Terrorism in Central Asia

Dynamics, Dimensions, and Sources

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Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has experienced a deluge of religious activity. All of the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan —have seen the rapid construction of new mosques; the opening of madrassas; and a noticeable upswing in Muslim consciousness, evidenced in a marked increase in the practitioners of Islam.

Along with moderate and traditional forms of Islam, radical and militant Islamic trends have also reemerged in parts of Central Asia. In the 1990s, Islamist organizations engaged in low-scale insurgency and sporadic terrorist violence against the ruling regimes. The 9/11 attacks and the ensuing military campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan—which shares a 1,480 mile border with Central Asia—heightened the strategic importance of the region, which sparked political and academic debates about the likelihood of Islamic radicalization and terrorism in Central Asia. As US and NATO troops gradually leave Afghanistan, many governments fear that "foreign fighters" from Central Asia who are currently in Afghanistan will return and destabilize their home countries.

The widespread perception that Islamic terrorism and extremism constitute a major security threat in Central Asia prompted regional authorities to resort to tough measures aimed at suppressing expressions of Islamic faith they deemed dangerous. The effectiveness of these measures is a matter of debate, along with the extent to which Islamist groups jeopardize stability in the region. What follows in this essay is an analysis of the nature of Central Asian terrorism, the extent of its threat, the sources of radical Islam and terrorism, and an assessment of the effectiveness of Central Asian governments' religious and counterterrorist policies.

I believe the evidence supports two key conclusions: First, Central Asian governments, through their own interactions and discourse with other nations, have exaggerated the magnitude of the terrorist threat. Relative to other Islamic polities, Central Asian states are bastions of moderate and traditional Islam, and radical Islamic groups have limited capabilities in the region. Most Central Asian Muslims are Sunnis of the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence and espouse the most liberal views among the four existing schools of law within Sunni Islam. They derive their Muslim identity from a multitude of local forms of Islamic faith, consisting of both canonical Islam and local customs, and from participation in traditional religious rituals, such as adhering to the culture of saints and visiting religious sites rather than strictly following Islamic orthodoxy.[1]

Secondly, although radical Islam and Central Asian terrorism have been linked to external influences, the emergence of Islamist organizations has been stimulated by events *within* the region—the primary cause of fundamentalism being the autocratic policies of Central Asian governments. Following the onset of the global "war on terrorism," all Central Asian regimes have intensified security and suppressed a wide range of religious and political freedoms under the pretense of fighting terrorism. By controlling Islam, Central Asian governments bred resentment among the Muslims and, inadvertently, contributed to the emergence of social forces that embrace violence and terrorism.

Terrorism in Central Asia: Deciphering the Concept, Actors, and Trends

In all Central Asian states, the threat of terrorism is associated with a variety of Islamist movements whose activities and beliefs fall outside Islamic practices controlled and regulated by the Central Asian regimes. Although it has become common to lump these groups together under the umbrella of "radical" and "militant" Islam, Islamist movements are far from being uniform in Central Asia. They have conflicting visions of Islam and differing interpretations of *jihad* and Islam's relationship with modernity, among other questions. Some radical Islamic groups view jihad in a purely military sense and consider violence as a legitimate means for influencing politics in Muslim nations. Other groups abstain from coercion in their activities. What unites these diverse collections of Islamists, also referred to as "wahhabis" and "terrorists" in Central Asia, is the belief in a "pure" Islam that existed during the epoch of the Prophet Muhammad. According to the Islamists, this return to the pure Islam is the only solution to religious, moral, cultural, and political decay; and it can only be accomplished through the re-Islamization of societies and the establishment of Central Asian Islamic states.[2]

Islamist opposition to secular regimes is not new to the region. In the early 20th century, Islamists fought the czarist government's attempts at mobilizing Central Asian Muslims to fight for Russia in World War I. After the Bolshevik revolution, Islamists took arms to resist the Sovietization of Central Asia. The Soviet regime never completely purged Islam from the lives of Central Asian Muslims who continued practicing their faith through the performance of Islamic rituals marking birth, marriage, and death. Numerous underground mosques and informal religious schools survived the Soviet attack on religion. As a result, during the *Perestroika* era, which began in the mid-1980s, the intellectual environment was ripe for an Islamic rebirth in parts of Central Asia.[3]

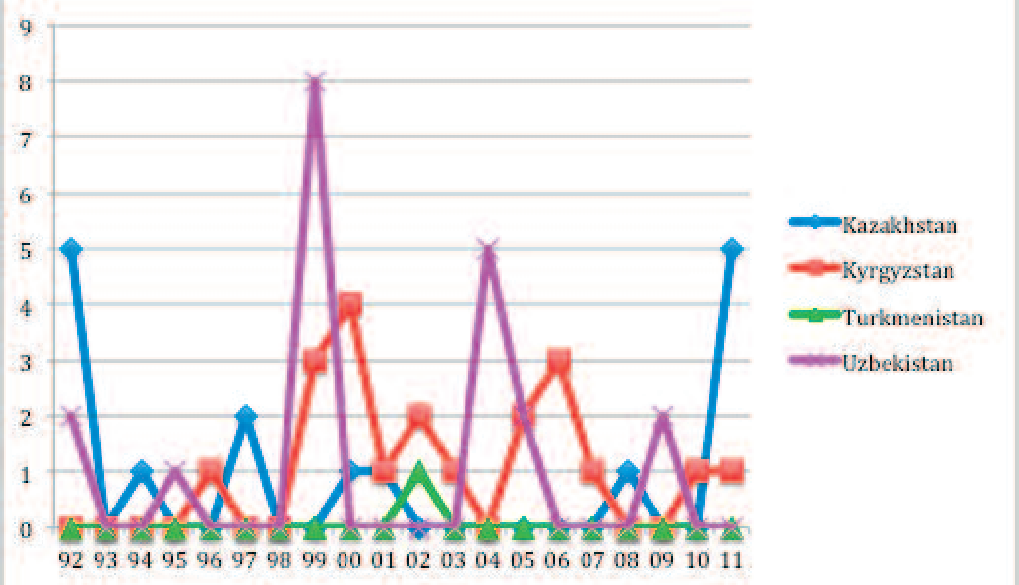
The Adolat, or justice movement group**,** was one of the early radical Islamic movements, and it began in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. This densely populated region divided politically between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan became an epicenter of Islamic rebirth in Central Asia. The Adolat leaders called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan as a solution to the pervasive socio-economic problems in the country. In 1991-92, Adolat's militia took control over the Uzbek town of Namangan, and its most radical members engaged in violent activities against secular authorities provoking a backlash from the Uzbek government. The leaders of the movement found refuge in Tajikistan, where they fought in the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997). Eventually, the former leadership of Adolat made up the core of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), infamous for a series of violent attacks and raids in Central Asia. The IMU announced its arrival in the summer of 1999 and was originally established with the goal of overthrowing Uzbekistan's secular regime but later expanded its mission to create a regionwide Islamic *caliphate* (an Islamic state led by a supreme religious and political leader called a *caliph*).

In February 1999, several bombs exploded in the center of the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. The Uzbek government quickly pinned these attacks on the Islamists. By branding the perpetrators of violence as "terrorists," the Uzbekistan regime introduced a new negative conceptualization of Central Asian Islamists that quickly spread across the region. The Tajik authorities, for example, began calling the remaining anti-government forces that fought against the regime in the Tajik Civil War as "terrorists." Although much of this conflict stemmed from aggravated regional differences and fights over resources, the dispute over the role of Islam in the state contributed to the outbreak of war in Tajikistan.

Following the 1999 bombings in Tashkent, Central Asian states witnessed the rise of militant activities by radical Islamic groups. The IMU insurgents raided the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000, trying to infiltrate Uzbekistan. The IMU was also responsible for a series of explosions in 2002-2004 in the Kyrgyz cities of Bishkek and Osh. Uzbekistan suffered from another bombing campaign in spring and summer 2004. A series of violent incidents that rocked Kazakhstan in fall 2011 became the newest addition to the roster of terrorist violence in Central Asia (see Figure 1). Compared to other world regions, the rate of terrorist incidents in Central Asia is rather low: During the period of 1992-2011, there were a total of 238 terrorist attacks registered in this region compared to 383 in East Asia, 4,628 in Southeast Asia, 15,683 in South Asia, and 15,567 in the Middle East. For the same period, Uzbekistan experienced a total of twenty terrorist attacks, compared to fifty-nine in Syria and 538 in Yemen, both of which are comparable to Uzbekistan in terms of the size of their population.

Today, Central Asian republics are home to a number of native and foreign Islamist groups, some with a proven record of violence and operations inside and outside the region. In addition to the IMU, two other militant regional Islamic groups are designated as terrorist organizations in all Central Asian states, Russia, China, and the US: the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Jund al-Khilafah (JaK; also known as Soldiers of the Caliphate). All of these groups have been implicated in ties to Al-Qaeda and Taliban networks and skirmishes with the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. The IMU was severely weakened over the course of the Afghanistan war and struggled to revitalize its activities under different leadership that sought to rebrand the movement and its splinter groups**.** Comprised mostly of non-Uzbek fighters, the IMU has distanced itself from Uzbekistan and Central Asia, operating now primarily along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.[4] The ETIM is an ethnic Uighur separatist organization that targets the Chinese government. It is motivated by a goal of establishing an Islamic state in China's Xinjiang Province, which is populated with Uighurs. The ETIM has been implicated in terrorist plots against US interests in the republics of Central Asia. JaK made international

Figure 1: Terrorist Attacks in Central Asia



Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), Global Terrorism Database (2012), http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd.
Note: Tajikistan is excluded from the figure for the following reason: A large number of terrorist accidents that occurred during the Civil War period distort the graphic by "flattening" the display of variation in terrorist attacks across other Central Asian states. In 1995, Tajikistan had over 30 terrorist incidences, and in 1997, 42 incidences. Following the end the of Civil War, the rate of terrorist attacks in Tajikistan dropped significantly. It had one terrorist incident registered in each of the following years: 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2010.

headlines in 2011, thanks to a series of attacks in Kazakhstan, which had previously avoided terrorist attacks. The movement is made up of Kazakhstani radicals but operates mostly in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Following the 2011 attack, JaK issued threats to the Kazakh government condemning the public authorities for assailing Islam through prohibitions on prayer in state institutions and wearing religious attire, beards, and hijabs.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is another Islamist movement with a significant and growing presence in Central Asia. Contrary to the IMU, ETIM, and JaK, it is an international movement with a pan-Islamist agenda emphasizing Muslim unity worldwide. However, in Central Asia, Hizb ut-Tahrir adapted its ideology to local people and subsequently enjoyed regional success. Contrary to other militant movements, Hizb ut-Tahrir claims that it does not support violence for accomplishing its political aims, although all Central Asian governments banned Hizb ut-Tahrir and added them to their lists of "terrorist" organizations. The Tablighi Jamaat, which roughly translates to the "Society for Spreading Faith," is structurally similar to Hizb ut-Tahrir in terms of its global mission and tactics of operation in Muslim communities. In Central Asia, the Tablighi Jamaat is concentrated in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where it promotes a revival of Islamic piety through missionary activities.

There also local varieties of international Islamist movements, such as Akromiya (also called Akramiya), founded in 1996 in Andijan, which is located in the Fergana Valley and is the fourth-largest city in Uzbekistan. Akromiya's teachings and structure are similar to moderate Islamic movements in the rest of the Muslim world, such as the Nurcu and Fetullah Gulen movements in Turkey. Its founders believed that building an Islamic state in the entire country was impractical and focused instead on the city of Andijan. In 2004, Uzbekistan's government unexpectedly imprisoned twenty-three local businessmen, who were charged with membership in Akromiya, then designated as an "extremist" organization. In May 2005, following the announcement of a harsh verdict by the court, thousands of Andijan residents came out for a peaceful demonstration, but government forces opened fire on them, killing several hundred protesters. The Uzbek government's brutality curtailed Akromiya's activities in Andijan.

Sources of Islamic Radicalization and Terrorism in Central Asia

The official narrative of Central Asian governments echoed by many political observers involved in the analysis of the-worldwide fight against terrorism is that it has foreign origins. Central Asian authorities insist that Islamist ideas are alien to Central Asian Muslims, and all extremist activities have been sponsored from abroad and kindled by political instability in Russia's Chechnya, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Most of the scholarship on Islam in Central Asia subscribes to a different view. Although these countries have not been immune to the influences from the outside Muslim world and foreign intellectual thought, radical Islamic ideas matured within a distinctly Central Asian religious milieu. As discussed, the roots of the modern Islamist movements go back to Soviet-era clandestine gatherings of influential Central Asian theologians and their followers who advocated for the reformation and purification of Islam. The collapse of the Soviets provided a window of opportunity for a renaissance of these religious beliefs. The majority of Central Asian Muslims, indeed, have been damaging to the radical reconstruction of their societies, but the Islamic ideological vacuum that followed the demise of Communist ideology rekindled people's interest in their spiritual and religious heritage, whereas deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and the increasingly repressive politics of the governing regimes have fueled the radicalization of religion.

There is a range of conditions that may create an environment conducive to the emergence of terrorism, including lack of democracy, a dearth of opportunities, and the plummeting well-being of the population. Socioeconomic and political pressures precipitated by poverty, poor governance, and ethnic and religious tensions may breed public discontent, resulting in violent action.[5] While Central Asia bears much promise in terms of its natural resources, geo-strategic location, and even democratization, it has been plagued by all of the challenges listed above. High unemployment rates, poverty, and shrinking welfare, coupled with the lack of opportunities and poor governance, have served as a breeding ground for radical Islamic groups—especially in the Fergana Valley, where these factors have been on the rise. The modest advances made by all Central Asian states in economic and political reforms have been crippled by pervasive corruption, which also undermines the governments' ability to fight with terrorism. Furthermore, terrorist activities in Central Asia received a boost from the drug and small arms trade that provides a steady supply of financial resources and weapons to terrorist organizations.

It is important to note, though, that by itself socioeconomic distress is neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for explaining the spread of radical Islam and terrorism. Radical Islamic groups can appear in societies that are relatively developed socioeconomically, and many Islamists are well-educated and come from privileged backgrounds. Any connection between states' socioeconomic circumstances and terrorism is, therefore, indirect. These conditions, however, are readily exploited by the Islamists who are eager to offer a vision of a new political order based on the ideas of "pure" Islam as an alternative to the policies of the current governments that are marred in corruption and nepotism.

The Abortive Policies of the Governing Regimes

Alarmed by the growing popularity of Islam in the communities of Central Asians, all regional states adopted restrictive religious policies and measures in an attempt to control and manipulate Islam. On the one hand, Central Asian authorities proclaimed their respect and veneration for Islam and meted out funds for the construction of mosques and the preservation of artifacts of their countries' Islamic tradition. Simultaneously, the governments tried to delegitimize the so-called "unofficial" Islam. To be able to exercise control over the processes of Islamic revival, the governments of Central Asia have relied on a dual strategy of co-optation and oppression of religion. Administrative supervision has been enforced through the mandatory registration of religious associations, determination of qualifications for clergy, regulation of religious information, and setting the parameters of theological discourse.[6] The councils on religious affairs formed within Central Asian governments closely monitor the work of the Muftiates, which keep a watchful eye on the Muslim population through the supervision of mosques' personnel and rotation of imams.

The "unofficial" Islamic practices have been widely persecuted. The government of Uzbekistan in particular has carried out arrests, trials, imprisonments, and executions of thousands of alleged Islamists in the name of combating terrorism and religious extremism.[7] In the 1990s, the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were known for their more lenient approach toward radical Islam, but they too intensified their counterterrorism policies in the 2000s. The states' intrusions and attacks on the religious sector have alienated many Central Asian Muslims and contributed to the weakening of religious authority of the official clergy. The government repression has served as a temporal deterrent that drove some Islamists underground. Yet, over time, it resulted in more militancy and terrorism.

This pattern has been clearly observed in Uzbekistan, where the government's persecution of the Islamists would spiral into a new series of violent attacks by them. The recent violence in Kazakhstan targeting government buildings and personnel is also emblematic in this regard. According to the Cingranelli and Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset—one of the most reputable resources on a wide range of internationally recognized human rights—freedom of religion in Kazakhstan dropped from a score of "2," indicating the absence of government restrictions on religion in 1992-1995, to "1" (moderate restrictions) in the following three years and "0" (severe restrictions) in 1999, where it has remained ever since (except for 2008 and 2009).[8] These trends are consistent with the assessment of religious freedom by Freedom House and researchers at the Association of Religion Data Archives, who systematically code the US State Department's International Religious Freedom reports. In 2003-2004, Kazakhstan's courts upheld bans on several Islamic groups defined as terrorist and extremist organizations in the neighboring republics. The number of Islamists detained has been on the rise since then, and the courts have been handing down harsher sentences to radical Islamic groups' members. As the government began intensifying its struggle against terrorism and religious extremism, including through enhanced participation in the regional counterterrorism programs, the number of ethnic Kazakhs in extremist groups began to grow as well. If before 2005 mostly ethnic Uzbek and Tajik radicals made up the rank-and-file of Islamist organizations, including those operating in Kazakhstan, the home-grown extremist groups, as well as the cells of regional and international Islamist organizations operating in Kazakhstan, are now increasingly made of ethnic Kazakhs.

Conclusion

The Islamic renaissance experienced by Muslim societies in Central Asia has arrived in different forms. For the majority of Central Asian Muslims, Islamic rebirth meant the rediscovery of faith as part of their national and communal traditions. The appearance of radical Islamic trends resulted in a series of armed attacks and sporadic outbursts of terrorist violence in Central Asian states. Although the majority of Central Asian Muslims are turned off by radical Islam, the social and political crises that reoccur in the region have the potential to erode government legitimacy while increasing support for alternatives to the present leadership among the dissatisfied segments of the population.

The strategy of governmental reprisals has been ineffective in reducing the spread of radical Islam. Repressive policies toward Muslims practicing their faith outside of religious confines has contributed to radicalization of moderate believers. The exact numbers of followers of radical Islamic groups are difficult to ascertain. Central Asian governments and Islamists themselves have strategically manipulated the strengths of radical Islam. Still, several reputable organizations, including the International Crisis Group, recorded some growth in the rank-and-file members of Islamist movements. The recruitment of Muslim women by Hizb ut-Tahrir and the appearance of Islamic militants in Kazakhstan, which had long enjoyed some immunity from the threat of terrorism, exemplify this trend. In Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the region, the government religious and counterterrorism policies that were intended to prevent radicalization have provoked discontent and induced the transformation of religious conservatism into extremism. The discourse of the persistent Islamist danger permeating international media continues to provide the Central Asian governments with a valuable pretense for portraying their strict religious policies as contributions to the worldwide efforts to halt the proliferation of religious fundamentalism and terrorism.

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1. For further discussion, see Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after communism: religion and politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Maria E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (New York, Routledge. 2007).
2. Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).
3. Mehrdad Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 85.
4. Murat Laumulin, "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia," *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*, ed. K. Warikoo (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 146

5. Alan B. Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism* (Princeton Univeristy Press, 2008), 53-104.
6. Sebastien Peyrouse, "Islam in Central Asia: National Specificities and Post-Soviet Globalization," *Religion, State and Society*, 35 (2007): 248.
7. Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
8. David Cingranelli and David Richards, *The Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset*, accessed July 2013, http://www.humanrightsdata.org

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