



# How Central Asia Has Handled Islamic Extremism

July 17, 2020 **Svante E. Cornell** *AFPC Defense Dossier*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Afghanistan; Caucasus; Central Asia; Iraq; Middle East; Russia

Radical Islamic extremism established a presence in Central Asia in the late Soviet era. Spurred by the war in Afghanistan and clandestine contacts with South Asia and the Gulf, Salafi ideology gained a foothold in eastern Uzbekistan and parts of Tajikistan during the 1980s. In both countries, these groups sought to take advantage of the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union to introduce Islamic governance across the region.

Islamic extremists attempted to take over Uzbekistan's eastern Ferghana valley region, but the country's fledgling government stymied their efforts. In Tajikistan, meanwhile, these elements managed to secure an influential role over the opposition in the country's civil war, which lasted from 1992 to 1997, and pushed more moderate Islamic forces in the opposition in an increasingly radical direction. But there too, Islamist forces failed to achieve their goals. Russian and Uzbek support for the Tajik government helped it to gain the upper hand, allowing authorities to strike a power-sharing deal with the opposition that limited its influence to a third of official posts. Dushanbe subsequently marginalized and blocked these representatives from any meaningful role in the government and bureaucracy.

In turn, the defeat of extremists in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan led to the consolidation of secular governments across the region, with existing regimes imposing restrictions on religious life in various degrees. This was part of a broad regional effort to interdict not only violent extremism but any form of extremist ideology, and sought to prevent alien religious ideas from gaining a foothold in local societies. Such measures were prompted in part by the rapid spread in the 1990s of Hizb-ut Tahrir (HuT), a transnational extremist organization that aims to recreate a global Caliphate—albeit, unlike al-Qaeda and ISIS, to do so through peaceful means. Nonetheless, Central Asian governments saw the group's core ideology as a clear challenge and therefore invested considerable resources in suppressing HuT and like-minded groups.

But Central Asian extremists did not disappear. Instead, they moved abroad. Pushed out by their failures at home in the 1990s, they found a haven in neighboring Afghanistan. Teaming up with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Central Asian extremists made several attempts to destabilize their homelands through terrorist attacks. The American response to 9/11, however, pushed them further away. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the region's foremost extremist group, sustained heavy losses and relocated to Pakistan's Tribal Areas—a region where, unlike in northern Afghanistan, they had no ethnic and linguistic commonalities with the local population. Although the IMU was subsequently expelled from Pakistani soil, its activities offered what amounted to a safety valve for Central Asian governments: extremist sympathizers in the region, it appeared, were as likely to join their brethren abroad as to stay in the region.

Indeed, by the time of the 2011 Arab uprisings, there were numerous Central Asians in extremist milieus abroad. These groups had military training and experience from the wars in Afghanistan, and were thus prime targets for recruitment for the new holy war in Syria and Iraq—a theater far more central to Islamic history than Afghanistan or northern Pakistan.

## Patterns of Recent Recruitment

Up until 2011, Central Asia saw gradually receding incidences of radical Islamic extremism. The period following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, however, has led to a second wave of extremism, with political uncertainty in Afghanistan exacerbating the violence. Several thousand Central Asians are estimated to have fought in the Syrian conflict, both within the Islamic State and as part of dedicated units connected with the al-Qaeda-aligned Nusra Front, presently known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.[1] The most well-known group is Katibat al-Imam Bukhari, which also established a presence alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2016. The number and origin of fighters, however, remains a source of controversy. Given that Uyghurs from western China speak a language closely resembling Uzbek, and that both Uzbek and Tajik are widely spoken in Afghanistan, it is difficult to discern the origin of fighters.

What is clear, however, is that the patterns of this wave are considerably different from those of the first one. First, the magnitude of the problem is not comparable to the 1990s within Central Asia's borders. While several thousand Central Asians did indeed travel to join the jihad in the Levant, few were residents of Central Asia at the time, and even fewer have returned. Local governments, meanwhile, are considerably better prepared to handle the situation. A number of small-scale terrorist attacks have nonetheless taken place in Central Asia in recent years, but they do not stand out on the international scene, and there is no evidence of a challenge that can pose a threat to the stability of the region.

Second, the geographic patterns of extremism diverge from the situation that prevailed during the 1990s. Whereas the extremism of that decade was concentrated in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, no such geographic concentration is visible in the more recent wave. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have seen a growth in extremism, including several terrorist attacks, while Uzbekistan has not seen a single case in the past fifteen years. Tajikistan, by contrast, has again seen a growing problem, most spectacularly with the defection of a senior commander of its interior forces to the Islamic State in 2015.[2] Kyrgyzstan has also experienced a notable growth in terrorist recruitment.

Third, the dynamics of extremist recruitment remain murky. There is even strong disagreement on the locus of recruitment of Central Asian foreign fighters. While western analysts tend to assume that Central Asians are recruited to foreign wars in the region itself, a closer examination suggests the opposite. In fact, a substantial body of evidence has emerged to indicate that the lion share of Central Asian foreign fighters are actually recruited in Russia, where several million work as labor migrants.[3] It appears that extremist recruiters in Russia, connected to North Caucasian networks, have targeted socially isolated Central Asians who lack the family networks and social controls that would inhibit such recruitment in their home countries.[4]

Of course, not all Central Asians are recruited in Russia, and there is evidence confirming the departure of individual Central Asians as well as entire families for Syria. Still, returning labor migrants appear to play an important role in spreading the extremist message back to their home communities. In Tajikistan in particular, a significant mobilization of Salafi proselytization appeared a decade ago and played an important role in spreading extremist propaganda, leading to government-imposed draconian measures to stop it. The defeat of the Islamic State fed concerns that masses of Central Asian fighters would seek to return home. The expectation of an American withdrawal from Afghanistan exacerbated these fears, especially since an unstable Afghanistan could lead to a rapidly growing extremist threat to Central Asia. Thus far, however, this threat has not materialized. There has indeed been a measurable increase in Central Asian-origin fighters in Afghanistan.[5] So far, however, there is little evidence of a mass return of such extremists to the states of Central Asia. Moreover, should these cadres in fact return, they face a decidedly hostile environment. Not only do Central Asian states have security structures with ample resources to handle isolated extremists, but local societies are also hostile to alien, extremist ideologies.

### **Assumptions Meet Reality**

This analysis of the situation stands in stark contrast to the alarmism of NGOs like the International Crisis Group, from great powers like Russia, and—until recently—from many Central Asian governments themselves. For differing reasons, all of these entities have exaggerated the threat of extremism in Central Asia. Russia, of course, sees instability as a tool to increase its military and security presence in the region. Central Asian governments tend to view matters similarly: security concerns have historically been used to legitimize restrictive measures and authoritarian consolidation. More recently, however, regional governments—particularly those of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—have adopted a less alarmist and more self-confident approach, projecting their ability to manage this type of challenge and the capacity of regional states to manage the situation without outside intervention. The weaker states in the region, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, deviate from this pattern to some extent, as they have found it more difficult to manage the issue.

Alarmism concerning extremism in Central Asia has been present for a long time among western NGOs and governments, and led to a reaction from regional scholars.[6] This alarmism stems from erroneous assumptions about the drivers of extremism. From the late 1990s onward, an influential view held that repression and poverty cause extremism and terrorism because repression drives “pious Muslims” into the hands of extremists, while poverty feeds a motivation to join extremist groups. This view influenced much of the George W. Bush administration's response to 9/11, particularly its so-called “Freedom Agenda.” However, the bulk of research on radicalization since then has largely debunked these assumptions.[7] Repression only appears to be a factor if the government carrying out the repression is of a different ethnic or religious identity than the target group. Poverty, meanwhile, is not linked with extremism at all—in fact, most recruits have been found to come from middle-class backgrounds. In other words, the prevailing Western assumption that Central Asia's poverty and repression would lead to mounting extremism has proved to be mistaken. In fact, the country that tended to follow western recommendations, Kyrgyzstan, saw an increase in the challenge posed by radicalization; by contrast, those that ignored western admonitions, namely Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have seen a decrease.

### **Government Policies**

Central Asian states have adopted similar, though not identical, strategies to confront radicalism. Most have moved in an increasingly restrictive direction, imposing ever-greater registration requirements on religious communities, banned proselytizing, and promoted a state-endorsed traditional form of Islam connected to the region's pre-Soviet history. Meanwhile, they have doubled down on secular governments, secular laws, and secular education systems.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan used to have relatively liberal regulations for religious groups, but these have tightened as the countries have responded to the rise of extremism globally. Still, Kyrgyzstan tolerates the spread of the South Asian-based Tablighi Jamaat movement in the country, seeing it as an antidote to extremism – a view that has been questioned by some analysts who see the group as a stepping stone to radicalization. Tajikistan, meanwhile, has adopted among the most draconian religious legislation, forbidding all religious education not under state control and restricting minors from taking part in religious services.

Uzbekistan, by contrast, used to have the most restrictive approach in the region, but under president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has embarked on a process of liberalization where the state has moved from a defensive to an offensive strategy. It now promotes an “enlightened Islam” drawing on the golden age of Central Asian history a thousand years ago, and expects this indigenous and tolerant Islam—together with mechanisms of social control at the local level—to form a strong counterweight to any alien efforts at radicalization.[8]

The growing confidence of Central Asian states is manifested in their willingness to repatriate women and children stranded in Syria and Iraq following the defeat of Islamic State. While European states have been reluctant to bring their citizens home, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have all taken steps to ensure that women and children—whose husbands and fathers are either dead or jailed—are brought home and reintegrated into society.

### **Toward a Central Asian model?**

Central Asian states have faced serious issues relating to Islamic radicalism since their independence almost thirty years ago. The first wave of extremism, and particularly the civil wars in Tajikistan and neighboring Afghanistan, led them to adopt strict measures to ensure state control over the religious field. Almost three decades later, Central Asian states continue to maintain policies that promote secular government, while endorsing the revival of traditional, moderate Islamic practices and institutions that were decimated by Soviet rule.

This Central Asian experiment is faring much better than commonly believed. Not only have Central Asian states managed to keep the problem of Islamic extremism in check; they have also begun to shift from a defensive approach to one that begins to offer the contours of a positive model that is unique in the Islamic world. This model combines secular government with the restoration of an alternative view of Islam that is open to modernity and science. And while it is far from perfect, the United States has a strong vested interest in supporting this model and helping Central Asian states to improve upon it.

### **ENDNOTES**

[1] See, for instance, Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," The Soufan Center, October 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>.

[2] Dmitry Solovyov, "Commander of elite Tajik police force defects to Islamic State," Reuters, May 28, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-tajikistan/commander-of-elite-tajik-police-force-defects-to-islamic-state-idUSKBN0OD1AP20150528>.

[3] See, for instance, Joanna Paraszczuk, "Most Uzbeks Fighting for IS Came from Russia, Theologian Claims," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 24, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/most-uzbeks-fighting-for-is-came-from-russia-theologian-claims/26918165.html>; See also Noah Tucker, "Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses," USAID/MSI, 2015, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE\\_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf); See also Ryskeldi Satke and Marta Ter, "Are Central Asian migrants in Russia a recruiting ground for Islamic State?" European Council on Foreign Relations, July 27, 2015, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_are\\_central\\_asian\\_migrants\\_in\\_russia\\_3080](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_are_central_asian_migrants_in_russia_3080); See also Daniil Turovsky, "How Isis is recruiting migrant workers in Moscow to join the fighting in Syria," Guardian (London), May 5, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/05/isis-russia-syria-islamic-extremism>.

[4] Strengthening Youth Resilience to Radicalization: Evidence from Tajikistan (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/327951586870202514/pdf/Strengthening-Youth-Resilience-to-Radicalization-Evidence-from-Tajikistan.pdf>.

[5] Christian Bleuer, "The Exaggerated Threat of Islamist Militancy in Central Asia," World Politics Review, February 25, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28559/the-exaggerated-threat-of-islamist-militancy-in-central-asia>.

[6] See, for instance, "Understanding Islamic Radicalization in Central Asia (UPDATED)," The Diplomat, January 20, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/understanding-islamic-radicalization-in-central-asia/>.

[7] See Katerina Dalacoura, "Islamist Terrorism and the Middle East Democratic Deficit: Political Exclusion, Repression and the Causes of Extremism," Democratization 13, no. 3, 2006, 508–25; See also Michael Freeman, "Democracy, Al Qaeda, and the Causes of Terrorism: A Strategic Analysis of US Policy," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 31, iss. 1, 2008, 40–59.

[8] Svante E. Cornell and Jacob Zenn, "Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Paper, June 2018.