

Exporting Jihad – Islamic terrorism from Central Asia

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The terrorist attack in Stockholm on April 7th was perpetrated by a citizen of Uzbekistan. Previously, on April 3rd an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan holding Russian citizenship conducted an attack on the subway in Saint Petersburg. These attacks were preceded by other large scale terrorist attacks conducted by Islamic radicals from Central Asia within the last 12 months. It shows the rising potential of radical Islamic groups and organisations originating from the countries of the region. Within Central Asia itself the level of the terrorist threat is low, owing to mass surveillance and widespread persecution of independent Islamic groups by the authoritarian regimes of regional states. These actions, however, led to radicalisation of individuals and entire groups, followed by them leaving the country to join Islamic terrorist organisations abroad (previously in Afghanistan and Pakistan, currently in Syria and Iraq). During the last decade, Islamic radicals from Central Asia were engaged in terrorist activities worldwide – from the USA, through Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria, to Turkey and countries of the European Union. The trend of radicalised individuals migrating outside of Central Asia will most likely increase in the future, due to demographic pressures in the region, rising authoritarian tendencies and the scale of persecution. Therefore, the terrorist threats arising for European Union from the radical Islamic militants from Central Asia will probably also increase.

Historical overview – evolution and globalisation

Central Asian Islamic terrorism is not a new phenomenon – its origins can be traced back to the breakdown of the USSR and independence of the region's states. Since that time it underwent a significant evolution – from local, grassroots groups to important international terrorist organisations. During the first period (1990-2000), radical Islamic groups and organisations (out of which the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – IMU – became the primary one) were focused primarily on attempts to start an Islamic revolution in the region¹. Following the end of the civil

war in Tajikistan, and IMU's failed attempts to provoke an Islamic revolution in the Ferghana Valley (the so-called Batken raids in 1999 and 2000), radical Islamic militants moved to the Taliban-controlled region of north Afghanistan. While based in Afghanistan, IMU became an important ally of the Taliban – for example, one of IMU's founders, Juma Namangani, led the Taliban defence against the coalition forces in 2001. After the American intervention, IMU militants fled to Pakistan's Waziristan, where they entered into the complex system of local Pashtun tribal allegiances². During this time the organisation split – with some of its members establishing the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). IMU's

¹ The begging of the radical Islam in Central Asia described further in: S. Zapaśnik, „Walczący Islam” w Azji Centralnej – problem społecznej genezy zjawiska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2006.

² Further in: D. Witter, Uzbek militancy in Pakistan's tribal region, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/BackgrounderIMU_28Jan.pdf

escape to Pakistan was the end of a direct presence of Islamic terrorist organisations in the region, yet the phenomenon of Central Asian Islamic terrorism did not cease.

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The second phase of growth of the radical Islamic organisations from Central Asia began during their stay in Pakistan and lasted until 2014. During this time both IMU and IJU became an important element of the international Islamic terrorist conglomeration present in Pakistan and at its peak numbered up to several thousand members (militants and their families). While maintaining their bases in North Waziristan, these organisations have fought against the Pakistani forces and subcontracted for larger terrorist organisations. The latter activity first of all included fighting the war in Afghanistan on the side of the Taliban. The IMU succeeded in launching an insurgency in the previously tranquil northern Afghanistan, while the US forces viewed IMU militants as better trained and more dangerous than the Taliban³. Secondly, there was activity in Europe on behalf of Al Qaeda – IMU operatives attempted to perpetrate large scale terrorist attacks in the EU member states in 2007 and 2010, as well as in 2012 in the US. However, in all of these cases they were thwarted during the planning stage⁴. IMU and IJU were also pioneers in large scale recruitment of Islamic radicals from Europe⁵.

³ A. Feitt, *Countering the IMU in Afghanistan*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/386-feitt.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,730377,00.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/04/islamic-jihad-union-bomb-plot>

⁵ Further in: J. Lang, *Radical Islamic militants of Central Asia*, *OSW Report*, 13.11.2013, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/report_the-radical-islamic-militants.pdf

Both the organisations regarded Central Asia mainly as a source of new recruits, rather than a theatre for armed struggle or terrorist actions (an exception to this was the two attacks perpetrated by IJU in Uzbekistan in 2004)⁶.

The second phase in the history of radical Islamic militants from Central Asia ended along with the intensification of the war in Syria and the change in Islamabad’s policy towards some of the international terrorist organisations active in the Pakistani tribal areas. A significant part of IMU and IJU’s militants have left for Syria, while the above organisations were forced to flee Waziristan in the autumn of 2014, as a result of the Pakistani offensive⁷. In 2015, IMU’s emir at the time – Usman Gazi – announced that the movement had joined the Islamic State (IS)⁸, which in Afghanistan consists of local Islamic radicals who are in conflict with the Taliban⁹. In October of 2015, Usman Gazi, along with a few remaining IMU militants, was killed by the Taliban in the Afghani province of Zabul¹⁰. This *de facto* meant the end of the IMU¹¹. IJU’s capability also significantly decreased due to the exodus of militants and sponsors to Syria, although the group remains active on the side of the Taliban in Afghanistan (for example, the involvement of IJU militants in the seizure of Kunduz in 2015)¹².

Syria – a game changer

The war in Syria and Iraq has significantly altered modern Islamic terrorism, with radical Islamic militants from Central Asia being no exception. The conflict in Syria has, on the one

⁶ *Ibidem*. In March and April 2004 IJU launched attacks against government targets in Tashkent and Bukhara.

⁷ Operation Zar-e Zarb which was launched as a response to militant attacks, including the IMU raid on the Karachi airport.

⁸ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74471>

⁹ In the case of IMU it was Mansura Dadullah’s group.

¹⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-islamic-movement-uzbekistan-fractured/27395160.html>

¹¹ Information about IMU’s reactivation in Afghanistan is periodically reoccurring, yet it is hard to ascertain the scale, which might be very small.

¹² J. Lang, *Nervousness in Central Asia after the Taliban seize Kunduz*, *OSW Analyses*, 14.10.2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-10-14/nervousness-central-asia-after-taliban-seize-kunduz>

hand, led to the decline of old organisations among the Central Asian radical Islamic militants, yet it has also popularised traveling to the region to engage in jihad, and established a wide array of new organisations and groups. Since the outbreak of war in 2011, between 2 and 5 thousand volunteers from Central Asia have left for Syria and Iraq, where they joined radical Islamic organisations¹³. Most importantly, for the first time travelling outside of the region to fight in the ranks of militant and terrorist organisations became a mass phenomenon. The largest exodus of volunteers to Syria was seen in 2014 following the successes of Islamic State. A combination of several processes and circumstances led to establishment of the above phenomenon on such a large scale. Amongst them the most important ones are: the rise of importance of the Salafi communities, the negative socio-economic situation in the regional states, effective propaganda disseminated by the organisations active in Syria, combined with the spread of social media in the region, and lastly the ease of getting to the war-zone via Turkey. It is difficult to reconstruct a profile of a typical Central Asian volunteer due to the diversity of those travelling to Syria – the only common ground is the Islamic factor (usually, but not exclusively, Salafism)¹⁴.

While in Syria, the radical Islamic militants from Central Asia have established terrorist organisations of their own, as well as having joined the ones already present there – mainly Islamic State. The most important organisations created by the militants from Central Asia include: Jamaat Imam Bukhari, Katibat Seyfullah or Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad, all of which are linked to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat an-Nusra),

as well as Jamaat Sabiri, which is part of IS. Individuals who previously fought in the ranks of IMU and IJU played an important role in the formation of the above organisations¹⁵. Groups made up of Central Asian militants have participated in the most complex operations of the war (for instance, in the successful attempts to break the siege of Aleppo in August 2016)¹⁶.

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In contrast to the Chechens, particularly the Kists, the Central Asian militants are rarely commanders of jihadists groups. Some exceptions to this, along with the leaders of the Central Asian organisations, include Abu Ibrahim al-Khorasani – former emir of the Jaesh al-Muhajireen wal Ansar (which included militants from the entire post-Soviet area and in September 2015 joined Nusra)¹⁷ and colonel Gulmurod Khalimov – former commander of the Tajik OMON, special militia unit – who joined the IS in 2015¹⁸ and a year later became the military commander of the Islamic State¹⁹, currently commanding the defence of Mosul, amongst other responsibilities²⁰.

Contrary to the Central Asian states' narrative, mass departures to Syria have so far not generated additional threats to the countries of the region. Furthermore, in the short and medium term perspective they are even beneficial – allowing the most radicalised, dangerous individuals to be eliminated or at least removed.

¹³ It is difficult to pinpoint an exact number, due to different methodologies in place. For instance, the number of citizens of particular states who left for Syria and Iraq includes also militants' families as well as those killed.

¹⁴ For further reading about reasons for leaving to Syria, see: M. Falkowski, J. Lang, Homo Jihadicus. Islam in the former USSR and the phenomenon of the post-Soviet militants in Syria and Iraq, *OSW Report*, 21.09.2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/homojihadicus.pdf>

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/uzbek-groups-part-of-new-offensive-in-southern-aleppo.php>

¹⁷ <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=24140>

¹⁸ <http://www.umma-42.ru/news-60056.html>

¹⁹ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/world/asia/tajikistan-islamic-state-isis.html?_r=0

²⁰ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/30012017>

The case of IMU, and earlier Arab veterans of Afghan war, shows that the mass return of Central Asian militants from Syria is rather impossible, with a more probable option being their relocation to a new conflict, which poses certain risks and threats elsewhere yet does not do so for the states of origin²¹. Nevertheless, in the long term perspective the influx of militants to Syria may negatively influence the countries of the region, primarily through an interdependence between the departures of militants for Syria and the growth of radical circles: on the one hand it was the growth of radical tendencies (mainly a radical form of Salafism) that elicited such a large number of volunteers to Syria, whereas on the other hand mass participation in the conflict there facilitates further propaganda and recruitment. Additionally, the war in Syria led to the establishment of a peculiar conglomeration of the post-Soviet fighters – a network of informal ties and contacts between particular circles and groups, at times formally hostile towards each other. Therefore, if a serious crisis should erupt in Central Asia, it is possible that it would be exploited not only by the radical Islamic militants from the region, but from the entire post-Soviet area.

Between Islamisation and authoritarianism

Though the role of Islam is increasing in the Central Asian societies, the scale of the phenomenon is often exaggerated. It also does not directly translate to radicalisation or an increase of the terrorist threat within the region. Radicalised individuals, with very few exceptions, choose to leave the region for the countries where Islamic terrorist organisations are active (currently almost exclusively to Syria). The actions of the authorities of the regional states in this regards are most often counterproductive and lead to further escalation of the problem of radical Islamic militants from Central Asia.

²¹ For more on the possibility of militants returning from Syria, see: Homo Jihadicus, *op. cit.*

Since the Central Asian states gained their independence, the role of Islam in their societies, as well as the percentage of individuals engaged in Islamic practices, is constantly rising.

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This is true for all the region's states, even including those such as Uzbekistan, where religious persecution is especially harsh. The occurrences of the above phenomena include, amongst other things, increasing participation in Islamic prayers, celebration of Islamic holidays, or a growing number of people observing the fast during Ramadan. There is no credible and comprehensive data, yet the above is still true for a minority. Most inhabitants of the region are still cultural Muslims²², not actively engaged in religion, which is a remnant of Soviet social policy. The lack of continuity of the tradition means that, Islam is *de facto* a new religion for individuals who practice it. This leads to dynamic growth of the Salafist groups, with Salafism as such often being perceived as the most authentic and vibrant form of Islam²³.

Despite the limited scale of this phenomenon, governments of the regional states view the rising role of Islam in unequivocally negative terms and actively seek to counter it. This is accomplished through introducing limitations upon practicing religion, and even persecutions of groups independent from the official Islamic structures, often resulting in radicalisation of

²² The Soviet form of Islam. Its essence is the identification of the professed faith with ethnicity – the perception and self-perception of the representatives of particular ethnic groups (for example Kazakhs, Azerbaijanis or Turkmens) as Muslims by definition, regardless of whether they practise Islam or possess any religious knowledge.

²³ Further in: Homo Jihadicus, *op. cit.*

the former. Such actions are often portrayed as part of the struggle against terrorism, which is aimed at giving them some form of legitimacy in the international arena, yet in practice they are also utilised to combat the opposition. A particular exception to this tactic is provided by Kazakhstan. Following the wave of terrorist attacks in 2011 and 2012, perpetrated by local, atomised, grass-roots radical Salafists, the authorities have introduced a more comprehensive policy towards Salafism. In practice, it meant mass arrests of suspected radicals, simultaneously combined with support for the peaceful Salafi leaders, such as Rinat Abu Muhammad al Kazakhstani (real name Rinat Zaynulin), a Salafi preacher well known throughout the entire post-Soviet area and often criticised by the radical Salafists²⁴.

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The persecutions of independent Islam in the Central Asian states not only fail to solve the problem of radical Islamic militants, they indeed serve to exacerbate it. The discrimination against independent Islamic groups, combined with strong surveillance and an apparatus of oppression, leads to most of the radicalised individuals deciding to engage in terrorist activities outside of the region (with the exception of isolated grass-roots attacks in Kazakhstan). In this context, the departures for jihad in Syria, despite the narrative of threats arising from them, are beneficial for the Central Asian states, which export the radicalised individuals abroad. Similar actions, yet on a larger scale, also took place in Russia, where the Russian security services at times went as far as ena-

bling Islamic radicals to leave for Syria (for example, the case of a well-known Salafi leader Nadir Abu Khalid/Nadir Medetov)²⁵. Along with the skilful playing out of the Caucasus Emirate – Islamic State rivalry, the above allowed for an almost complete neutralisation of the Islamic insurgency in the Northern Caucasus, with both seasoned militants and new recruits leaving for Syria.

Perspectives

Up to the present date, the mechanisms described above allowed Central Asia to avoid the problem of Islamic terrorism, by transferring it outside of the region. The events of the last year show that this model is exhausting itself. While it still exports risks abroad, it ceases to protect the region's states or Russia. Taking into account the dynamic of the events in Syria, the radical Islamic militants from Central Asia also pose a threat for the NATO member states.

The main threat for Central Asia and Russia lies in a continuation of the current policies while the key parameters change. These include: deteriorating socio-economic conditions, growing inefficiency of the state structures and the rise of radical Islamic ideas caused by the war in Syria, combined with the impossibility of a mass outflow to Syria to be sustained²⁶. The rise in activity of the Islamic radicals in the region is a result of a lack of policy. Examples of it include: the August 2016 attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek²⁷, the latest attack in Saint Petersburg²⁸ or the attack carried out

²⁵ Further in: *Homo Jihadicus*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Which is caused by Islamic State losing its access to the Turkish border, the losses of the Sunni opposition and the change in Turkey's policy towards Islamic State.

²⁷ Suicide attack (3 people wounded) perpetrated by the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIM), previously linked to IMU and IJU, currently based in Syria and cooperating with Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad. The attacker was an ethnic Uighur with Tajik citizenship; <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:1327985>

²⁸ The perpetrator of which, Akbarjon Jalilov, Russian citizen, ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan's Osh, probably acted alone.

²⁴ For example: <https://tavhid.com/forum/showthread.php?tid=2999>

by Islamic radicals on the internal troop base in Aktobe in June 2016²⁹. Russia and Kazakhstan seem to be the most endangered countries. Currently in Russia at least 3 million Central Asian labour migrants are present, while additionally Chechnya is starting to face a new radical Islamic insurgency, operating under the banner of Islamic State, and having no ties to the previous Caucasus Emirate linked insurgency. In the western region of Kazakhstan, a dangerous process of criminal structures and Salafi groups melding into one may be observed, which even now cyclically generates tensions. Taking into consideration the negative economic situation and the peculiarities of this part of the country, the problem may lead to destabilisation in the future. In the case of other countries of the region, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the degree of repression and surveillance over society most likely hinder the direct threats arising from the actions of the radical Islamic militants. Simultaneously, a number of structural factors potentially kindle the destabilisation of these states, which in return would probably be exploited by the organisations that originated in the region³⁰.

The activity of terrorists from Central Asia also poses threats to Western countries. An example of this may be seen in the attack carried out in Stockholm on April 7th, the perpetrator of which is a citizen of Uzbekistan, most probably being under the influence of Islamic State propaganda but not a member of its structures³¹. However, the primary threat remains in regard to the areas of armed conflict. Radical Islamic

militants from Central Asia have fought against ISAF troops in Afghanistan, and are currently fighting within the ranks of the Islamic State, which is under attack by the international coalition. The above groups also have some abilities to engage in terrorist activity within the NATO states. In this regard Turkey is the most vulnerable country. Since Turkey has changed its policy towards Islamic State, the organisation has launched several terrorist attacks in Turkey, perpetrators of which were often Islamic radicals from Central Asia. Examples of this include the attack on Istanbul airport on June 28th 2016, which resulted in 230 casualties, including 45 dead, or the attack on Istanbul's Reina night club on 1 of January 2017, where 39 people were killed³².

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The Reina club attack shows also another dangerous trend – Turkish authorities have accused foreign intelligence services³³, unofficially Syrian intelligence³⁴, of inspiring the attack (which was not a suicide attack – the assailant was later caught³⁵). The losses of Islamic State, combined with inability to return to the countries of origin, may drive some of the Islamic radicals from Central Asia, who, due to the war in

²⁹ The attack led to 19 fatalities (including 13 attackers). The attack was launched spontaneously by grass-roots radicalised Salafists. Further in: A. Jarosiewicz, *Military clashes in Kazakhstan*, *OSW Analyses*, 8.06.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-06-08/military-clashes-kazakhstan>.

³⁰ Further in: M. Falkowski, J. Lang, *Hostages to Moscow, clients of Beijing. Security in Central Asia as the role of the West diminishes*, *OSW Studies*, 28.10.2014. https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_51_ang_hostages_to_moscow_3.pdf

³¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/stockholm-attack-latest-killed-shots-fired-lorry-truck-ah-lens-mall-crash-crowd-sweden-people-a7672636.html>

³² <http://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-makes-arrests-in-raids-targeting-suspected-islamic-state-members/3398394.html>

³³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-attacks-idUSKBN150113>. The validity of the claim seems to be supported by the fact that US\$ 200,000 in cash was found in the possession of Masharipov, which is uncommon amongst individuals acting on behalf of terrorist organisations with ideology being the driving force.

³⁴ <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2017/01/12/is-syrian-intelligence-behind-daesh-attacks-in-turkey>

³⁵ Abdulgadir Masharipov, citizen of Uzbekistan, in the past he has fought in Afghanistan (probably in the ranks of IMU) and later in Syria; <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/01/16/reina-nightclub-attacker-who-killed-39-nabbed-in-istanbul>

Syria, gained both combat experience and contacts in various groups throughout the region, to engage in terrorist action commercially – as mercenaries for other terrorist organisations or intelligence services. One example of such commercialisation of Jihad might be the so-called Malhama Tactical, which was formed by Central Asian militants. The group is active in conducting subcontracting (training, combat actions etc.) on a commercial basis for terrorist organisations present in Syria³⁶, positioning itself as “Jihadi Blackwater”³⁷. The founder of the group was an Uzbek militant – Abu Rofik – who in the past has served in the Russian Airborne Troops, which pinpoints another dangerous trait of Central Asian militants – traditionally amongst them there is a high percentage of individuals who either underwent military service, are veterans of prior armed conflicts³⁸,

or were even part of the professional security apparatus³⁹. This results in the advanced combat skills that the Central Asian radical Islamic militants demonstrate.

The situation described above may pose a threat for other countries also, including the UE states, independent of the present phenomenon of European Islamic terrorism. Especially worrisome in the European context are the links developed during the Syrian war between the Central Asian radicals and the Chechen community in Europe and Turkey, heavily infiltrated by Ramzan Kadyrov's security services⁴⁰.

³⁶ Further in: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/>

³⁷ For example well established presence in the social media: https://vk.com/malhama_t; https://www.instagram.com/malhama__tactical/; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9V9z1z9qveqRARjzb5iMew/videos>

³⁸ For example, one of IMU's founders, Juma Namangani, was a Soviet veteran of the Afghan war, where he fought while serving in the Soviet Airborne Troops.

³⁹ For example, the above-mentioned Gulmurod Khalimov, who, as commander of the OMON unit, underwent special training in USA and Russia; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/28/the-u-s-trained-commander-of-tajikistans-special-forces-has-joined-the-islamic-state/?utm_term=.6028c525fd14

⁴⁰ <http://memohrc.org/monitorings/pravozashchitniki-konstatirovali-usilenie-vliyanija-kadyrova-na-chechenskie-diaspory>

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