

# Policy Briefing

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## Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia

### I. Overview

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Growing numbers of Central Asian citizens, male and female, are travelling to the Middle East to fight or otherwise support the Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIL or ISIS). Prompted in part by political marginalisation and bleak economic prospects that characterise their post-Soviet region, 2,000-4,000 have in the past three years turned their back on their secular states to seek a radical alternative. IS beckons not only to those who seek combat experience, but also to those who envision a more devout, purposeful, fundamentalist religious life. This presents a complex problem to the governments of Central Asia. They are tempted to exploit the phenomenon to crack down on dissent. The more promising solution, however, requires addressing multiple political and administrative failures, revising discriminatory laws and policies, implementing outreach programs for both men and women and creating jobs at home for disadvantaged youths, as well as ensuring better coordination between security services.

Should a significant portion of these radicalised migrants return, they risk challenging security and stability throughout Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan form a brittle region, sandwiched between Russia and Afghanistan, Iran and China. Each suffers from poor governance, corruption and crime. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan resemble authoritarian police states. Kazakhstan has some wealth, but its regions are in disrepair, and its political system is autocratic. All five fail to deliver quality social services, particularly in rural areas. Their security services – underfunded, poorly trained and inclined to resort to harsh methods to compensate for a lack of resources and skills – are unable to deal with a challenge as intricate as radical Islam. Rather than promoting religious freedom while safeguarding secular constitutions and attempting to learn from European or Asian experiences in rehabilitating jihadis, the five fuel further radicalisation by using laws to curb religious growth and the police to conduct crackdowns.

Recruitment to the extremist cause is happening in mosques and *namazkhana* (prayer rooms) across the region. The internet and social media play a critical but not definitive role. The radicalisation of women is often a response to the lack of social, religious, economic and political opportunities afforded to them in Central Asia. Economic reward is not a motivation for those drawn to IS-controlled territory. For some, it is a personal adventure; for others it is a call to arms. Many find them-

selves providing support services to more experienced fighters from the Caucasus or Arab states.

Ethnic Uzbeks, including citizens of Uzbekistan, are most numerous among the Central Asians with the Islamic State, but Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Turkmen and Tajiks are also well represented. Some are recruited at home; others are radicalised abroad, often as migrant workers. The problem is acute in southern Kyrgyzstan, where the risks are amplified by the alienation of the Uzbek community since the violence in Osh in 2010.

The appeal of jihadism in the region is also rooted in an unfulfilled desire for political and social change. Rich or poor, educated or not, young or mature, male or female, there is no single profile of an IS supporter, but fatigue with social and political circumstances is an important linking thread. Uzbekistan is particularly exposed. Frustrated and excluded, people who would not have considered fighting with the longer-established Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or the Taliban in Afghanistan perceive the Islamic State as the creator of a novel and ordained political order.

The number of Central Asians receiving combat training and progressing through IS command structures is increasing, as are the jihadi networks of which they are a part. Although most Central Asians find themselves in *jamaats* (factions) organised loosely along ethnic and linguistic lines, these form larger regional battalions of co-operating fighters from across the former Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China's Xinjiang region. The risk is rising that these connections will gather pace and purpose in Central Asia, blindsiding governments ill-prepared to respond to a security threat of this type.

Russia and China are already concerned and have urged the Central Asian states to address the problem of radicalisation in light of the rise of IS. The region's other international partners, including, the EU and the U.S., should recognise that Central Asia is a growing source of foreign fighters and consider prioritising policing reform, as well as a more tolerant attitude to religion, in their recommendations for combating the problem. Without a concerted effort on the part of the Central Asians, including their security services with respect to intelligence sharing, however, the response outside powers seek will likely flounder.

## II. A Growing Jihadi Problem

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asian governments have struggled to accommodate the growth of religion.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, poverty has become more acute in all but a few urban centres, and migration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to relatively more prosperous cities in Kazakhstan and Russia continues to grow.<sup>2</sup> Turkmenistan is relatively closed to the world; despite its

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group Asia Reports N°176, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, 3 September 2009; N°59, *Central Asia: Islam and the State*, 10 July 2003; N°58, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 30 June 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Its Federal Migration Service estimates there are some 3.95 million Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek citizens working in Russia. See "В России находится свыше 550 тысяч граждан Кыргызстана" ["There are more than 550 thousand Kyrgyz citizens in Russia"], Radio Azattyk, 20 November 2014; also Sergey Ryazantsev and Oleg Korneev, "Russia and Kazakhstan in Eurasian Migration System: Development Trends, Socio-Economic Consequences of Migration and Approaches to

energy wealth, much of the country is underdeveloped.<sup>3</sup> In all five states, religion and religious organisations fill a void created by the lack of credible governance and social insecurity.<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop, the call of IS – which says it wants teachers, nurses and engineers, not just fighters – can appear to some to offer an attractive alternative.<sup>5</sup>

#### A. Diverse Profiles

Though the phenomenon has a disproportionate impact on security perceptions at home, Central Asia supplies only a small fraction of the tens of thousands of IS fighters in Syria. Official Central Asian governments' estimates of several hundred are conservative though. Western officials suggest the number is 2,000, and it may be as many as 4,000.<sup>6</sup> Dozens have died in Syria, their families sometimes notified only by messages on social networking sites or mobile phone texts.<sup>7</sup>

The largest single group is reportedly Uzbek, both citizens of Uzbekistan and ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley, including Osh, Kyrgyzstan's southern city. The number of the former in Syria is not the estimated 500 or so cited by Tashkent and may exceed 2,500.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps 1,000 men and women, including 500 ethnic Kyrgyz and others from Osh, have left the Ferghana Valley to fight for or provide humanitarian assistance to IS, and the exodus, which began 2011-2012, continues from this long-rebellious area shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>9</sup>

In northern Kyrgyzstan, twenty former residents from just one medium-sized town are reported to have travelled to Turkey in 2013 with the intention of going on to Syria; there could be at least 300 unreported cases nationwide.<sup>10</sup> In Kazakhstan, some 150 people made headlines when a video showing them in Syria appeared on

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Regulation", in Anna Di Bartolomeo, Shushanik Makaryan and Agnieszka Weinar (eds.), *Regional Migration Report: Russia and Central Asia*, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies and Migration Policy Center, (Florence, 2014), pp. 1-54; Crisis Group Asia Report N°183, *Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis*, 5 January 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Some development such as new hospitals can be seen in regional centres, but the overall reach is patchy, said a Western diplomat based in Ashgabat. Crisis Group interview, September 2014. Crisis Group conducted research in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Russia and Europe but was unable to do so in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan.

<sup>4</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°250, *Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change*, 30 September 2013; N°222, *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, 29 March 2012; N°205, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, 24 May 2011; and N°201, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, 3 February 2011. The total population of the five Central Asian states is 65.7 million. "CIA World Factbook", [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov).

<sup>5</sup> "Isis leader calls on Muslims to 'build Islamic State'", BBC, 1 July 2014; "Islamic State recruiting women to 'have kids and cook'", *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Western officials estimate that about 400 fighters from each of the five Central Asian countries have travelled to join the Islamic State. A Russian official put the total regional figure at 4,000. Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, October 2014; Astana, November 2014. The term "Syria" as used in this briefing refers to the area of operations of IS in Iraq as well as Syria. IS itself frequently speaks of "bilad al-Sham" (Syria and its neighbourhood).

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interview, mother of jihadi killed fighting for the Islamic State, southern Kyrgyzstan, April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interview, Russian official, September 2014, who also said there were 2,500 Russian citizens fighting in Syria.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, July 2014; senior police officer, southern Kyrgyzstan, August 2014; Uzbek opposition activist, Turkey, September 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kyrgyz security official, Chui province, Kyrgyzstan, May 2014.

YouTube in October 2013.<sup>11</sup> IS supporters tend to come from the west and south of the country, but not exclusively.<sup>12</sup> In Tajikistan, recruitment is nationwide but appears strongest in Sughd and Khatlon provinces; at least twenty people left for Syria from just one village in September 2014.<sup>13</sup>

Central Asian governments often fail to recognise that IS appeals to a cross-section of citizens. There are seventeen-year-old hairdressers, established businessmen, women abandoned by husbands who have taken second wives in Russia, families who believe their children will have better prospects in a caliphate, young men, school dropouts and university students. All are inspired by the belief that an Islamic state is a meaningful alternative to post-Soviet life. Some wish to fight, others to facilitate.

The appeal is to uneducated and educated alike, with experts disagreeing on which group dominates. A senior Kyrgyz official asserted: “99 per cent of them are uneducated. They received their religious education on the local village level .... Money does not play a role in their world; they do not care if they have a roof or not, they follow their ideology”.<sup>14</sup> A religion expert from Kyrgyzstan, however, criticised what he considered a caricature of the Central Asian jihadi as an unmarried, semi-literate male aged eighteen-26: “It is a mistake to think that people recruited [to Syria] lack education or common sense. Most of them are educated people. They have worked as teachers, have families and responsibilities. They are people shocked by the rapid social changes in society”.<sup>15</sup> In southern Kazakhstan, the brother of a man convicted for fighting in Syria said he was radicalised by a wealthy businessman who recruited other equally affluent and established individuals.<sup>16</sup>

## B. *Getting to the Caliphate*

The security services, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are ill-equipped to track IS supporters. Recruitment happens mainly in Central Asia, Russia and Turkey, but also from among young men who travel to religious schools in Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Bangladesh.<sup>17</sup> Emigration in the millions, while a vital pressure valve to relieve social tensions at home, can also cause dislocations that lead Central Asians into the arms of jihadi recruiters.

In Russia, migrants who are marginalised, often illegal and working badly paid, dangerous jobs seek solace, a sense of identity and community in religion.<sup>18</sup> They may

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<sup>11</sup> “Astana probes video allegedly showing Kazakh ‘jihad’ family in Syria”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 21 October 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Kazakh security expert, Astana, October 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Masum Mukhammadradjab, “Чоркишлоқ: родина 20 участников Сирийской войны” [“Chorqishloq: Birthplace of 20 participants in the Syrian war”], Radio Ozodi, 25 September 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, July 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interview, southern Kazakhstan, August 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, July 2014. A Kazakh security expert said the level of recruitment in Russia is “greatly underestimated”. Crisis Group telephone interview, Astana, October 2014. See also “ГКНБ: Основным маршрутом переброски граждан Кыргызстана в Сирию является направление ‘Кыргызстан-Казахстан-Россия-Турция-Сирия’” [“State Committee for National Security: Main route for sending Kyrgyz citizens to Syria goes through ‘Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan-Russia-Turkey-Syria’”], AKIpress, 17 November 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Kirill Benediktov, Aleksandr Kostin, Mikhail Remizov, Ilyas Sarsembayev, Rais Suleimanov and Marat Shibutov, “Миграция и исламизм” [“Migration and Islamism”], Иммиграция как вызов национальной безопасности России [Migration as a challenge to the national security of Russia], Институт Национальной Стратегии [National Strategy Institute], (Moscow, 2014), pp. 24-34.

fall in with Caucasian networks, Dagestani or Chechen, that blur the lines between religion and organised crime, while offering a degree of protection against other crime groups and difficulties.<sup>19</sup> Outside Central Asia, ethnic differences are smoothed over.<sup>20</sup> In IS, participants from the Central Asian republics and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union are known collectively as Chechens, though they form *jamaats* roughly along ethnic, regional and linguistic lines.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey is usually the penultimate destination on the journey to Syria. Flights from Central Asian cities and from Russia to Istanbul are not expensive. Some people are able to fund their journey independently; others use donations from wealthier supporters of the Islamic State.<sup>22</sup> Travel to Turkey is visa-free for citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan; Uzbek citizens can get a 30-day visa upon arrival.

At Turkish entry points, it is difficult to distinguish between tourists, economic migrants and those with other motives, and Central Asian security officials sometimes relay inaccurate details about those suspected of aiming for Syria.<sup>23</sup> Even within Central Asia, lack of coordination between the security services is a major problem.<sup>24</sup> Those worried about being stopped from flying to Turkey from Kyrgyzstan sometimes make arrangements with airport staff to ignore suspicious departures. Those escorting young, unaccompanied females to Kyrgyz airports also appear aware of and able to guard against security checks.<sup>25</sup> In Turkey, a similar system of escorts and facilitators arranges transport, typically by car, to the Syrian border.<sup>26</sup>

### C. *Actors and Groups*

Word of mouth is one of the most powerful tools of recruitment in Central Asia; one family member or friend leaves for IS-controlled territory, then several more follow.<sup>27</sup> Social media maintains communication between those in Syria and those at home thinking about joining. As a U.S. official put it, “wars have moved from tradi-

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<sup>19</sup> A police officer investigating the flight of three youths from Kara-Balta, including two teenage girls, said the ringleader, a 21-year-old man with an interest in boxing and martial arts, had been radicalised by Chechens he met in Moscow. Crisis Group interview, Kara-Balta, Kyrgyzstan August 2014.

<sup>20</sup> “Islam has become a consolidating force for all migrants [in Moscow]. You can see Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrants being Muslim brothers, instead of seeing them being grouped by ethnic identity”. Crisis Group interview, religion expert, Moscow, June 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, foreign fighter expert, Tel Aviv, Israel, September 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, brother of jailed returnee, southern Kazakhstan, August 2014. One-way tickets from Central Asian cities to Istanbul range from \$143 to \$365.

<sup>23</sup> The problem is particularly acute with Kyrgyzstan. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, July 2014. Turkey should encourage better information sharing; see Teemu Sinkkonen, “War on Two Fronts. The EU Perspective on the Foreign Terrorist Fighters of ISIL”, FIIA Briefing Paper no. 166, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, January 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Kazakh security expert, Astana, October 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, father of teenagers currently in Turkey and Syria, Kara-Balta, Kyrgyzstan July 2014. “Some people do help for money; they are not our people from the *jamaat* with whom we are in contact, but others. We will give them money, and then they do lead us through the airport to the plane, bypassing controls”. Crisis Group interview, Islamic State supporter planning to travel to Syria, Osh, July 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Uzbek IS supporter, Istanbul, September 2014; residents, Reyhanli town, southern Turkey, September 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, brother of Kyrgyz citizen fighting in Syria, northern Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

tional battlefields to villages and homes, [reflecting the] increasing power of individuals and reach of individuals”.<sup>28</sup>

Recruitment cells in Central Asia are small, secretive and sometimes extensions of prayer groups. Not everyone in a prayer group will be aware of the activities of other members or the connection to Syria. In an Osh female prayer group with up to 30 members, only a few want to go to Syria, and the others are ignorant of their plans.<sup>29</sup> Recruitment cells in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan appear to be able to operate despite a degree of security-service awareness.<sup>30</sup>

Groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat play a peripheral role in so far as both men and women may be radicalised as they gravitate toward their teachings. Neither appears to be directly involved with recruiting to Syria, but they sometimes unwittingly are staging posts in the journey to extremist violence.<sup>31</sup> A member said Tablighi Jamaat “strongly opposes” jihad. A leading Hizb ut-Tahrir member in southern Kyrgyzstan would not condemn jihadis, arguing it was a personal choice.<sup>32</sup>

More worrying for the overall security climate in Central Asia is the way Syria appears to have provided the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its offshoots with a renewed sense of purpose. Formed in 1998, the organisation was weakened by the death of its leader, Tokhir Yuldashev, in a 2009 airstrike.<sup>33</sup> It remains an umbrella entity, however, for a number of groups that go by different names, such as Jamaat Ansarullah, formed in 2010 by IMU associate Amriddin Tabarov.<sup>34</sup>

While the IMU and Afghanistan’s Taliban have long-established links, the IMU and IS have kept a polite distance from each other’s affairs. IMU leader Usman Ghazi pledged support for the Islamic State in September 2014.<sup>35</sup> IMU members have been active recruiters to the Islamic State in the Ferghana Valley for some time, while taking advantage of what in Central Asia is seen as a glamorous association to raise more funds for their own organisation and grow it in stature. Numerous Jamaat Ansarullah members have been arrested in Tajikistan for recruiting Tajiks to Syria, and members returning from Syria have also been accused of plan-

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<sup>28</sup> Eileen O’Connor, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Central and South Asia Bureau, State Department, speech to the Global Counterterrorism Forum, an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) workshop on women’s roles in radicalisation, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, IS supporter planning to travel to Syria, Osh, July 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, lawyer, southern Kazakhstan, August 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, religion expert, Kyrgyzstan, September 2014. Tablighi Jamaat, a non-violent organisation founded in 1926 in India, is banned in every Central Asian state but Kyrgyzstan. Hizb ut-Tahrir, a non-violent organisation that seeks to establish a caliphate, is banned in all five Central Asian states. See also Crisis Group Report, *Radical Islam in Central Asia*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan, 8 September 2014; southern Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

<sup>33</sup> “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: New ‘emir’ is elected in concern with the death of Takhir Yuldashev”, Ferghana News, 17 August 2010, <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?Id=1820>.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western defence official, Bishkek, June 2014. “A Look at Tajikistan’s Jamaat Ansarullah Leader Amriddin Tabarov”, Jamestown, Militant Leadership Monitor, 7 August 2013. In practice there is little to distinguish Jamaat and IMU operations in Central Asia, Afghanistan or Pakistan’s north-western Waziristan region. Jozef Lang, “The Radical Islamic Militants of Central Asia”, Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich im. Marka Karpi, November 2013.

<sup>35</sup> “In 2001 during the American-led Enduring Freedom operation, aimed against al-Qaida and Taliban, the IMU became a vanguard of the Taliban forces in the north of the country ...”, Lang, op. cit., p.11. “From the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to the Islamic State word of support and advice”, Hilofatnews, 26 September 2014, [http://hilofatnews.com/News\\_d83303.html](http://hilofatnews.com/News_d83303.html).

ning terror acts.<sup>36</sup> The IMU acts as distinct from IS, however, and its members fighting in Syria have not sought to usurp or duplicate the latter's command structure.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the IMU also appears to have acted as a bridge for a wider variety of Central Asian fighters, including Uighurs from western China, who gain initial combat experience in Afghanistan or Pakistan and then hone their skills in Syria.<sup>38</sup>

Recruitment in Central Asia is easier for the distant IS than it is for extremists in nearby Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has supporters "spanning from one side of Central Asia to the other", many of whom are active in Russian and local language online forums, while Afghan material is mostly in Pashto, Dari or Arabic, which are little understood in the region. A key to this success is also IS's claim to be about a more universal purpose, creation of a caliphate.<sup>39</sup> As an imam from southern Kyrgyzstan, recalling the fights against Soviet and NATO operations in Afghanistan, put it, "Syria is about principles, not colonialism".<sup>40</sup>

### III. Radicalisation at Work

IS sympathisers in Central Asia are motivated by an extremist religious ideology and inspired by the ruthless application of a severe social and political order that they interpret as reflecting moral strength. The growth of radical tendencies is exacerbated by poor religious education and grievances against the region's secular governments.<sup>41</sup> Radicalisation also spreads partly because economic and political opportunities are scarce.<sup>42</sup> Islamic organisations offer social services that Central Asian states do not adequately provide, such as education, childcare and welfare for vulnerable families.<sup>43</sup> Conservative strains of Islam are no longer alien, due to the long-time presence of missionaries and clerics.<sup>44</sup> Religion is sometimes the only form of politicised expression in Central Asia that is not perceived as a compromise of moral values.<sup>45</sup> Despite IS's blatant brutality, its call to Syria exploits the failures

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<sup>36</sup> "В Таджикистане задержаны 12 террористов, которые вербовали местную молодежь на войну в Сирии" ["Twelve terrorists are detained in Tajikistan, who were recruiting local youth for the war in Syria"], Maxala.org, 13 November 2014; "МВД: Террористы планировали взорвать тоннели 'Шахристон' и 'Истиклол'" ["Interior Ministry: Terrorists were plotting attacks on 'Shahrison' and 'Istiklol' tunnels"], Radio Ozodi, 19 October 2014; Makhinur Niyazova, "В Кыргызстане задержаны члены террористической группировки, перебросенной из Сирии, готовившие теракты в Оше и Бишкеке" ["In Kyrgyzstan, members of the terrorist group from Syria are detained, plotting attacks in Osh and Bishkek cities"], 24.kg, 16 September 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Uzbek opposition leader, Istanbul, August 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kabul-based Western diplomat, Bishkek, September 2014.

<sup>39</sup> A large number of Central Asians have left for Afghanistan and Pakistan over the years, however. A recent study estimated that there were about 4,000 Uzbek/IMU in Waziristan (Pakistan) in 2009. Dr Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, "Uzbek Militancy in Pakistan", Centre for International and Strategic Analysis, no. 1 (2013), p8, <http://bit.ly/1zW7OSj>.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, August 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, two former Kyrgyz ministers, Bishkek, October 2013 and July 2014.

<sup>42</sup> "Radicalization in Tajikistan is a result of social and economic problems", Crisis Group interview, OSCE official, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, academic, Bishkek, 2013. See also Crisis Group Report, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Aktau, June 2014.

<sup>45</sup> "You have two choices [as a youth in rural Kyrgyzstan]: start drinking or become religious and get some respect from the community". Crisis Group interview, ex-minister, Bishkek, September 2013.

of successive post-Soviet governments to provide political, social and economic opportunities.

*A. Why Central Asians Leave for Jihad*

Even though socio-economic factors play a role, ideological commitment to jihad, the idea of holy struggle to advance Islam, is for many the main reason Central Asians are drawn to IS.<sup>46</sup> Not all who go to Syria want to engage personally in violence, but they at least accept that others will do it for them.<sup>47</sup> Some are pushed away from Central Asia by a perception of state discrimination – religious, ethnic or both. This is an acute problem in southern Kyrgyzstan, but not only there, as religious individuals and communities are marginalised across the region by harsh laws regulating religious activity and constant security service investigations.<sup>48</sup>

Alienation from inadequate secular state education, poor religious schooling and overall rejection by states of other than sanctioned, conventional religious expression are significant factors propelling young people toward radicalism.<sup>49</sup> Some migrants hope IS will give them a thorough Islamic education.<sup>50</sup> In Tajikistan, “people who do not find any support for their ideas and ideology leave for Syria. They are perfect material for other forces to use, as these forces appear to offer them what their homeland does not”.<sup>51</sup>

Radical Islam gives some women a framework with which to distance themselves from marital and family circumstances. One of four preparing to leave for Syria in 2014, with their children but not husbands, said, “[our husbands are] against religion, against Islam. My friends do not want to live with them anymore”.<sup>52</sup> For other women, it is the call of a devout life, or an Islamic environment for their children. Still others follow fighters or family members who have established a contacts network in Turkey or IS-controlled territory.<sup>53</sup> A 38-year-old mother of three dismissed the dangers of a war zone: “so what? The fight is for religion, and if somebody gets killed then he will be in another world, the eternal world”.<sup>54</sup> A parliamentarian from Kyrgyzstan outlined the problem:

We are concerned by the growing number of women who commit extremist crimes. Ten years ago, just 1 per cent [were] committed by women, now it's 23 per cent .... There are no people specialising in women at mosques, while conservative groups have resources and money to exploit women's interest in Islam .... Very often law enforcement agents are not emotionally able to take harsh measures against women, do not detain them, do not try to use force .... Recruiters are incentivised to recruit girls, because women are not checked on as frequently as men.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security analysts, religion experts, Moscow, June 2014; Bishkek, August 2014; Astana, November 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, would-be migrant to Syria, southern Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

<sup>48</sup> “Annual Report 2014”, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kazakh security and political analysts, Almaty, Aktau, June 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, would-be migrant to Syria, Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Tajik political analyst, Dushanbe, October 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, southern Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kara-Balta, July 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, would-be migrant to Syria, southern Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Irina Karamushkina, Kyrgyzstan parliamentarian and deputy chair, Committee on Security and Defence, speech to OSCE Global Counterterrorism Forum, Vienna, October 2014.



The Uzbek community in southern Kyrgyzstan has complex reasons for leaving. Since violence in Osh in 2010 that left over 400 dead, many ethnic Uzbeks have retreated from engaging with the Kyrgyz authorities for fear of harassment and extortion.<sup>56</sup> Many men have migrated to Russia to find work and escape discrimination. Unlike ethnic Kyrgyz elsewhere in the country, Uzbek families are unlikely to report or seek help regarding the radicalisation of relatives. To do so invites at best state surveillance, at worst detentions, beatings or demands for cash.<sup>57</sup> Inter-ethnic tensions in southern Kyrgyzstan have gone unresolved, and the political and economic marginalisation of the Uzbek community contributes to the appeal of radical groups, particularly Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the jihadi cause in general. A former member of the Kyrgyz State Commission on Religious Affairs concluded:

Radicalisation is on the rise. The reasons are complex but include socio-economic problems, unemployment, a lack of education and a lack of access to social benefits. Young people are fed up with everything and want to take revenge; they see it as a way out of their situation.<sup>58</sup>

#### B. *The Spectre of Returning Jihadis*

The fallout from Syria is now a top security concern in Central Asia.<sup>59</sup> The fear that returning jihadis intend to overthrow governments has been underscored by a series of prosecutions and apparently foiled conspiracies in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Alleged plots included bomb attacks in Bishkek and Dushanbe and on strategic road tunnels through the Tajik mountains.<sup>60</sup> Risk in the region is not uniform, however, and a blanket description of all migrants to IS-controlled territory as potential returnees fails to recognise the motivations and aspirations that prompted them to leave to begin with.

Not all want to be fighters. Many do not want to return because of ideological commitment to IS, which, for now, is focused on Syria and Iraq.<sup>61</sup> “The Hadith says choose Syria, choose al-Sham, and al-Sham is Syria”, said a would-be migrant from Osh.<sup>62</sup> “They are not against terror in Central Asia, but people in the Islamic State

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<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, religion expert, Bishkek, 22 July 2014. See also Crisis Group Report, *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions*, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Osh, Bishkek, July 2014. In contrast, an ethnic Kyrgyz family reported the departure of its children and demanded assistance finding them, but the police could do little. The family is in phone contact with one who claims to be in Syria. Crisis Group interview, northern Kyrgyzstan, July 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2014. He added that Issyk-Kul province in the north is also a hotspot for youth recruitment, because residents are employed for just three months per year, during the tourist season.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kazakh official, Astana, November 2014. See also “Бордюжа: боевики ИГ из стран ОДКБ могут дестабилизировать ситуацию” [“Bordyuzha: IS fighters from CSTO countries might destabilise the situation”], Ria Novosti, 28 October 2014.

<sup>60</sup> “Afghan and Syrian Links to Central Asian Jihadism”, Jamestown, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 29 October 2013; “Tajik Islamists held for plotting attacks”, RFE/RL, 19 October 2014.

<sup>61</sup> “A message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the month of Ramadan”, statement from Amirul-Mu'minin Abu Bakr Al-Husayni Al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi, Alhayat Media Centre, July 2014, [www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf](http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, July 2014. Nick Danforth, “There Is No al-Sham”, *Foreign Policy* (online), 17 June 2014.

are drawn to wage ‘proper’ jihad. IS says ‘we have established a caliphate; you need to come to us’”, an expert on foreign fighters explained.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, Central Asian governments’ belief that Syrian-trained jihadis plan to establish a caliphate in the region has shaped the security debate and provides a backdrop for ever-stricter laws on religious practice that may be counterproductive.<sup>64</sup> It also leads governments and media to posit radicalisation and violent extremism as the product of external forces, even a global conspiracy.<sup>65</sup>

Central Asian governments do face, in varying degrees, violent threats, but for now at least, these are domestic rather than foreign based. Indeed, some regime opponents see the Islamic State phenomenon as a distraction. An Uzbek opposition leader in exile, for example, said he was opposed to Uzbeks fighting in Syria because it undermined the continuation of violent dissent against the government of President Islam Karimov:

If the Uzbeks want jihad, let them fight against Karimov in Uzbekistan ... in the 1990s, young men of the same age [as those fighting in Syria today] went with Yuldashev [and the IMU]. A whole generation has passed in twenty years, but the spirit of opposition, hatred of the regime has not been completely suppressed.<sup>66</sup>

Returning jihadis are a danger to be prepared for rather than an immediate threat. Many will not return, because they will die in Syria. An Uzbek who delivers humanitarian aid through Turkey to fighters from Tashkent and Osh noted that IS needs cannon fodder and added:

[Central Asians] cooperate with Arabs or [sub-groups] from the Caucasus and Europe. The guys from Central Asia are absolutely not prepared ... they are human material. Any operation is fraught with victims. At any moment a bomb may fall and many can die. And they also must be constantly replenished.<sup>67</sup>

Others, who have grown disillusioned in Syria and might be candidates for rehabilitation, do not dare to return and are stranded in Syria, because there is a lack of meaningful rehabilitation efforts, they do not trust the police and fear prosecution.<sup>68</sup> Denmark, by contrast, has effective rehabilitation programs based on trust built up between the authorities and the families of fighters.<sup>69</sup> A program in which European police share their experience in showing ex-jihadis a way out of IS would be highly desirable. Indonesia would also be well positioned to assist Central Asian police

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<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Tel Aviv, Israel, October 2014.

<sup>64</sup> “Rather than securing the region, this alarmism legitimises policies in countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that restrict basic liberties and feed a vicious cycle of repression and militancy”. Edward Lemon, “Russia sees IS as reason to boost control in Central Asia”, EurasiaNet, 11 November 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Nikolai Bobkin, “Islamic State created by United States”, Strategic Culture Foundation, 2 October 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, aid organiser, Istanbul, August 2014.

<sup>68</sup> For youth perspectives on Central Asian identity, exclusion and law enforcement, see “Nobody has ever asked about young people’s opinions”, Saferworld, March 2012, pp. 24-25.

<sup>69</sup> “In order to build trust, community policing is very important. It would be very difficult for us to get in contact with the returnees and their families if we only wanted to persecute them”. Crisis Group telephone interview, Allan Aarslev, chief, Crime Prevention Department, East Jutland Police Department, Aarhus, Denmark, 18 November 2014.

forces develop responses to radicalisation in terms of improved intelligence-gathering techniques and building community relations, as well as rehabilitation.<sup>70</sup> It should be recognised, however, that the capacities of Central Asian police forces to absorb and implement lessons learned are undermined by weak state structures.<sup>71</sup>

#### IV. The Response so Far

Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have introduced laws criminalising fighting abroad, the former coming into effect in July 2014, the latter on 1 January 2015.<sup>72</sup> Uzbekistan banned terrorism training without reference to location in January 2014, but the law was widely interpreted as directed against foreign-trained fighters.<sup>73</sup> The Kyrgyz parliament approved criminal code amendments suggesting sentences of eight to fifteen years for taking part in conflicts, military operations or terrorist- or extremist-training in a foreign state in September 2014, but these have yet to be signed into law.

The Uzbek law states that persons with no previous convictions who turn themselves in will not be held criminally liable.<sup>74</sup> There is no such provision in the legislation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and doubt surrounds Uzbekistan's actual willingness to rehabilitate returning fighters. Rehabilitation programs could have potential, but Central Asian governments lack the resources and apparently the political will to implement them. A Tajik political analyst said, "usually these types of laws are passed when they do not want the fighters to come back. The government is basically scaring them away, creating barriers to stop them from coming home".<sup>75</sup>

In Chirchik, a city near Tashkent, a member of a district committee said an assistance program for suspected extremists and their families began in 2006:

Police gave us the list of the people who have been suspected or sentenced on extremism charges. Then we divide the list up between the districts and communicate with their families. Mentors are given to every family which has someone

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°204, *Indonesian Jihadism: Small Groups, Big Plans*, 19 April 2011, pp. 19-21.

<sup>71</sup> David Lewis, "Reassessing the Role of OSCE Police Assistance Programming in Central Asia", Central Eurasia Project, Open Society Foundations, Occasional Paper Series no. 4, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> "Назарбаев подписал Уголовный Кодекс" ["Nazarbayev signed a Criminal Code"], Tengrinews, 3 July 2014, "Таджикистан определил наказание за участие в 'джихаде'" ["Tajikistan identified punishment for participation in 'Jihad'"], Radio Ozodi, 3 August 2014. "Уголовный кодекс от 3 июля 2014 года № 226-V (вводится в действие с 01.01.2015 года)" ["Criminal Code from 3 July 2014 N° 226-V (Comes Into Force From 01.01.2015)"], 3 July 2014, <http://normativ.uchet.kz/view.php?ID=109751>; "Закон Республики Таджикистан 'О внесении изменений и дополнений в Уголовный Кодекс Республики Таджикистан'" ["The Law of The Republic of Tajikistan 'On Amendments and Additions to Criminal Code of The Republic of Tajikistan'"], 26 July 2014, [http://base.spininform.ru/show\\_doc.fwx?rgn=69815](http://base.spininform.ru/show_doc.fwx?rgn=69815).

<sup>73</sup> Sergey Kozhemyakin, "За недонесение накажут" ["Non-denunciation will be punished"], *Pravda*, 10 February 2014.

<sup>74</sup> "В Узбекистане ввели уголовную ответственность за несообщение о терактах" ["Criminal liability is introduced in Uzbekistan for not informing about terrorist acts"], 12.uz, 21 January 2014. "Закон Республики Узбекистан 'О внесении изменений и дополнений в некоторые законодательные акты Республики Узбекистан'" ["The Law of The Republic of Uzbekistan 'On Amendments and Additions to Certain Legislative Acts of The Republic of Uzbekistan'"], 20 January 2014, [www.senat.uz/ru/laws/zru-365\\_20.01.2014.html](http://www.senat.uz/ru/laws/zru-365_20.01.2014.html).

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Dushanbe, October 2014.

sentenced or suspected of extremism. The mentors are usually the elderly, heads or well-respected people of the *mahalla* [district]. We go to their families and try to talk to them; we try to find out how they are living now. If they don't have jobs, we try to find work for them. Usually, it is a psychological and moral support to the wives and children of the family.<sup>76</sup>

It is unclear, however, how successful the program is and if it is replicated in other parts of Uzbekistan.

State-registered imams in all five Central Asian countries seek to explain the dangers of supporting IS, but people inclined to support that movement worship outside of state-sanctioned mosques.<sup>77</sup> Outreach to women has not been prioritised, though this is central to preventing radicalisation.<sup>78</sup> The conservative Muslim community's relative disinterest in the role of women allows underground Islamic groups to fill a need.<sup>79</sup> A preventive approach that labels all unfamiliar interpretations of Islam as extremist only further alienates vulnerable groups. "Prevention should not mean harassment, and it should not mean further restrictions on freedom of religion; there are enough of those already", said a Western specialist on freedom of religion in Central Asia.<sup>80</sup> An official of the Russian-organised Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) commented:

There was a program in Azerbaijan where at-risk men were taught that the real meaning of jihad is not violent. It was not formal religious education, but it addressed the confusion around jihad .... I think this program could also work in Central Asian countries .... We need to explain that the fight in Syria is about power, not about jihad, and that it has nothing to do with Islam.<sup>81</sup>

At the national level, leaders frame extremism as an existential security threat.<sup>82</sup> Leaders in the bureaucracy are often from the communist-educated urban elite, with limited understanding of religion's appeal in society; retraining is needed, especially for distinguishing between piety and radicalisation that can lead to violence. Moreover, the domestic threat IS poses is sometimes exaggerated to suit political and secu-

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<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Chirchik, October 2014.

<sup>77</sup> "I warn in every sermon 'do not go to Syria. Muslims killing Muslims is not jihad'", said an imam at a mosque in southern Kyrgyzstan, but he fears that IS propaganda, including footage shared on mobile phones, dilutes his message. Crisis Group interview, Osh province, August 2014.

<sup>78</sup> "Women have a crucial role to play in preventing recruitment, preventing foreign terrorist fighters and dealing with de-radicalisation on return". Pierre von Arx, deputy head of delegation for security policy issues, Switzerland OSCE mission, speech, OSCE Global Counterterrorism Forum, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>79</sup> "An uneducated woman is a time bomb because, when needed, she can be used for many other goals". Crisis Group interview, Islamic activist, Bishkek, October 2014.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western expert, Bishkek, August 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Tatyana Kudryavtseva, "Алмазбек Атамбаев: За широкой исламизацией стоит идея превратить кыргызов в манкуртов" ["Almazbek Atambayev: The general idea behind Islamisation is to turn Kyrgyz into *mankurts*"], 24.kg, 3 November 2014. The term "*mankurt*" was first used in the Chingiz Aitmatov 1980 novel *И дольше века длится день* [*The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*]. According to the author, a *mankurt* is an imprisoned person who has been turned into a soulless slave, fully obedient and forgetful of his past.

rity agendas.<sup>83</sup> “Governments have equated Islamisation with violent extremism; these are not the same thing”, a Western diplomat said.<sup>84</sup> An OSCE official added that even basic precautions are not in place:

The first step with prevention is raising awareness. Some [people] don’t know they have become members of a radical group; their parents don’t even know what it means to wear certain clothes or hang out with certain people.<sup>85</sup>

National governments likewise should do more to apply policies locally.<sup>86</sup> But there is also not much regional cooperation, even though the Russian-led bloc, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), of which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members, has singled out the Islamic State and its Central Asian fighters as a major threat.<sup>87</sup> Conflict in Uzbekistan, the state most exposed to extremists receiving combat training in Syria, in numbers at least, would risk impacting weaker neighbours such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Though the CSTO is an untested defence mechanism, both would lean heavily on it in a worst-case scenario. Nevertheless, some Russian officials say privately Uzbekistan is not in line for assistance from Russia or the CSTO should returning fighters attempt to destabilise or overthrow its government.<sup>88</sup>

Central Asian officials, Russian and Western diplomats and regional experts all expect the Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan security services to take a zero-tolerance approach to fighters with plans to return. “Uzbekistan will shoot them on the border”, said a Russian official.<sup>89</sup> The Kazakhs may also consider drastic pre-emptive measures, though these would simply shift the danger next door. Islamic State supporters seeking to return to Central Asia and avoid a tough homecoming would likely choose to go to Kyrgyzstan – thus putting it at greater risk – because its security services are milder and society is more open.<sup>90</sup>

## V. Conclusion

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The Islamic State is attracting a coalition of Central Asian jihadis and sympathisers and fostering a network of links within the region and nearby areas, including the Caucasus and Xinjiang. Violent extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan are gaining renewed traction. Central Asian governments and regional security bodies are using the threat to bolster political agendas while curtailing civil liberties, but they have yet to create a credible counter-action plan. Instead, the se-

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<sup>83</sup> “There is not a huge problem of foreign terrorist fighters coming out of Central Asia .... What is happening that is more of a concern is Central Asian governments framing political dissent as a terrorist threat”. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, October 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, OSCE official, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>86</sup> “There is no connection between the national and local [levels] .... We need to help grassroots actors reach local communities. The focus has to be at the local level ... young men are responding to pressure to provide for their families”. Crisis Group interview, Tajik NGO manager, Vienna, October 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Kazakh security expert, Astana, October 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, August 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Kazakh security analyst, Astana, October 2014.

curity response – including surveillance, harassment and detentions – and legal measures limiting religious freedoms may inadvertently amplify the risk.

Central Asian governments, though keenly aware of the dangers fighters could pose upon return from Syria, have done little to address the reasons why such a diverse cross-section of their citizens seek to participate in IS. Prevention of extremism and rehabilitation of jihadis are not yet high on the agenda, and female radicalisation is largely ignored by religious leaders, while the paucity of economic and political opportunities for young people compounds radicalism. Poorly educated imams struggle to compete with the Islamic State's glamourisation of jihad.

The security services, including the police, are distrusted and unlikely to be able to replicate rehabilitation programs pursued in Europe and elsewhere, at least without first addressing how they are perceived by the communities they serve. Though they affirm their own Islamic faith, politicians, many of whom are still imprinted by attitudes from Soviet times when they were members of the Communist Party, display unease with the growth of religion. Their mixed messages perplex and alienate, as do increasingly severe laws that limit freedom of conscience and association. Central Asia is fortunate that Syria is relatively distant, no major attacks have yet occurred, and the risks are still in relative infancy. But governments should assess accurately the long-term danger jihadism poses to the region and take proper preventive action now, not brush it aside or exaggerate it in a way that will only make the problem worse.

**Bishkek/Brussels, 20 January 2015**

Appendix A: Map of Central Asia



Map No. 3763 Rev. 7 UNITED NATIONS  
December 2011

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