistan in the Pamir mountainous region is home to the Isma’ili Shiite population which feels increasingly threatened from the threat of Taliban incursions from bordering Afghanistan. Consequently, radical elements enjoy almost no support in this region.

Highly inconsistent and fluctuating statistics have been submitted of the number of Tajiks who have currently joined ISIS. The numbers vary between 190 (International Centre for the Study of Radicalization), to almost 2000. Official estimates are yet to cross the 500 mark. Despite such variations, little contestation is put to the claim that Tajikistan is the perfect place for extremist groups: drug trafficking, easy infiltration of financial and combative military assistance, corrupt and repressive government, economic crisis, lack of social security, unemployment, inadequate security infrastructure and poverty cumulatively contribute towards disillusionment and alienation among youth, paving the way towards radicalization. Needless to say, it is in Russia that recruitment into terrorist organizations mostly takes place. The hubs are mosques and prayer rooms spread across the country, frequented by the Chechnans, who work towards consolidating young migrants and providing them a sense of security and community through religion. Online social networking plays a limited role.

## **Turkmenistan**

Geographically, *Turkmenistan* is located the closest to the IS infested territories and ranks the second highest amongst the Central Asian countries with close to 360 Turkmen speculated to be fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State. However, uniquely, religious radicalization is not a dominant cause of concern in the country, and is limited to only a section of the minority confined to the fringes. Despite Turkmenistan being a hermetic state, with not much known about its prominent social trends, it is suffice to say that Turkmen value their clan and regional identities much more than the allure of a global Islamic movement.

Turkmen are a source of low-paid and low-skill labour in Russia, which is where majority of the recruitment takes place. What may motivate Turkmen to join organizations such as the ISIS are the vast socio-economic disparities, a characteristic of the decaying social structure of the state. However, what is the most peculiar to Turkmenistan is the fact that many of their Shiite brethren inhabit pockets of territories in Syria and Iraq and have often been the target of attacks and killings orchestrated by IS. Therefore, the allure of the terror group is almost defeated by its pronounced anti-Shia identity, which limits the spread of its influence from the nascent base that IS has managed to build in Afghanistan.

## **Uzbekistan**

For more than twenty years, *Uzbekistan* has seen no real political change and remains one of the strongly authoritarian forms of government in the region. More than 500 fighters belonging either to the country or to one of the neighbouring countries but who trace their ethnicity to Uzbekistan are considered to be fighting the war for the IS. Due to reasons more than one, terror groups like the ISIS consider the exceedingly divisive ethnic, social and religious faultlines in Uzbekistan to be the most effective backdrop and facilitator for the growth of extremism. The specificity of the Ferghana Valley, characterized by numerous ethnic clashes, political disgruntlements and geographical inaccessibility made worse by an inefficient and loosely structured security structure makes cross-country infiltration easier, exacerbating the terror threat. A sizeable portion of the Uzbeks are also eminently present in the ranks of the Syrian rebels, and may also constitute their own groups/factions associated with other terrorist groups, such as the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. Uzbeks also constitute the highest ranks of Caucasian recruiters tasked with enhancing and inflating the support base of such terrorist groups.

The country's leading terrorist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), officially professed its allegiance to and support for ISIS and now preaches the need for a pan-Sunni identity and the creation of an Islamic Emirate in Central Asia. It is particularly active on the border with Afghanistan and is increasingly turning its attention from fighting authoritarian regimes towards strengthening the ranks of jihadis' in the Middle East.

## **Threat from Returning Jihadis**

The top security concern in Central Asia is the impact which those returning from the IS controlled territories pose to regime stability and social structures of individual countries. Increasing encroachment over the democratic spaces in the Central Asian countries is justified by citing the threat from the Syria returned jihadis, heightened by a series of apparent foiled conspiracies in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Governments have repeatedly stated that the plan for the establishment of a Central Asian caliphate is stronger today more than ever before and thus provides the perfect backdrop for ever stricter laws on religious practice. This leads the state agencies and the media to present extremism and violent radicalization as the most serious threat the region faces, essentially a product of foreign forces, or even a “global conspiracy.”

Those returning back to their homelands do so, either to carry forward the agenda of their groups of affiliation, or due to a sense of disillusionment with the practices of such extremist organizations. While the former category of ‘returnees’ is not bothered by the challenge of existence, the latter is under the crippling fear of police action and the torture which ensues given the lack of rehabilitation facilities. Caught in the crossfire are often those who do not support the ideology of the Islamic State and may only be seeking any route to escape the barbarity.

Valuable lessons for the reintegration of such returnees can be acquired from certain successful models which have been implemented by countries like Denmark and Indonesia. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that the fragile state structures, weak institutional capacities and lacking political will in the countries of the Central Asian region will impede the implementation of such programmes.

## **The Challenge for the Central Asian States**

Policies are essentially made and evaluated in context. Therefore, a unilinear explanation of their evaluation can never be tenable. Ideas metamorphose in response to the milieu contributing to their germination. For the fledgling republics of Central Asia immediately after their independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the twin challenges of political stability and economic growth loomed large, without which, development seemed improbable. In addition to steering their countries through troubled and unchartered territories, the leaders of these states were faced with the task of consolidating a formidable national identity which

announces their arrival on the geopolitical scene and assures to their populations a sense of self-determinate stability and security. Cut to a decade later, immediately in the aftermath of 9/11, the leadership of the Central Asian republics was concerned to stem the onslaught of radical interpretations of religion, reinforced by powerful foreign forces, from threatening their secular polity. The degree of success attained in these endeavours maybe substantial, but not without diabolic by-products, which are emerging as causes of concern in the contemporary context of ISIS inspired and influenced terrorism.

There is evidence which points towards the conclusion that apprehensive repression creates the most suitable conditions for instigating psychological perceptiveness towards radicalization. Organizations like the ISIS continue to exploit suppressed religious sentiments in their favour to swell their ranks. Mismanagement of religion in public life particularly in the context of the geostrategic Central Asian states poses a huge danger to their stability and the security of their citizens against the cross tide of international religious movements. Laws have been enacted which “criminalize fighting abroad”, but are highly inadequate, in their provisions and implementation. There is a perceptible lack of political will for the rehabilitation of returning fighters. Those who tasted a bitter pill in their support for the Islamic state and seek to return to their homelands face a tough homecoming. A preventive approach which labels all unfamiliar interpretations of Islam as radical and violent only serves to further alienate the vulnerable groups. Security, at times, becomes the garb of cover for nullifying political competition.

The Central Asian states today face an unprecedented and massive challenge. A haven for moderate Islam is undoubtedly under siege. But how must this haven be protected or rather reclaimed is a question which requires to be revisited. Existing policies are highly inadequate and the lack of political, economic and social justice compounds the threat. Clear and coordinated preventive measures to preserve stability and security in the region are required in earnest. The importance of institutional reforms cannot also be understated.

The threat is real. An ostrich like approach shall serve no end. A “witch-hunt” may only increase troubles many times over. Today, more than ever before in history, great minds in the region and the world over need to put their heads together to defeat this redoubtable threat.

## References

- "5 Killed, 9 Injured In Almaty Terrorist Attack On Police Station (GRAPHIC)". *RT International*. N.p., 2016. Web. 20 July 2016.
- "2015 Annual Report". *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. N.p., 2016. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.
- "America, Central Asia And Islam: In Central Asia, Islamic State Adds A New Twist to a Diplomatic Puzzle, The Economist". *Economist.com*. N.p., 2016. Web. 2 Aug. 2016.
- Botobekov, Uran. "Is Central Asia Ready to Face ISIS?" *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 29 July 2016.
- Botobekov, Uran. "ISIS and Central Asia: A Shifting Recruiting Strategy". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 29 July 2016.
- Catherine Putz, "Terrorism as Pretext: Religious Repression in Central Asia". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 12 Aug. 2016.
- Chausovsky, Eugene. "Militancy in Central Asia: More Than Religious Extremism". *Stratfor*. N.p., 2012. Web. 6 Aug. 2016.
- "Crackdown In Central Asia Adds Fuel To Islamic Militants' Fire". *EurasiaNet.org*. N.p., 2001. Web. 7 Aug. 2016.
- "Crisis Group: Central Asia Needs Credible Plan to Counter IS Radicalization". *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. N.p., 2015. Web. 7 Aug. 2016.
- Dyner, Anna, Arkadiusz Legieć, and Kacper Rękawek. *Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia*. The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2015. Web. 29 July 2016.
- "From Central Asia to Syria: A Teenage Girl's Jihad". *Blog.crisisgroup.org*. N.p., 2014. Web. 2 Aug. 2016.
- Heathershaw, John and David Montgomery. "The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics". *Chatham House*. N.p., 2014. Web. 10 Aug. 2016.
- "How Moscow's Migrant Workers Are Being Recruited To Isis". *The Guardian*. N.p., 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.
- "Islam in Central Asia". *Nytimes.com*. N.p., 2001. Web. 29 Aug. 2016.

- Jaborov, Safovudin. "Youth Radicalization In Tajikistan: Causes, Consequences, and Challenges to Address | Central Asia Program". *Centralasiaprogram.org*. N.p., 2013. Web. 3 Aug. 2016.
- "Kazakhstan: Gunmen Attack Gun Shops and Army Unit in Aktobe - BBC News". *BBC News*. N.p., 2016. Web. 24 July 2016.
- Krausen, Erik S. "Central Asia: Can Secular Islam Survive?" *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 4 Aug. 2016.
- Masyllkanova, Aidai. "Radicalization In Kyrgyzstan Is No Myth". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 30 July 2016.
- Omelicheva, Mariya Y. and Lawrence Markowitz. "A Trafficking-Terrorism Nexus in Central Asia". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 28 July 2016.
- Orozobekova, Cholpon. "Central Asia and the ISIS Phantom". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 7 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "5 Countries Where Freedom of Religion Is Threatened". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 3 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "6 Myths of Muslim Radicalization in Central Asia". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 4 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "Central Asia Has 99 Problems, But Extremism In Tajikistan Isn't The Worst". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "Did The Missing Tajik Commander Just Reappear?" *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "How Fragile Is The Peace In Tajikistan?" *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "Playing 'Telephone' With ISIS Central Asia Estimates". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 3 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "Missing Tajik Commander Shows Up in ISIS Video". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 4 Aug. 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "How To Fight ISIS Messaging In Central Asia? Religious Freedom". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 29 July 2016.
- Putz, Catherine. "Tajikistan Mulls Banning Islamic-Sounding Names". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 2 Aug. 2016.

- Putz, Catherine. "Tajikistan to Install Surveillance Cameras on Dushanbe Mosques". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2016. Web. 30 July 2016.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Islamic State Flag Hung From Tashkent Bridge". 2014. Web. 14 Aug. 2016.
- "Regional Workshop on Radicalization in Central Asia". *Undp.org*. N.p., 2016. Web. 2 Aug. 2016.
- "Remarks at the Rollout of the 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom". *U.S. Department of State*. N.p., 2016. Web. 6 Aug. 2016.
- Ruzaliev, Odil. "ICG Warns Of Growing Radicalization In Central Asia". *VOA*. N.p., 2015. Web. 10 Aug. 2016.
- Snow, Shawn. "ISIS Looks For Foothold In Central Asia". *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 1 Aug. 2016.
- Solovyov, Dmitry. "Central Asia Crackdown on Militant Islam Risks Backlash". *Reuters*. N.p., 2015. Web. 7 Aug. 2016.
- Sorbello, Paolo. "Islam and Central Asia: Threat or Myth?" *The Diplomat*. N.p., 2015. Web. 4 Aug. 2016.
- Stobdan, P. "ISIS in Central Asia,| Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses". *Idsa.in*. N.p., 2014. Web. 29 July 2016.
- *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*. International Crisis Group, 2015. Web. 3 Aug. 2016.
- Tahir, Muhammad. "Radical Islam Takes A Front Seat In Central Asia". *The Jamestown Foundation*. N.p., 2011. Web. 6 Aug. 2016.
- The Japan Times, "Container of Cesium-137 Falls Off Truck in Kazakhstan, Is Missing". 2016. Web. 14 Aug. 2016.
- "Thousands From Central Asia Joining 'Islamic State': Report | Asia | DW.COM | 21.01.2015". *DW.COM*. N.p., 2016. Web. 7 Aug. 2016.
- Toktonaliev, Timur. "Does Islamic State Threaten Central Asia?" *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*. N.p., 2015. Web. 6 Aug. 2016.
- Tynan, Deirdre. "Thousands from Central Asia Joining 'Islamic State'". *International Crisis Group*. N.p., 2015. Web. 7 Aug. 2016.
- Tynan, Deirdre. "Islamic State Threatens Central Asia". *International Crisis Group*. N.p., 2015. Web. 4 Aug. 2016.

- "US Congressman: Gulf States Finance Radicalization in Central Asia". *Sputniknews.com*. N.p., 2016. Web. 5 Aug. 2016.
- Zhussipbek, Galym. "Religious Radicalism in Central Asia - ". *Rethinkinstitute.org*. N.p., 2013. Web. 30 July 2016.

**Image Source:**

- <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org>



## **About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media fields have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organization to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelize fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its establishment, VIF has successfully embarked on quality research and scholarship in an effort to highlight issues in governance and strengthen national security. This is being actualized through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive-dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of the VIF form the lasting deliverables of the organisation's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



### **VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org), Website: <http://www.vifindia.org>

Follow us on [twitter@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)