



## **Redefining Extremism in Central Asia**

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### **Abstract**

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For over twenty years, the Central Asian states have faced periodic challenges of violent extremist groups and radical ideologies. These have varied among the countries, in terms of intensity, motivation, and methods, requiring the states to adjust their counter-measures accordingly. To an extent, the national narratives are similar, in that extremism is deemed an existential threat that needs to be managed with the harshest measures. However, in time, parallel approaches of de-radicalization, counter-messaging, and the like have been employed, suggesting a better appreciation of the root causes of violent extremism. That said, punitive measures remain important and with the concern of “returning foreign fighters,” one can expect an increase in them. This contribution will examine the various strands of extremism in Central Asia and compare and contrast the respective government approaches to them. Not surprisingly, the capacity and motivation to carry out measures against such groups vary. Sometimes outside assistance is required. Likewise, multinational security organizations appear to offer some ability to frame the issues in the region. For all, it is a matter of how important the threat really is, or is perceived to be, that determines the severity of counter measures and actions.

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## Analysis

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For over twenty years, the Central Asian states<sup>i</sup> have periodically faced challenges of violent extremist groups and radical ideologies. These have varied among the countries, in terms of intensity, motivation, and methods, requiring the states to adjust their counter-measures accordingly. In spite of this, the national narratives are strikingly similar. Extremism is deemed an existential threat that needs to be managed with the harshest of measures. Distinctions are made between internal and external “enemies,” with the latter often seen as influencing and sustaining the former. The U.S.-framed “global war on terrorism” of the 2000s provided the language with which the Central Asian countries could justify their own actions, especially if they could argue that they were working in concern with the Americans. In recent years, parallel approaches of de-radicalization, counter-messaging, and the like have been employed. Punitive measures remain important, and with the concern of “returning foreign fighters,” one can expect to see them increase.

This contribution will examine the various strands of extremism in Central Asia and compare and contrast the respective government approaches to combating them. Not surprisingly, the actual capacity to carry out appropriate measures varies. It is important to ask: how grave is the threat? How is it perceived? Can a realistic assessment determine the severity of counter measures and actions? The first section addresses the manifestation of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia, with the second section looking at how the respective governments react to and address these phenomena. Sometimes outside assistance is required, thus the third section will look at how key external actors have assisted the Central Asian governments in countering violent extremism. Multinational security organizations appear to offer additional resources to address extremism in the region, suggesting that these structures play a key role in some of the official strategies. Finally, attention will be given to challenges that need to be addressed in the coming years. While the threat of extremism may not be as severe as it is in some neighboring, or regional states, the potential does exist for it to become so if it is not properly addressed.

### I. Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia

Extremism is not new to Central Asia. Even during the Soviet period, there were concerns that religious extremism could arise in the context of the changes that were taking place in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, a fear of a “Muslim threat,” became the topic of numerous Western academic and policy studies.<sup>ii</sup> At the time of independence, the respective leaderships in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan all made policy statements regarding the role of religion, especially Islam, and the limits on what could be perceived as “extremist” interpretations of it. The ongoing civil war in Afghanistan and the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s only sharpened these concerns. With the exception of Tajikistan, all states in the region prohibited religious-based political parties and organizations. Moreover, laws on “religious freedom” were drafted that allowed greater government control over mosque and *madrassa* registration, religious charity actions, and the basic guidelines to practice ones’ faith.

In spite of the above measures, or perhaps because of them, signs of extremist activity appeared in the region. In August 1998, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) announced its presence in Uzbekistan with attacks on police stations and the murder of government officials in the Fergana Valley, especially in the city of Namangan. Years earlier, a group known as Adolat formed in that city with the intent of promoting Islamic values in society and within the newly-forming Uzbek legal environment. It fell afoul of the Uzbek government



and President Islam Karimov (also spelled Islam Karimov) as this group openly questioned his leadership. Karimov personally directed that Adolat, and other Islamist organizations, be declared illegal. Its leaders, Juma Namangani and Tohir Yuldashev, went underground and travelled to Tajikistan, gaining experience fighting in that country's civil war. When they reemerged as the IMU, the tactics it used belied a connection with other terrorist groups, most notably Al-Qaeda, which had also declared its presence in the world. The IMU emphasized a short list of objectives, first and foremost being the removal of President Karimov and the transformation of Uzbekistan into an "Islamic state." A broader, regional objective involved similar ends for regional states, suggesting that the IMU was more than just a single-nation entity. While there were claims of supporting Al Qaeda's self-declared war against the United States, the West, and "non-Muslim" leaders in the world, the IMU remained a regionally-focused organization.

Military-like actions in the Fergana Valley in 1998, 1999 and 2000 indicated that it was maturing as an organization. Though it faced defeat in direct confrontations with Uzbek security forces, it repeatedly regrouped and attacked again. These efforts usually involved small, mobile groups of fighters that could live off the land in areas they operated. Whether in Surkhandarya or the Tashkent wiloyatlar in Uzbekistan, or the Batken oblast of Kyrgyzstan, the IMU demonstrated that it could conduct operations throughout the region. This included a spree of six bombings in downtown Tashkent on 16 February 1999. The targets included a major government office building and the National Bank of Uzbekistan, with casualty figures at nearly 150, including 16 dead. While there remain questions about the attack, the official view from the Uzbek government is that they were IMU-perpetrated. Actions in Batken Oblast in Kyrgyzstan, although not a direct threat to that government, demonstrated that it was not fully capable of addressing such concerns. Likewise, Tajikistan was regularly criticized for being unable to managing its borders, allowing extremist groups to pass through on their way to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Violent actions were not always necessary to deem a group an extremist one. The organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) appeared in the 1990s and continues to exist in the region. Although no specific act of terrorism has been attributed to it, HT was declared banned by all governments in Central Asia. The early development of HT is well-outlined by Zeyno Baran in her study, which shows that it focused largely on presenting a theoretical and foundational alternative to the existing governments in the region.<sup>iii</sup> While it professes "non-violence," HT uses extremist language and has applauded the violent actions of other groups. In the 2000s, HT was considered influential in parts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with less of a hold in the other three countries. While there was an attempt to link it with the 2005 Andijon events and the 2010 Osh violence, overall it faded in terms of being considered an "existential threat" to any of the regimes.

In Central Asia, the IMU and HT were not alone, as other extremist groups emerged. They tended to be offshoots of the IMU, or copy-cat followers of international groups like Al Qaeda. The Islamic Jihad Union, Jund al-Khilafah, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, are some of the organizations cited by Central Asian governments as active in the region. By all accounts, these were fragmented entities with limited capabilities and competing leaders and ideals. A spate of suicide bombings in 2004 and 2005 was initially feared to be the beginning of a trend in the region. These included concurrent attacks on the U.S. and Israeli Embassies in Tashkent on 30 July 2004 and a series of suicide bombings in marketplaces in Tashkent and Bukhara. In terms of frequency and casualty figures, these never developed along with lines of what one saw, and continues to see, in the Middle East and South Asia. This is not to say that extremism or violence ceased in the past decade. On the contrary, various acts continued. In September 2010, extremist groups engaged government forces in firefights in the Rasht valley and Badakhshan in Tajikistan. Even the violence in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan in



December 2011 was considered “terrorism” by the government. Attacks across the Turkmen-Afghan border in 2017 have been viewed as perpetrated by extremists, although the Turkmen government tended to downplay their significance.

Each episode further solidified government countermeasures, which tended to be supported by outside countries in terms of assistance and cooperative measures. Equally important, they were explained by narratives that suggested extremist ideologies were *imported from abroad*. However, because certain elements in local society could be susceptible to these influences, it is important to impose certain controls. In some instances, there emerged a narrative that extremism and terrorism were really “*Uzbek problems*.” The southern oblasts of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are heavily populated by ethnic Uzbeks, who were seen as more susceptible to extremism. Other reports focused on the Fergana Valley, which is shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and also populated largely by ethnic Uzbeks. In all, somehow the phenomenon of increased religiosity in these local communities could be simplified as a threat.<sup>iv</sup>

Overall, while one can catalogue specific acts of terrorism and the existence of extremist groups in Central Asia, the impact of such over the past quarter century has been less significant than one might have anticipated. The continued violence and presence of extremist groups in neighboring Afghanistan, as well as the concerns of terrorist groups in China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, the South Caucasus and Turkey suggest that the potential for future instability does exist. Especially considering that that security apparatuses of the Central Asian regimes may not always be as strong as these neighboring countries, one could pose the question: are these countries doing something right? Or are the conditions on the ground not conducive to extremist ideas and terrorist acts?

## II. Addressing the Challenge of Extremism in Central Asia

Government strategies against extremism usually fall into the basic categories of offensive/kinetic operations, law enforcement, and information campaigns. When the threat is deemed externally-driven, these can include regional cooperation. A review of the five states in the region shows a similarity in approaches. It is worth noting that there are differences, given varying structural capacities and approaches to crafting official narratives on extremism. How governments frame the issues has been critical over the years.

### *Uzbekistan*

As the country that considers itself to be the central target of terrorist groups in Central Asia, Uzbekistan has developed the most overt policy against violent extremism and terrorist organizations. The threats are viewed in two ways: external organizations that could cross into Uzbekistan, or citizens of the country that might be susceptible to following extremist views. While the Uzbek government expresses concern over the former, active measures against the latter are easier to manage. The external “threat” is narrowly-defined and usually translated as forces that could come from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, or Kyrgyzstan, the three weak states on its borders. Indeed, although the IMU was technically a home-grown force, it has often been cast as an organization that threatened Uzbekistan from abroad. That it began to train regularly in Afghanistan in the late-1990s, and later relocated in the tribal areas of Pakistan in the early-2000s supports this idea of being an external actor. Over time, a significant percentage of the IMU members were actually non-Uzbeks, or people who had no association with the country of Uzbekistan, further legitimizing this claim.



With respect to “internal threats,” President Karimov was adamantly vocal in wanting to take direct actions. His quote in 2000 that he would “shoot them myself,” was often repeated by human rights reports and in numerous articles.<sup>v</sup> Primarily for domestic consumption, this type of language demonstrated the resolve of the Uzbek government in preventing extremist groups from harming his country. As specific attacks took place in 2004 and 2005, in the form of suicide bombings and other measures, the Uzbek leadership further emphasized this resolve. Attacks on the US and Israeli embassy reminded the Uzbek leadership that even its ties with such foreign powers would could have negative consequences.

The question of whether the Uzbek government would take *military* action in response to the threat of extremism was demonstrated in the late-1990s. Uzbek regular army forces, in conjunction with Interior and Police units, battled the various IMU incursions into the country. Measures also included the depopulation of certain “threatened” villages in the area to afford the military a wider territory within which to act. The Uzbek government also used kinetic measures on 13 May 2005 under the pretext of counter-terrorism actions. The well-analyzed Andijon events of that month remain a subject of great controversy. They have often been cast as a prime example of the Uzbek government shooting on unarmed, peaceful demonstrators. Other analysts and the Uzbek government itself have presented these events in a different way: as a successful attempt to quell a violent extremist operation.<sup>vi</sup> Official sources readily point out the fact that a number of the demonstrators were armed and that several had conducted an operation freeing Islamist prisoners from a jail that resulted in the deaths of several law enforcement agents on the night of 12-13 May. Because Western governments concluded that these measures were disproportionate and unnecessary, they dramatically reduced their security cooperation assistance. Not surprisingly, this rift between Uzbekistan and the West only accelerated Uzbek engagement with Russia and China, and an intensification of measures within the country.

The stated need to enhance security within the country became a pretext to use more stringent measures against the citizenry of Uzbekistan. The approach most often cited the heavy surveillance the state uses on its own people to limit the spread of extremist ideas, or any views that might run counter to the regime. This is done via national agencies, such as the National Security Service (Milli Hafsizlik Hizmati), which can operate under fairly flexible rules and maintain a robust “watch list” of suspected extremists. Groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International closely monitored the increasing number of political prisoners accused of “acts of terrorism.” The wave of arrests in 2005 paralleled what one saw in the late-1990s, when the government raised concern over the initial IMU attacks. “Akromiya,” the declared terrorist group responsible for causing the violence in Andijon, was cast in the same light as other terrorist organizations.

Such active measures are aided by the utilization of the mahalla structure that exists in most parts of Uzbekistan. The “mahalla” is simply a neighborhood. Unwritten social codes help maintain order within the mahalla. Traditionally, elders in such close communities would offer guidance and make decisions in cases of disputes. Either ignored or attacked during the Soviet period, this local cultural structure has been heartily embraced by the Uzbek government as a means to maintain order on behalf of the regime itself. Mahalla leaders are required to report suspicious behavior of individuals in the community under the auspices of maintaining social order. Security offices located in the mahallas become the “eyes and ears” of the administration throughout the country.<sup>vii</sup> To the outside world this image of Uzbekistan as a police state became synonymous with President Islam Karimov himself. With his death on September 2, 2016, and the accession of former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the office of President shortly thereafter, some have speculated that the strong state surveillance structure might lighten. Indeed, the release of political prisoners in 2016 and 2017, some of which had been held for more than two decades, suggests that the new President is



trying to portray himself as a more benevolent leader. The rhetoric regarding the dangers of extremism has not disappeared, but there is some speculation that overly-harsh measures might not remain the norm in the future.

### **Turkmenistan**

Understanding extremism in Turkmenistan is more difficult than that in Uzbekistan, primarily because of a dearth of information and, quite frankly, a lack of terrorist activity in the country. During the 1990s, even though neighboring Afghanistan was in the throes of a civil war and the Taliban was on the rise, Turkmenistan did not experience any direct challenges to its territory. This could be due to the fact that President Saparmurad Niyazov Turkmenbashi declared his country's policy of "Permanent Neutrality" at the United Nations General Assembly. Or, on a more practical level, the conflicts within Afghanistan were in regions not contiguous with Turkmenistan. This allowed the Turkmen government to focus its attention on economic development and highlight the advantages of neutrality. Security discourse, even after the start of the U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan, was largely absent in Turkmenistan during these years. When mentioned, extremism was viewed as an external phenomenon that was culturally incongruent with Turkmen society.

The first real mentioning of extremism *within the country* did not appear until November 2002, when news of an attempted assassination of then-President Saparmurad Niyazov was released. While the details remain unclear to this day, the Turkmen government quickly claimed that this was an effort on the part of outside forces to create instability in the country. The Uzbek Ambassador to Turkmenistan, for example, was implicated, as were several opposition figures. One, Boris Shikhmuradov, actually returned to Turkmenistan from his exile in Europe and was promptly arrested for his alleged involvement in the plot.<sup>viii</sup> The tactic of using the charge of terrorism, or extremism, as a way to target opponents is common in the region, so this should not have been a surprise.

Real acts of extremism have been noted in the 2010s, especially as violence in Afghanistan continues approach that country's shared border with Turkmenistan. The previously-mentioned Taliban incursions into Turkmenistan that took place resulted in firefight with Turkmen border guards. Local news reports admitted that both sides took casualties. While not a sustained threat to Turkmenistan, the government subsequently ramped up its calls for cooperative efforts in border security. These calls include increased engagement with the international community, such as the United States, the European Union, United Nations, among others, although only sporadically. Among the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan minimizes discussion of extremism in the country.

### **Tajikistan**

In contrast to Turkmenistan, and depending upon how one defines "extremism," Tajikistan has been the object of countless attacks. To start, the official interpretation of the Civil War of 1992-1997 focuses on the rightful government fighting "extremism" for control of the country. Part of Emomali Rahmon's justification of his government's policies is this ability to keep the country stable. Of course, opposition figures and the international community do not see it this way. One such group is the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Active since the late-1980s, the IRPT was part of an early effort to recognize the importance of Islam in the daily life of Tajik citizens. With independence in 1991, the question would be whether the IRPT would be allowed to exist, in contrast to the other Central Asian states, which banned "religious-based political parties." Ironically, the Civil War created the space to make the IRPT a credible voice in Tajik politics, garnering the



support of the Islamic Republic of Iran and other international actors. As one of the key actors in the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the IRPT was able to articulate an alternative political vision for the country that highlighted a religious foundation for politics short of advocating a theocracy. The IRPT was a signatory member of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord of 27 June 1997, and transitioned into a partner within the post-conflict government.<sup>ix</sup> The IRPT contested presidential and legislative elections through the 1990s and 2000s. However, the notion that it represented “Islam” at a time when extremism was viewed with suspicion meant that it faced continual and increasing harassment. Its early leader, Said Abdullo Nuri was regularly harassed by security officials. His successor, Muhiddin Kabili, was also limited in his actions and detained at times. In 2015, the IRPT was finally banned as a political party on the grounds that it was an extremist organization.

The actions against the IRPT occurred largely because the Rahmon government has been able to “control the narrative” in terms of the Civil War and post-war environment. Moreover, as it can manage laws and the use of force, the fate of the IRPT was largely set. Crucial in this is the fact that extremist groups have conducted operations in the country, as noted earlier, lending cause to the government’s decisions. Active measures include targeted attacks against suspected extremists, the disappearance of key opponents, and the passage of laws that limit religious expression. In August 2011, the government passed a law prohibiting citizens under the age of 18 from entering mosques or participating in the normal Friday prayer services. In October 2015, the same restrictions applied to civil servants. Moreover, sermons are crafted by an approved state board.<sup>x</sup> Unregistered mosques do exist, but they are shut down or harassed when discovered, along the lines of how underground mosques were treated during the Soviet period.

These measures have not resulted in a decline of extremist activity in the country, but arguably an increase of cases over the past several years. Most notable in this was the defection of a top-ranking security official, Gulmurod Khalimov, to the so-called “Islamic State” in 2015. Although later reported to have been killed in September 2017 by a Russian air strike in Syria, this case heightened fears of extremism in the country.<sup>xi</sup> International organizations raise the concern that the over-reaction of a weak (or “failing” as per the ICG) state will only precipitate a downward spiral of more repressive measures resulting in more attacks, and thus another round of repressive measures. If the government’s goal is regime protection, then the cost of these actions will be deemed acceptable, at least in the short run.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

Lacking the capacity of its neighbors in addressing extremist groups, Kyrgyzstan is no stranger to the challenges of terrorism. Parallel to the other states, this threat is cast as one “from abroad,” specifically Afghanistan. As noted earlier, the attacks in Batken in the late-1990s revealed the limited capacity of the Kyrgyz security and intelligence forces. In addition, Uighur groups operating out of Western China (Xinjiang) have conducted limited actions within Kyrgyzstan, in at least one incident in 2002 targeting Chinese officials.<sup>xii</sup> Later attacks in 2014 and 2016, which resulted in civilian fatalities, were directed against Kyrgyz targets.

Of late, it is less the Uighur minority that is portrayed as “extremists,” but more the Uzbek minority, which makes up nearly fifteen percent of the population. When the ethnic-cleansing violence took place in June 2010 in Osh and Jalalabad, Kyrgyz nationalist media and activists quickly noted that any actions taken against this minority were actually *against extremist groups and defensive in nature*. That “Uzbeks” can be seen as



synonymous with extremism, and therefore terrorism, has become a more open and acceptable conclusion. Not surprisingly, the local Uzbek interpretation of this dynamic and these specific events are quite different.<sup>xiii</sup>

The capacity limitations of the Kyrgyz government were exhibited during these events and remain so today. Consequently, among the Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan relies heavily on external assistance and the growing web of security organizations that will be discussed later. This is particularly important, given that the lines between “terrorist/extremist” groups and criminal gangs are increasingly blurred. In the south of Kyrgyzstan, especially in the Osh region, narcotics and weapons traffickers conduct their activities in the same areas as extremist groups, sometimes resulting in officials declaring that they’re all interconnected.

### **Kazakhstan**

Of the five states in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has had the longest period of stability with respect to extremist threats. Moreover, the government has a greater capacity to address this concern, largely because it is able to take advantage of significant revenues from its hydrocarbon wealth. This means that the military and other security forces are better equipped and prepared to address terrorist actions, if the need arises. On a practical level, these forces are specifically trained in counter-terrorist methods, to include Special Forces units of the Kazakhstani military. However, the performance of such units during the unrest in Zhanaozen, suggests that more work needs to be done.

On an ideological front, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has taken on the issues of religion and extremism head on, attempting to frame a pluralist national narrative. In the “Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions,” which was established in 2003, Nazarbayev hopes to present his country as tolerant of a range of views and beliefs. Indeed, official Kazakh sources regularly note that Kazakhstan is a “multi-faith” nation. While recognizing the importance of Islam to the country, the views of other faiths that exist in the country are stressed. In public opinion polls and other studies, it appears that a sense of moderation is central to the Kazakhstani identity. This is not to say that there is complete freedom: salafist groups and ones advocating a more conservative expression of Islam are monitored and often banned, as are other organizations deemed “cults,” such as Jehovah’s Witnesses.<sup>xiv</sup> In the name of security, the state is quick to designate opposition movements “extremists,” thus allowing for legal actions to be taken against them, if necessary.<sup>xv</sup>

In sum, the five Central Asian states have exhibited different levels of capacity in both managing the political language and the actual use of force to counter extremist groups. There is a tendency to highlight the “external” nature of extremism, thus ignoring any domestic root causes of this phenomenon. In terms of specific attacks, when these have occurred, state offices tend to act harshly, assuming such measures are required to prevent any further spread. The reality is that none can carry out actions in a vacuum and thus have relied on external assistance to supplement their own efforts. It is to this that we will now turn.

### **III. The Role of the International Community**

So what does this mean for outside powers as they engage with the Central Asian states and attempt to assist in creating safe and stable environments therein? First of all, the international community varies in its engagement in the region, often basing such aid on the specific national security interests of the donor country in question. Second, the level of support is relatively modest in terms of materiel and financing. The capacity of the Central Asian countries to absorb significant external aid is limited, which often necessitates a modest



approach. Third, there is a general lack of coordination among the donor countries and the states in the region. Bilateral arrangements dominate the security landscape more than any holistic approach, although it does appear that at least one multinational organization could play a significant role in the future.

For the first decade of independence, external security forces had a limited presence in Central Asia. Russian border services worked in both Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Also, the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Division is based outside of Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Advisors and training opportunities in Russia itself were made available to the Central Asian states, but overall, one saw a rather limited arrangement. The 1992 Collective Security treaty focused on state-on-state conflicts, but not the threat of extremism.<sup>xvi</sup> Given the lack of actual terrorist attacks in the 1990s, this was not seen as problematic.

The 9/11 Al-Qa'eda sponsored attacks on the U.S. and the subsequent U.S. operations against that organization and its' Taliban sponsor in Afghanistan fundamentally changed the security dynamic in Central Asia. Prior, the U.S. was even more limited than Russia in helping with combating extremist groups. In late 2001, the U.S. opened bases in the region to help conduct operations in Afghanistan. These included a base at Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan (2001-2005) and the Manas Transit Center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (2001-2014), among other opportunities. At their peak in 2011, the U.S. military commitment in the region was several thousand strong. However, by 2014, the permanent presence of such forces in Central Asia came to an end, finalized with the closure of the Manas Transit Center in June 2014. Currently, only small teams of U.S. military personnel are in the region to conduct specific bilateral engagement and training programs. In many ways, this is a return to the training efforts of the late-1990s, when American Special Forces personnel worked with some of the Central Asian militaries to fight irregular units threatening their countries. Such action underscores a central effort of U.S. engagement, which is training. Some equipment transfers have taken place, but these pale in comparison to similar programs with countries such as Egypt, Israel, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The total U.S. security commitment has been just under \$2 billion since 2001, with much of this taking place shortly after military operations in Afghanistan began in 2001 and again with the troop surge in that country in 2011. The main obstacles to enhanced security cooperation are the conditions placed on the aid. Human rights conditions, Leahy-vetting, and concerns that a Central Asian government could use counter-terrorism skills against their own people are regularly seen as issues that ultimately curtail U.S. assistance to the region.<sup>xvii</sup>

The American presence, as well as that of partner European states, prompted others to re-evaluate their effort in the region. For example, Russia stepped up its' military presence in Central Asia in the early-2000s, highlighted by the enhancement of the Russian forces at the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. Bilateral relations between Russia and the Central Asian states remain uneven. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have a more direct relationship and follow Russian guidance on training, equipment, and coordination. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are generally more distanced from Russia, but for the latter, this has varied. Over the years, Uzbek security forces worked with both Russian and American counterparts. After the Strategic Partnership with the U.S. was signed, Uzbek ties with Russia dropped considerably. These returned, in 2005 when U.S.-Uzbek relations soured, only to drop yet again at the end of the decade, following the Russian attacks on Georgia in August 2008. Karimov's death in September 2016 and the ascendance of Mirziyoyev have resulted in some speculation that this "more pro-Russian" leader will be amenable to regional cooperation. This could include Russian participation, as the central structure of regional security cooperation for Russia is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Officially started on 7 October 2002, the CSTO is the latest incarnation of Russia's effort to engage with the post-Soviet successor states in areas of military and broader security issues.



However, as the focus is primarily collective defense, it is ill-equipped to address extremism and the consequences of extremist groups.

The introduction of outside forces, as well as the connection of security challenges in Afghanistan with those in Central Asia, increased the intensity of discourse on violent extremism and terrorist acts overall. It was no surprise, for example, that the four countries who are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) underscore that structure's focus on the "three evils" – separatism, terrorism, and extremism. The SCO is a regional security organization that specifically has countering extremism as part of its mandate. Founded in 2001, the SCO is also a continuation of past efforts. The 1995 "Shanghai Five" and later "Shanghai Forum," the initial efforts of China to engage with Russia and the Central Asian region focused on confidence-building measures and border delimitation. China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were the founding members, with Uzbekistan joining in June 2001. The history of the SCO is outside of the scope of this study, but suffice it to say that it is a structure "in transition," possessing economic, security, and political functions. Unlike the CSTO, it is not a collective defense organization. Indeed, the notion of "state-on-state" security threats is not mentioned. Rather, the focus is on the "isms" noted above. In many ways, this is China's forum in which it can cooperate with the Central Asian states on addressing terrorist groups and extremist ideologies. In particular, the focal point for China is the perceived threat from Uighur separatists in its western regions. As a consequence, the countries within the SCO now share a common understanding and nomenclature when discussing extremism and terrorism and have begun to share information about suspected groups and individuals. The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, is the central node for this engagement.<sup>xviii</sup>

For Russia and China, whether a Central Asian country uses these vehicles to better monitor their own population is simply not an issue for debate. A fundamental principle of the SCO (and CSTO, implicitly) is the non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.<sup>xix</sup> In contrast, unless the U.S. decides to abandon the ideals of human rights and transparency, it will most likely be the case that American aid to Central Asia will continue to be secondary to that from Russia and China. Before one concludes that these outside powers control the foreign and security policies of the five Central Asian states, at present all agreements are transactional. The nations in the region are increasingly confident in their own existence, thus more comfortably accepting aid from China and Russia *when deemed necessary*.

#### IV. Future Challenges for the Central Asian Countries

How each country is addressing violent extremism and the role of outside powers underscores the common-held view that while such threats exist, they are not perceived to be existential. Even in the poorer countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the respective governments claim to have sufficient capacity to manage such problems. Of course, sometimes this requires the governments to call on outside organizations to assist. That said, it would be short-sighted to believe that such ever-changing and complex problems as violent extremism will never increase in intensity and severity. Concerns can be grouped into the following basic areas:

##### *The status of internal groups*

Within Central Asia, there are a number of known extremist groups that could pose future threats; however, they are currently not robust enough to truly gain followings in the region. Copying the low-cost/high-risk-but-high-yield efforts of parallel groups in the Middle East, South Asia, Europe, and North America could create



inordinate amounts of damage to a city or community in Central Asia. Would this be an approach acceptable to Central Asian extremists? Would they truly believe being episodically disruptive is sufficient for the current time?

### ***The Emergence of the Taliban or Da'esh in Central Asia***

Since the 1990s, there have been concerns raised about the possibility of Taliban fighters extending their influence north of the Amu Darya. Especially in 1998, when the Taliban took control of the districts bordering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, calls for greater security cooperation in the region were made. As it turned out, while the Taliban and Al-Qaeda supported the IMU in its' cross-border incursions into Central Asia, these organizations did not themselves attempt to head northward. Indeed, their concerns lay elsewhere. Would a re-strengthened Taliban in the current decade offer yet another threat to Central Asia, or do they remain focused on internal Afghan matters? It appears for now, the latter description is applicable.

Can the same be said for the "current extremist group," the so-called Islamic State, or Da'esh? Is there a concerted effort on the part of Da'esh to assert itself in the Central Asian countries? When it set up its capital in the Syrian city of Raqqa, Da'esh laid out a new "Caliphate map" of the Muslim world, which included a region called "Khorasan," that encompassed a good part of South and Central Asia. Given the existential fighting taking place in the Middle East, this "IS-Khorasan" territory has not been set up as completely as others. However, it is instructive to study and understand this group's ability to foster support throughout the world. That it is able to control territory in distant countries such as the Philippines ought to give any Central Asian leader cause for concern. If Da'esh actually focused on Central Asia, could the "Islamic State-Khorasan" become a possible threat?

### ***The question of "returning foreign fighters"***

This issue remains a perennial topic of discussion and research amongst counter-terrorism experts outside of Central Asia. As the conflicts in Syria and Iraq begin to morph into a conflict without defined boundaries with the demise of the so-called Islamic State, what could be the impact on Central Asia? Does the possibility exist that the Central Asians who migrated to the region to "fight the good fight" will now take their talents home? Even if this were only 1,000+ foreign fighters returning home, it would create huge problems for the Central Asian governments. Some experts note that many of these "foreign fighters" were recruited from Russia, or elsewhere abroad, and have tenuous links to Central Asia itself.<sup>xx</sup> Therefore, the likelihood of such fighters creating real problems in Central Asia is currently minimal, but potentially problematic.

### ***Governments overreacting in responses to extremist threats***

In discussions of states combating extremism, inevitably, the topics of proportionality and effectiveness arise. If the responses are too weak, will the extremist ideologies take root and terrorist groups succeed? If the responses are too strong, will the population chafe at the measures and be drawn to the extremist views as a logical alternative? Currently in Central Asia, the conditions for the spread of extremism are minimal. While extremist views have been disseminated in the region over the past two decades, a wide popular appeal does not appear to exist. Also, governments' ability to monitor and harass them precludes the chance that they can gain a wider following, let alone create their own space for action.



Measuring this, of course, is not an exact science, and the causal relationships between government actions/reactions and the rise or fall of extremism is often only “proven” *post-facto*. However, a number of academics and policy experts do suggest that extreme measures that prevent real “voice” for different views in a society create the potential for a population to gravitate to alternative views, even radical ones. As seen in places such as Syria, or Afghanistan in the late-1990s, if an extremist group is seen as being able to provide services, order, and a sense of peace and stability, it can also attract support.

### ***Outside powers decided to ‘control’ Central Asia***

Curiously, most discussions of a “great game” character in the region focus on how the West, and the United States in particular, are keen to control Central Asia for its natural resources and basing possibilities against either Russia or China. However, it is these latter two countries that appear to be better positioned to dominate the region under the guise of “counter-terrorism cooperation.” This is especially true for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have the weakest security structures in the region. Both require cooperation with Russia and the CSTO to maintain their internal security and to monitor the threats from transnational terrorist groups. Increasingly, as China develops a greater economic stake in the region through its “One Belt One Road” program (Belt-Road Initiative), one could see a stepped up interest to have the SCO play a greater, more proactive security role in Central Asia. If a real threat emerges, would it be necessary for one or more Central Asian countries to cede security responsibilities to these larger countries, perhaps under the auspices of the CSTO or, more realistically the SCO? Doing so might provide a stable and cost-effective security environment, but would most definitely limit national sovereignty and independence.<sup>xxi</sup>

In the end, it can be said that, compared to other countries in the world, especially in Asia, the Central Asian states do not face immediate and serious extremist challenges. However, they are not immune and, as noted above, the potential exists for real and substantial increases. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are purposefully autarkic in this regard, even as the former hosts the SCO’s RATS. Kazakhstan continues to develop its own capabilities, understanding that cooperation with Russia is necessary within the confines of the CSTO and EEU. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face perhaps the most difficult challenges in that their borders are complex and abilities to manage them limited. To the extent that they can, all five states would like to be able to control how and when security measures are applied in their own countries. Depending upon the circumstances, they may not have this choice.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> For the purpose of this discussion, “Central Asia” is defined as the five states of the former Soviet Union in Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, see Michael Rywkin, *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1982) as an example of this issue being raised by outside scholars. “Parallel” or “underground” Islam was a key theme of the 1980s literature on the region.

<sup>iii</sup> Zeyno Baran, *Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Islam’s Political Insurgency* (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, 2004).

<sup>iv</sup> In light of the conflict in Afghanistan, it is common to find links with extremist groups in that country. An example is *Central Asia: Tensions Grow in the Fergana Valley* (Strafor, 7-8 October 2013). A number of academics published a report critical of how international organizations highlighted the religious quality of extremism in Central Asia, specifically citing the International Crisis Group. See Understanding Islamic Radicalization in Central Asia, *The Diplomat*, 20 January 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Indeed, in several of his obituaries in September 2016, this was duly noted. See Andrew Roth, “Islam Karimov: Uzbekistan strongman who exploited anti-terror fight, dies at 78,” *Washington Post*, 2 September 2016.

<sup>vi</sup> See Shirin Akiner, *Violence in Andijon 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment* (Washington, DC: CACI Silk Road Studies Program, 2005). A counter-argument can be found in *Burying the Truth: Uzbekistan rewrites the story of the Andijon massacre*, Human Rights Watch Report, 18 September 2005. For why this “narrative creation” is important, see Nick Megoran, “Framing Andijon, Narrating the Nation: Islam Karimov’s Account of the Events of 13 May 2005,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.27/1 (March 2008), pp.15-31.

<sup>vii</sup> On 25 August 2017, the Government of Uzbekistan posted a detailed description entitled “The Mahalla: A Unique Civil Society Institution in Uzbekistan” on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. It outlines the positive role it plays in local society and conflict resolution. Others, most notably Human Rights Watch and RFE/RL, have catalogued the surveillance role of the mahalla. For an early discussion of this, see Charles Carlson, “Uzbekistan, the Changing Role of the Mahalla,” *RFE/RL News*, 24 February 2003.

<sup>viii</sup> Numerous accounts appeared in 2002 and 2003 on this incident. For a recent appraisal, see Bruce Pannier, “Turkmenistan: A Country for Old Men,” *RFE/RL News*, 21 February 2017.

<sup>ix</sup> See Kamoloudin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes (eds.), *Politics of Compromise: The Tajik Peace Process, Accord #10* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2001).

<sup>x</sup> See Marlene Laruelle, “Assessing Uzbekistan’s and Tajikistan’s Afghan Policies: The Impact of Domestic Drivers,” in *The Central Asia-Afghanistan Relationship: From Soviet intervention to the Silk Road Initiative*, edited by Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp.115-140.

<sup>xi</sup> See Edward J. Lemon, “Daesh and Tajikistan: The Regime’s (In)Security Policy,” *The RUSI Journal*, vol.160/5 (October-November 2015), pp.68-76.

<sup>xii</sup> On 30 June 2002, a Chinese Consul to Kyrgyzstan and his driver were murdered by suspected Uighur separatists. See *BBC News*, 30 June 2002.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Kyrgyzstan: Recovery and Reformation*, PONARS Policy Perspectives (Washington, DC: George Washington University, August 2010).

<sup>xiv</sup> *Kazakhstan 2016 International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2016).

<sup>xv</sup> Mariya Y. Omelicheva, “Islam in Kazakhstan: A Survey of Contemporary Trends and Sources of Securitization,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.30, No.2 (June 2011), pp.243-256.

<sup>xvi</sup> While the Collective Security Treaty nations sent a force to support the Tajik government during that country’s civil war, it did not play a combat role, nor was it equipped for irregular warfare.

<sup>xvii</sup> For a good study of the challenges of US security cooperation in Central Asia and the potential for abuse, see Joshua Kucera, *U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia: Who Benefits?* Central Eurasia Project OPS 7 (Washington, DC: Open Society Foundation, September 2012). As all forms of aid have declined since 2011, some authors suggest that the U.S. ought to focus on non-security assistance. See Eugene Rumer, et al., *U.S. Policy toward Central Asia 3.0* (Washington, DC: CEIP, 25 January 2016).

<sup>xviii</sup> A Central Asian perspective of the SCO can be found in Timur Dadabaev, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Regional Identity Formation from the Perspective of the Central Asian States,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.23/85 (2014), pp.102-118.

<sup>xix</sup> Lisolette Odgaard, “Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China’s Relations with Russia in Central Asia,” *Asian Security*, vol.13/1 (February 2017), pp.41-58.

<sup>xx</sup> For specific data on Central Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq, as well as how Da’esh recruits them, see *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses* (Arlington, VA: MSI, 4 May 2015). This report was under the direction of Noah Tucker, an expert on this topic.

<sup>xxi</sup> Russia’s security concerns about Afghanistan shape its actions in and with the Central Asian countries – and with their questionable ability to manage their southern borders. For a current assessment of this dynamic, see Ivan Sanfranchuk, “Afghanistan and Its Central Asian Neighbors: Toward divided insecurity,” (Washington, DC: CSIS, June 2017).