



Asian Rebels in Aleppo, Western Blind Spot

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Abstract

Western policy in Syria is operating with a blind spot towards increasing presence of Asian jihadists in Aleppo and Idlib. Recent Turkey/Saudi proposal to solicit US/European backing for its invasion of northwest Syria, in order to bolster their salafist rebel assets, will be a threat to Asian stability. By ignoring Asian states' legitimate security interests and supporting these militants; risk turning northwest Syria into a base to wage Asian jihad; coupled with heightened distrust regarding Saudi proliferation of Wahhabism to destabilize Asia—this may provoke a military intervention just as when US intervened in Afghanistan after 9/11.

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Analysis

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry often refer to rebel jihadi groups in Syria as the “Syrian opposition.”



Militants of the Uzbek group Katibat al Taqhid wal Jihad fighting at Tal Bajir in southern Aleppo

However, as German intelligence pointed out, over 95% of the fighters in Syria are foreign and not Syrian. Moreover, many are not even Arabs, but increasingly Asian.

Over the past few years, Asian fighters from Central Asia, China, as well as Russia have burrowed themselves in northern Syria around Aleppo and Idlib, with the majority from Uzbekistan.

Known as the ‘Aleppo Uzbeks’, various Uzbek groups such as Katibat al Taqhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Imam Bukhari Jamaat (IBJ) have aligned with Al Nusra.¹ Estimates of Central Asian fighters in groups such as Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar — which includes Chechens, Uzbeks and Tajiks and first appeared in Syria in 2012 — are around 1,500 in Aleppo.² They too merged with Al Nusra.

Overall estimates of Central Asian fighters with Al Nusra and Islamic State (IS) are around 5,000, with additional Chinese Uyghur fighters estimated around 1,000 based in Idlib. According to the director of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Rami Abdul Rahman, there are also more than 2,000 fighters from Chechnya, Dagestan and other Caucasus regions operating with Al Nusra, and “they are concentrated in Idlib, Aleppo, and Latakia provinces” — where Russia is targeting its airstrikes.

Indeed, a September meeting at Chatham House revealed how “the perceived jihadist threat to Russia is a major factor in Kremlin’s policy-making” to intervene militarily in Syria. Russia also fears these jihadists returning home, as well as attacking Russian interests and citizens abroad.³

¹ USAID, *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses*, May 4, 2015, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf; Caleb Weiss, “Uzbek group pledges allegiance to Al Nusra Front”, *The Long War Journal*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/uzbek-group-pledges-allegiance-to-al-nusra-front.php>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRBqJK6l8nE>

² “Central Asian fighters in Syria join al-Nusra Front”, *Middle East Eye*, September 23, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/central-asian-fighters-syria-join-al-nusra-front-259685836>

³ “Exporting Jihad: Fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia and the Syrian Civil War”, Chatham House Roundtable, September 23, 2015,



This threat is increasingly shared by Asian states.

Exporting Syrian jihad to Asia

Peter Knoope, an associate fellow with the International Center for Counter-Terrorism of the Hague, noted that IS and other jihadi groups in Syria are exploiting and recruiting disaffected youth in Central Asia. As such he warned, “the question is not ‘if’ but rather ‘when’ violent action will hit the Central Asian region.”

In Southeast Asia, violence has already occurred with the January attack in Jakarta, highlighting the danger of IS and Al Qaeda establishing a regional stronghold.

In South Asia, while there has not yet been a major attack claimed by Al Qaeda or IS, India nonetheless is sounding the alarm on infestation of Wahhabism and potential creation of new Syrian-linked jihadi groups in the subcontinent, similar to that in Indonesia.

Alarmed by this form of hybrid warfare against India, in a September 2014 *Indian Defence Review* article, retired Indian general Afsir Karim criticized Saudis for using Wahhabism as a weapon to dominate India, snuff out other strands of Islam (e.g., Sufi, Shia, etc.), attack India’s pluralistic cultural norms, and pump in millions of dollars propagating Wahhabi theology to provide fertile soil for spawning future jihadists.⁴

In fact in August 2015, Indian intelligence received alerts of a possible attack on naval facilities in Kochi and Mumbai by the newly created Indian wing of al Qaeda. General Karim further observed the dangerous trend of how Al-Qaeda and ideologues of other radical groups have urged Indian Muslim religious organizations to take up arms against the Indian state, and been able to enlist a sizeable number of Muslim youth radicalized by Wahhabism.

Similarly in Malaysia, retired diplomat Dennis Ignatius sounded the alarm regarding what he calls the “Saudiization” of Southeast Asia, and expressed disbelief that a once moderate, constitutionally secular, and democratic nation like Malaysia is now infested with extremists calling for sharia law, and having discussions about “amputating limbs, beheading, stoning, and even crucifixion.”⁵

Seeing how young Southeast Asian Muslims from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and elsewhere are radicalizing and joining jihad in Syria and Iraq, with IS even forming a military unit for Malay-speaking fighters — Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyyah (Malay Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) — Ignatius attributed this extremism solely to Saudi aggressive export of Wahhabi ideology by spending more than \$100,00 billion during the past few decades.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/events/special/Summary%20FSU%20fighters%20in%20Syria%20011%2015%20JM.pdf>; Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Islamist North Caucasus Rebels Training a New Generation of Fighters in Syria”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol 12, Issue 3, February 7, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?cHash=ae2a2cd5f15746b0534e5bb00c9ceff&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41927#.VrXvj8dBau4; Emil A. Souleimanov, “Globalizing Jihad? North Caucasians in the Syrian Civil War”, *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Fall 2014, Vol XXI, No. 3, <http://mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/globalizing-iihad-north-caucasians-syrian-civil-war>

⁴ Maj Gen. Afsir Karim, “Wahhabism in South Asia”, *Indian Defence Review*, September 13, 2014, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/wahhabism-in-south-asia/>; Akhilesh Pillalamari, “The Radicalization of South Asian Islam: Saudi Money and the Spread of Wahhabism”, *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, December 20, 2014, <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2014/12/20/the-radicalization-of-south-asian-islam-saudi-money-and-the-spread-of-wahhabism/>

⁵ Dennis Ignatius, “The Wahhabi threat to Southeast Asia”, *The Malaysian Insider*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/sideviews/article/the-wahhabi-threat-to-southeast-asia-dennis-ignatius>



He further warned that the “Saudi-Wahhabi nexus has become the greatest single threat to peace and stability in the world today.”

Indeed by fertilizing the Asian soil with Wahhabism and with Saudi/Turkey/Qatar stirring the jihadi cauldron in Syria, when the toxic brew eventually boils over and pours out, Asian states risk falling prey to a rapid spawning of home-grown jihadists to topple secular regimes.

Denying Syria as a base for Asian jihad

As Al Qaeda affiliates in Aleppo, Idlib and IS in Raqqa are becoming the command center for Asian jihadists, this is a threat to Asian regional security and stability — especially in the light of the recent Jakarta bombing. However, Saudi/Turkey proposal to invade Syria and protect their militant assets including ones from Asia, is going to be a problem.

By ignoring Asian states’ legitimate security interests and supporting these militants; risk turning northwest Syria into a base to wage Asian jihad; coupled with heightened distrust regarding Saudi proliferation of Wahhabism to Asia—this may provoke a military intervention just as when US intervened in Afghanistan after 9/11.

In the July 2015 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit that includes China, India, and Central Asian states as members, the threat of Syrian instability and Islamic extremism was high on the agenda. A few months later in October, China and India conducted joint counter terrorism exercises inside Yunnan, China.

In November, a Chinese military delegation led by Changlong, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission (CMC), visited India to discuss counter-terrorism—the highest level Chinese military delegation to visit India in 10 years.

In December, in the aftermath of the suspected Gray Wolves-linked Bangkok bombing that killed Chinese citizens, IS execution of a Chinese national, and uptick of terrorist attacks throughout China from Xinjiang in the west, Yunnan in the south, Beijing and other parts in eastern China, China passed its anti-terror legislation to allow for military operations abroad.⁶

Shortly thereafter, Zhou Bo from the PLA Academy of Military Science surmised, “The next war for China may not be with a neighbor. Instead, it could be far away from its borders to safeguard Chinese overseas interests and the well-being of not only Chinese citizens but also that of other countries.”

Given the conflict of interest between Asian powers and Ankara/Riyadh over support for jihadists in northern Syria, there should be a dialogue to prevent miscalculations. As former Indian diplomat M.K. Bhadrakumar noted, despite Israel and Russia’s divergent Syrian interests, they have managed to establish a successful cooperative template of clarifying each other’s red lines and legitimate security concerns.⁷

⁶ Susan Cunningham, “Thailand’s Shrine Bombing—The Case for Turkey’s Grey Wolves”, *Forbes*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susancunningham/2015/08/24/thailands-shrine-bombing-the-case-for-turkeys-grey-wolves/#1418ab7217a5> ; <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/turkey-syria-grey-wolves-emerge-as-jihadists.html>; Shannon Tiezzi, “ISIS: Chinese Hostage ‘Executed’”, *The Diplomat*, November 19, 2015.

⁷ <http://atimes.com/2016/02/russia-is-content-with-israel-but-wrathful-toward-turkey/>



In the face of globalization of the Syrian war that now impacts Asian security, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Asian powers such as China, India and others should likewise establish a similar cooperative template, and seek a collective political solution to de-escalate the conflict and restore regional stability.

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

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