

The spread of islamic extremism in central asian post soviet countries

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



On third of April, 2017, a terrorist attack has happened in the metro of Saint Petersburg by a suicide bomber who used an explosive device in one of the stations. Fourteen people were reported to be dead and it was unclear whether the perpetrator was in the list of demised. A performer was recognized as Akbarzhon Jalilov, a Russian citizen who was an ethnic Uzbek, born in Kyrgyzstan. Another attack has occurred in New York City on October 31, 2017. The suspect who was a 29 year old Sayfullo Habibullaevich Saipov drove and rammed his rented pick up truck into cyclists and runners. The vehicle ramming attack killed eight people and injured eleven others. He was later shot by a policemen and arrested. Therefore, the Federal Bureau of Investigation found out that Sayfullo Saipov immigrated into the United States in 2010 from Uzbekistan via a Green Card (popular migratory program in Central Asia that got a negative feedback from president Trump) and then started to establish connections with one specific terrorist organization. It was called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS). Organization took the responsibility for the attack in Saint Petersburg and explained it as the consequences for Russia's undesired involvement in Syrian conflict and for bombardment of Islamic State key military bases. Islamic State as a non-state actor displayed its power outside of Syria and Iraq and gave Russia a signal that they can attack them from inside even by using their citizens as facilitators. Same responsibility Islamic State took for the attack in New York City. Afterwards, there were numerous terrorist attacks which linked ISIS and Central Asia together. The most recent one happened on July 29, 2018 in Tajikistan where cyclists from the U. S., Netherlands and Switzerland were rammed by a car and killed. It turned out that Islamic State took the

responsibility for the attack. All authors of listed terrorist attacks were born and raised in Central Asia and consequently became agents of Islamic State. It shows that once, they have been recruited by ISIS and this recruitment became a very serious political problem in Central Asia. Local states continuously organized summits in order to increase vigilance for potential threat and to liquidate the issue of Central Asian recruitment. But what explains ISIS as organization and why it became so potent? Why it targets Central Asia and what explains success and failure in its recruitment?

In the last couple of years Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and Levant or “ Daesh” in Arabic became an agenda and was all over the news. It made everyone say their name with horror and fear. However the origins of so called Islamic State go over a quarter of a century ago. The principle behind the ISIS is to create a global caliphate that supervises the religious and political activities of all Muslims and to establish Islamic new world order based on a strict and literal interpretation of religious scripts such as Quran and Hadiths. However most Muslims around the world see ISIS as non-Islamic and condemn their actions along with the United Nations. ISIS is prohibited in many countries.

Origins started from a modest beginnings of a small organization called “ jama’at al-tawid wal-jihad” which was a Sunni Jihadist group in 1999, later became known as “ Al Qaeda” in Iraq. It grew in a very firm organization by operating under Osama bin Laden and it recruited many other international Sunni jihadists from Muslim dominated countries during a US led invasion in Iraq. Later on, a newly formed Mujahideen Shura Council were in power to

declare the existence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2006, the same year when Saddam Hussein was executed. In 2011 the operatives from Islamic State known as Jibhat Al-Nusra were sent to Syria to fight in the civil war with the intent of developing and spreading the Islamic State outside of Iraq. It was happening during the Arab Spring. In 2013 they already established themselves as a strong and powerful anti-Shiite, non-state actor with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as their Caliph. By promoting and establishing themselves as a strong and independent Caliphate, Islamic State used social media as platform where they spread their influence throughout the world. Social media helped them to recruit and call upon many young Sunni Jihadists who came from around the globe in order to assist during the times of war against infidels. In Isis terms infidels are considered people that don't support Jihad and the ideology for which Isis is fighting for whether they are Muslims or not. Islamic State used many rhetorical devices such as spreading a lot of grisly videos on social media where they killed many "kafirs" (wrong Muslims or disbelievers, especially Shia Muslims) in order to show power and recruit more assisting Jihadists by showing their physical dominance over infidels. ISIS also published a significant amount of extremist literature that was automatically banned by many countries. The most notorious one is called "Dabiq" which is an online magazine used by Islamic State for radicalization and recruitment worldwide.

In Central Asian post Soviet countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the renaissance of the Islamic extremism has started from the collapse of the Soviet Union. After years of

state enforced atheism, Central Asia found itself independent and got connected to a wider Islamic world. However, lack of continuity meant that Islamic literacy in Central Asia was not high. New connections brought more extreme and strict interpretation of Islam from other countries. In Tajikistan, during the vacuum of power (after the collapse of U. S. S. R.), at the moment of Tajik Civil War (1992-1997) there were two confronting parties one of which was Islamic and wanted to make Tajikistan a fundamental Islamic country such as neighbouring Afghanistan. The same situation was going in Uzbekistan. However, power in Central Asian Post Soviet countries was taken by secular strongmen which resembles the Soviet era. Regional leaders took power and turned regimes into harsh dictatorships which were explained by the elimination of political opponents. That is the reason why Islamic extremist groups are seen as the only outlets to confront the authoritarian regimes.

As it was mentioned, Islamic State with a full attention of the world and with the power of all their networks recruited many jihadists especially from Central Asian post Soviet countries. It brought success because listed countries of Central Asia are Sunni dominated and the practise of Salafism (a strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect advocating a return to the early Islam of the Quran and Sunna) became very popular within the area especially among young people. It can be argued that Islamic radicalization has come from abroad since Central Asian countries were given a lot of scholarships to study in the Islamic schools. Those schools were located in Arab countries.

So, young specialists brought that Salafi interpretation from the outside (especially from Saudi Arabia that is considered the main baker of Salafism).

The spread of Salafism in Central Asia explained a success in ISIS recruitment, since Salafism corresponds to many aspects of Islamic State ideology and promotes a strict form of Sunni Islam based on the early periods of Islam. Salafi Muslims also don't recognize other branches of Islam such as Shi'a and Sufism. Countries of Central Asia became desired pieces of cake for Islamic State recruitment. There isn't an exact number of how many people went to ISIS from Central Asia but according to report by Crisis Group in January 2015, between 2000 and 4000 Central Asians have joined Islamic State and even more joined afterwards. An unknown amount of labour migrants from Central Asia were recruited during their stay in Russia. Caught between lack of opportunities and suppression in their home countries by the authoritarian governments and discrimination in Russia, a new prospects and a promise of a good life in Islamic State became an attractive deal. Tajikistan became the biggest contributor between all other Central Asian states with approximately 1300 young people plus many others that were not recorded have joined Islamic State.

One of the small villages in a remote region of Tajikistan called "Chorqisloq" dragged the attention of government when 69 people ran to Syria. The relatives of these Islamic State fighters are strictly monitored by the intelligence agencies. Coercive forces in Tajikistan are so serious about the situation that citizens are even afraid to pronounce words such as "Syria", "Iraq", and "Islamic State" while talking through telephone. The presidents of

the authoritarian states in Central Asia such as Tajikistan or Kazakhstan are very serious about taking actions on preventing people from running to Isis because it contains many members of opposition who promise to return and organize a bloody Jihad within their countries. Consequently they pose a continuous threat to president's long seizure of power. That is the reason why these countries exercise the toughest methods of recruitment prevention. In Tajikistan, Salafi Islamization was very noticeable until 2017 even though the country is officially secular. Same situation could be seen in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (especially in rural areas) and it could be noticed on more women compromising national dresses and wearing hijabs and burqas or men growing religious beards. Taking actions in Tajikistan was characterized by stern restrictions on religious freedoms and elimination of government's opponents. Currently for instance the Salafi movement is officially banned by the government of Tajikistan due to its radical believes and intolerance towards other Muslim branches.

Another example of harsh restrictions is the only opposition party to a current president Emomali Rahmon called " Islamic Party of Renaissance in Tajikistan (IPRT)" which was closed by the Tajikistan Supreme Court and accused of having links with Isis. It should be noted that IPRT was the only one registered Islamic party in Central Asia and it was competing with a current government from nineties. Many members of IPRT were imprisoned. Later on, the head of Tajikistan's Special Assignment Police Unit (OMON) which is a core for the president Rahmon's security appeared in the Islamic State propaganda video where he was accusing Rahmon of godlessness and

pressure of religious freedoms in Tajikistan. Colonel Khalimov was participating in a five separate U. S.-led training programs between 2003 and 2014, three of which were in the U. S. In the beginning of September, Khalimov was lifted to the position of ISIS, “ Minister of War” which is a respected position in ISIS and he was calling upon many Tajiks to come and join the “ holy war”. In August 2014, a Tajikistani was appointed as emir of Raqqa region which is Isis eponymous capital. Gulmurod Alimov promised to return and overthrow the government and was threatening those Tajiks who didn’t take any actions against Tajik government. After 500-1100 Tajiks fled to Isis and range of threatening videos from the opposition in Islamic State on Youtube, the government of Tajikistan started a war with Islamization which the government considered a threat number one. Consequently, government started to introduce series of informal laws such as the ban on beards and hijabs in 2017. Children under 18 are refused of access to mosques and the majority of the Islamic schools are closed throughout the country. To make a sacred trip to Mecca, people must be at least 45 years old and get an official permission from the state. Government also strictly controls local mosques and their Imams (who are leaders of worship process in mosques between Sunni Muslims). This measure is taken because sometimes the recruitment process was conducted inside the mosques by some leadger figures. Therefore, government clearly filters what Imams preach and control their internet activity.

Tajikistan has very strict and rigorous approach of fighting against Islamic State. These restrictions of religious freedoms create the environment of fear

and submission. However, others argue that it explains success in ISIS recruitment of Tajik Jihadist because it makes people indignant and creates grievance because of the restricted desire for practising their religion. That is the reason why people want to avenge the government and the the only comfortable way to do it for them is outside of Tajikistan and by joining Isis. One of the examples of this avenge is the mentioned terrorist attack that happened on July 29, 2018 where four foreign tourists were killed on the road while driving bikes by three Tajik citizens. Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs found out that those three murderers were paid by Islamic State and therefore were its agents. It was an intentional move against the current president, Emomali Rahmon. Terrorists deliberately targeted tourists because the president Rahmon announced 2018 as a year of tourism and they did this unprecedented tourist slaughtering in Dangara region which is a birthplace for the current Tajik president. Government chose to silence this occurrence by not showing it on local TV channels. In order to reduce the recruitment and avoid the indignance and anger from people, government continuously blocks YouTube because there are numerous videos from Tajik opposition in Isis which uses a persuasive rhetoric and names president Rahmon as the main infidel who created this shameful regime. Terrorists promised to come and “ decapitate the representatives of Tajik government by a blunt knife”, which intimidates the government and leaves it no choice but to hold all its citizens in an iron hand.

Kyrgyzstan which considers itself a land of democracy (due a revolution that overthrew the dictatorial regimes) in contrast with dictatorships in Tajikistan,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, has more liberal approach in fighting against Isis. The government of Kyrgyzstan is working with local non-profit organizations in order to filter the education in Islamic schools (madrassas). Since the subjects that are taught in the Islamic schools are supposed to be only Islamic, local NGO's changed that and provide schools with additional subjects such as mathematics, computer science and cooking lessons. This decreases the radicalization since previously, when subjects were only Islamic, many graduates of Islamic schools were not able to get employed and it resulted them being more prone to radicalization. Consequently, subjects taught by NGO's can help them in the future to get employed. Majority of Kyrgyz people went to Islamic State from the city Osh during 2013 and 2014 years which are considered a peak years. Government of Kyrgyzstan used many jihadists who were disappointed in Jihad and returned, in order to deter young people from going there by having constructive dialogues.

Kazakhstan has taken a relatively more constructive approach compared to his Central Asian neighbours. The president, Nursultan Nazarbayev is praised for turning Kazakhstan into one of the most prosperous post Soviet States. However, religious repressions are still evident in the country and the president rule is characterized by elimination and marginalization of his opponents. Kazakhstan government resorted to a harsh censorship of online and independent sources in order to decrease ISIS recruitment. Others may argue that the significant amount of government censorship is counterproductive since this control prevents inhibits many moderating

voices from Muslim who are strongly anti-ISIS. More of less, Kazakhstan combats with ISIS recruitment in very same way as Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan is one of the biggest contributors of jihadists to Islamic State. With 500 to 1000 Uzkeks jihadists fighting in ISIS, Uzbekistan government started to empower reputable religious leaders to speak out against ISIS. Former Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov took unprecedented step to release Hayrulla Hamidov, a highly respected Islamic poet teacher and activist to make him the face of anti-Isis campaign. He was jailed due to doubtful terrorist charges in 2010. However, he was still seen as a legitimate and famous religious figure in Uzbekistan despite working with the government. Hamidov efforts to combat ISIS recruitment have become successful. His messages on anti-ISIS campaign became extremely popular especially between ethnic Uzbeks. This strategy also attracted a polemic from many radical Islamic figures and it decreased ISIS recruitment from inside of Uzbekistan.

Turkmenistan lack of transparency makes it difficult to analyze governmental measures against ISIS recruitment. Citizens of Turkmenistan are subjects of strict travel restrictions. Dictatorial government controls media and restrict specific web pages. Government tries to hide the issue of Turkmens recruitment by Islamic State from its citizens and media never informs citizens about country's internal problems. Government also denies Russia's claims about active threats from ISIS recruiters. Even though these severe travel restrictions may eliminate terrorist attacks inside Turkmenistan, others may say that it makes people more prone to radicalization.

Turkmenistan is the least contributor of jihadists to Islamic State. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) estimated the number of Turkmen fighters in Islamic State which was 360 at the beginning of 2015. Governmental restrictions showed isolated Turkmen citizens from ISIS recruitment. With these kinds of non-democratic actions, it is almost impossible for recruiters to reach Turkmenistan citizens.