

# A 'Hotbed' or a Slow, Painful Burn? Explaining Central Asia's Role in Global Terrorism

By Noah Tucker and Edward Lemon

After a string of terrorist attacks in Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan involving Central Asian citizens, as well as foiled plots and arrests in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey, Central Asia is once again in the spotlight as a supposed center of terrorism. But this narrative of a constantly growing threat does not fit well with reality. Compared to only a decade ago, when over 4,000 Central Asians traveled to Syria and Iraq to join militant organizations, the levels of recruitment and volume of messaging have decreased substantially. To explain terrorism from Central Asia or measure the potential threat, the authors contend it is important not to overly focus on the narratives in slick recruiting videos that only reach a few hundred people. Given the lack of evidence for a new wave of mass recruiting, the authors suggest that the recent spike of attacks and arrests is the 'long tail' of the Islamic State. After the collapse of the Islamic State's territorial holdings in Syria in 2019, many operatives migrated to Europe, forming sleeper cells, some of which have been disrupted in the past year. Mobilization of Central Asians also remains primarily an issue tied to migration. With the notable exception of Kazakhstan where internal migration and displacement play key roles, Central Asian participation in terrorist groups remains primarily an issue that manifests itself outside the region. Instead of focusing primarily on online recruiting, the authors argue one should focus on the factors that led to mobilization to Syria and Iraq a decade ago and that have been exacerbated in recent years, especially in Tajikistan, including crackdowns on religion, corrupt ineffective governance, high levels of migration, and well-established terror networks that are holdovers from the peak of the Islamic State.

After a string of terrorist attacks in Russia,<sup>1</sup> Iran,<sup>2</sup> and Afghanistan<sup>3</sup> involving Central Asian citizens, as well as foiled plots and arrests in the United States,<sup>4</sup> Germany,<sup>5</sup> the Netherlands,<sup>6</sup> Italy,<sup>7</sup> and Turkey,<sup>8</sup> Central Asia is once again in the spotlight as a supposed center of terrorism. Most of the incidents were linked to Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), and the majority, including the Crocus City Hall attack in March 2024, involved citizens of Tajikistan. Much of the analysis frames Tajikistan as an "utter hotbed of ISIS activity"<sup>9</sup> that has "suffered from a long-running extremist Islamist insurgency"<sup>10</sup> and points to the more prominent role of Central Asians in global terrorism as evidence of ISK's

"increasing efforts to build support within Central Asia."<sup>11</sup> This analysis further paints Central Asia as a region being bombarded with terrorist messaging.<sup>12</sup> For many years, such "discourses of danger" have framed Central Asia as peculiarly vulnerable to Islamist insurgency due to it being "obscure, ethnically and politically fractious, essentially Oriental."<sup>13</sup>

But this narrative of a constantly growing threat does not fit well with reality. Compared to only a decade ago, when over 4,000 Central Asians traveled to Syria and Iraq to join militant organizations,<sup>14</sup> the levels of recruitment and volume of messaging have decreased substantially. To explain this problem or measure its potential threat, one should not overly focus on the narratives in slick recruiting videos that reach only a very small dedicated audience. Telegram channels that reach only several dozen people, for example, are not a reliable indicator for population-level threats in a region of just under 80 million.<sup>a</sup>

In order to make a more accurate assessment, it is important to put recent ISK activity into the context of three decades of terrorism, insurgency, and conflict migration in the region.<sup>15</sup> Factors that led to mobilization to Syria and Iraq a decade ago have been exacerbated in recent years, especially in Tajikistan where the government has continued to expand its brutal crackdowns on practicing Muslims and on civil society writ large that along with economic factors displace large portions of its population.<sup>16</sup> Rehabilitation programs for people who were in Syria, including

a Numbers here and throughout are derived from datasets that a collection team at the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs has been building on violent extremism content in Central Asian languages through consistent monitoring for the past three years. Researchers within the team have done similar monitoring for a variety of different projects since 2012. The authors also note that media shared between individuals in private communication is not captured by this monitoring, and some ad-hoc sharing of materials may also not be captured. But they feel it is important to note that opinion pieces and popular press reports that describe official recruiting groups, such as the now defunct *Khuroson Ovozi* in Uzbek, as "growing" fail to include numbers for context and when independently verified are found to have "grown" from around a dozen to a few dozen followers.

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children and teens who returned deeply traumatized after years of war and displacement, are quietly being closed.<sup>17</sup> Reintegration or even demobilization efforts never extended to individuals who did not return to their home countries, including hundreds of former militants and conflict migrants who fled Syria for Europe. Given the lack of evidence for a new wave of mass recruiting, the authors suggest that the recent spike of attacks and arrests of Central Asian migrants is the ‘long tail’ of the Islamic State—that after the collapse of the Islamic State’s territorial holdings in Syria in 2019, many operatives migrated to Europe, forming sleeper cells, some of which have been disrupted in the past year.<sup>18</sup> In other words, what remains is a small but resilient contingent of individuals dedicated to the cause and still determined to carry out attacks. There are now well-established networks of enablers to facilitate fake passports, safe houses, and support for operations, including classic insurgency-style, network-based recruiting.

This article begins with an analysis of the threat of terrorism within Central Asia and the role that Central Asians have played in attacks and networks outside of the region. It goes on to highlight how the volume of online messaging from violent extremist organizations targeting Central Asians has decreased over the past decade along with the level of recruitment. It argues that recent attacks are the product of a ‘long tail’ of the Islamic State and the result of unaddressed push and pull factors that drive a small number of Central Asians toward terrorism. The article concludes with an assessment of how the threat may evolve going forward.

### The Rarity of Terrorism in Central Asia

Contrary to alarmist rhetoric about the region being a hotbed of terrorism, Central Asia itself has not experienced much terrorism.<sup>19</sup> Central Asia is home to one percent of the world’s population and accounts for only 0.001 percent of entries in the attacks recorded in the Global Terrorism Database since 1970. There have been 19 attacks in the region since 2008, according to the author’s (Lemon’s) own data.<sup>b</sup> And since 2008, 155 individuals have died in terrorist attacks in Central Asia. The majority were members of law enforcement (80) and terrorist groups (64). There have been 11 civilian casualties (mostly collateral damage). Half of these incidents have occurred in the region’s most prosperous state, Kazakhstan, with over half of the deaths occurring in Tajikistan.

Most of this violence is not so much a part of global terror networks as it is rooted in local political struggles, corruption, and repression. A string of violent events between 2008 and 2011 that the government of Tajikistan labeled terrorism were, in fact, more linked to power dynamics between local warlords given power over local communities as part of the peace deal that ended the civil war and the central government seeking to take back control.<sup>20</sup> Kazakhstan’s first suicide bombing in 2011 was conducted by a lone wolf actor who had links to organized crime and targeted the local security services headquarters “in order to evade responsibility for criminal offenses as part of an organized criminal group.”<sup>21</sup>

Three of the world’s least-free countries are in Central Asia according to the 2024 *Freedom in the World* report, and all

b Defined as events initiated by a non-state group (counterterrorism operations are excluded) and those labeled “terrorism” by the government. These are updated figures based on Edward Lemon, “Kennan Cable No. 38: Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia,” Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, December 2018.

five Central Asian countries are now classed as consolidated authoritarian regimes.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, a great deal of violence has rocked these societies in the past 30 years. Tajikistan was torn by civil war for five years (1992-1997), and life in southern Kyrgyzstan has been shaped by recurring rounds of deadly ethnic conflict. In between, however, most of the violence experienced by Central Asians has come from their own states. In only three incidents combined in 2022, roughly twice as many citizens of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were killed by police or security forces for participating in protests in the span of a few days than the total killed by all attacks attributed to terrorism over the past 20 years.

Notably, more acts of terrorism perpetrated by Central Asians have manifested outside of the region as Central Asians pushed and pulled out of their home communities were inspired by or found common cause with armed Islamist groups that promised to build a utopia for oppressed Muslims or fight back against what they claim are the root causes of the suffering that Central Asians experience. Central Asians have been involved in a range of attacks outside of the region, at the Karachi airport in Pakistan in 2014, in Stockholm, New York, and Istanbul in 2017—the latter three of which were all lone-wolf attacks justified as vengeance against those who supported military efforts to destroy that pseudo-utopia and for the deaths of women and children allegedly killed in the process.<sup>23</sup> Very often, however, Central Asian recruits are co-opted by international militant groups for their own purposes.

Unique aspects of the Central Asian mobilization to Syrian conflict, especially the frequency with which recruits brought extended families with them, offer some clues to what they were seeking. After the start of the Syrian civil war, and particularly after the declaration of the Islamic State’s pseudo-utopian ‘caliphate’ in 2014, when over 4,000 Central Asians traveled to Syria and Iraq to join armed groups, they often did so with their whole families—from great-grandchildren to elderly matriarchs—seeking a new life and a future they could not see for themselves at home.<sup>24</sup>

### The Decline in Terrorist Messaging

The authors’ research from 2012 to the present indicates that Uzbek-language messaging has fallen precipitously over the past decade, and while Tajik-language material has seen an uptick over the past year, it remains nowhere near its peak 2014 levels. Three years of working with a team of local-language analysts to monitor the volume and content of jihadi messaging in Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Russian<sup>c</sup> has shown that overt recruiting has far less resonance and reaches a much smaller audience than it did during the Syrian conflict, and that operators have shifted from direct recruiting to messaging that seeks to build longer-term support for the project they sell as an alternative to Western-style

c The monitoring project built and continually updated databases of both official and ‘sympathizer’ or unbranded jihadi messaging operations in all of these languages, from websites to all social media platforms on which activity was detected. At the beginning of that period, Telegram was by far the most important, but over the course of three years, activity has shifted heavily to YouTube and Instagram with some tentative efforts being made on TikTok as well. Resonance is measured in engagement (likes, dislikes, and comments) and voluntary resharing beyond the initial groups or channels in which the message appeared. Data collection focused on the efforts in these languages by the Islamic State and its affiliates, including ISK, as well as Central Asian-led groups such as Tavhid va Jihad Katibasi and al-Bukhoriy Katibasi, and their efforts to promote Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Taliban, their respective sponsors.





*Members of emergency services work at the scene of the attack at the Crocus City Hall concert hall in Krasnogorsk, outside Moscow, Russia, on March 23, 2024. (Stringer/AFP via Getty Images)*

democracy, building on the success of the Taliban just across the border. The analysis produced the following takeaways:

- **Audience sizes are very small and do not appear to be growing.** In three years of consistent monitoring, official ISK groups messaging in Uzbek have failed to reach an audience larger than around 60 subscribers and have an average lifespan of less than a month before being flagged and shut down. Each time a group is recreated, it loses subscribers and rarely gains ground with new ones. Groups in Tajik attract larger numbers, but mostly less than 1,000. For reference, the largest general al-Qa`ida-Taliban-Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-supporting mixed Uzbek group the authors identified on Telegram three years ago had more than 15,000 followers at its peak just after the Taliban retook Kabul. Today, it no longer exists, and the largest similar channel monitored by the authors currently has less than half of that 2021 level. During the Syrian conflict, Uzbek and Tajik language recruiting videos at times reached audiences of over a million viewers through several hundred identified channels. Today, there are no more than a few dozen channels in both languages that reach a sharply diminished total audience.
- **Small pockets of ISK dissenters from the Taliban spend most of their energy in Central Asian languages trying to convince people the Taliban are illegitimate and part of the global ‘kaffir’ conspiracy.** ISK media in Uzbek, for

example, focuses on trying to convince followers that the Taliban are in the pocket of Iran, receiving plane-loads of cash from the CIA, or sponsoring new synagogues across Afghanistan. Even the small audiences of Central Asians these messages reach are indifferent to these conspiracy theories or find them ridiculous, and ISK messaging or even these general narratives rarely break out of their siloed channels on Telegram.

- **Tajik-language materials are slightly more prominent.** While it focuses on sectarian divisions and criticizes the Taliban, ISK’s more developed Tajik-language messaging echoes local grievances held by many Tajiks, criticizing the government of Tajikistan and framing it as a corrupt, immoral enemy of Islam that is controlled by Russia.
- **The primary change in terrorist messaging in Central Asian languages has been the shift away from recruiting to ‘adjacent’ messaging channels that try to shift public opinion in the longer term away from democracy and toward Taliban-style Islamic governance.** This evolution responds to several new developments: the changing realities of what the groups can get away with publishing on platforms such as Telegram and YouTube and a new geopolitical reality with what they promote as the Taliban’s victory over the rest of the world. It also signals a shift in strategy. As Central Asian-led groups such as the Tawhid va Jihod Brigade and

the al Bukhariy Brigade found themselves pinned down in an increasingly small sliver of territory in northern Syria, the logistics of recruiting became much more difficult. Most al-Qa`ida or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-aligned battalions shifted their messaging operations to celebrating what they saw as the Taliban's victory over ISAF forces. Their messages continue to focus on touting the Taliban's everyday governance such as anti-narcotics crackdowns, law-and-order policing, and a system of government they say better reflects the indigenous cultures and values of Central Asians than European or American-style liberal democracy they argue was imposed by force.

- **Touting the Taliban's victory is incompatible with recruiting.** Central Asian violent extremist groups that support the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan want to portray the Taliban as a powerful force that has transitioned from war to peacetime governance; they cannot simultaneously need help from the outside. Instead, messaging operations have shifted heavily to unbranded 'pseudo-news' platforms that draw far bigger audiences than branded recruiting operations and are working on a long-game strategy, interpreting or falsifying current events in the region and beyond to fit with the broader narrative that a Taliban-style caliphate is a better, more just social model for the historically Muslim peoples of Central Asia. In some ways, these messages fit in well with the global trend of populist anti-liberalism embodied by Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Sadyr Japarov in Kyrgyzstan.

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and ethnic Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan have become the focus of recruitment efforts in the region from both armed and purely political Islamist groups that emphasize the argument that Western democracy has failed to deliver on the promises of the 1990s for the former Soviet states. Tajikistan remains at the center of the mobilization in part because all the other Central Asian countries have had leadership changes that in different ways have worked as a pressure-release valve and allowed some grievances to at least be expressed. In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev released thousands of religious prisoners, relaxed some restrictions on religion such as allowing the call to prayer, and set in motion a broader set of changes that punished corruption among local officials and relaxed some everyday repressions.<sup>25</sup> After Kazakhstan erupted in fiery protests in January 2022 that finally toppled the cult of Nursultan Nazarbayev, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has promised a "New Kazakhstan."<sup>26</sup> Hollow though these promises may be, they have allowed grievances to be channeled in different ways. Meanwhile, under Japarov who came to power in 2020, Kyrgyzstan has turned toward illiberal populism and ethnonationalism.

ISK does not have mass appeal in Central Asia; its sectarian messaging falls on largely deaf ears, and its grievances against the Taliban and Russia are not shared by most in the region. Their continued, albeit limited, presence is in many ways a holdover from a decade ago, when the larger Islamic State did manage to recruit thousands of aggrieved Central Asians into its ranks with its vision of an Islamist utopia. Connections with those who were part of the original wave of recruits remain important. According to the authors' colleagues working on the ground in these regions, hotspot communities that sent disproportionate numbers of people to Syria and Iraq appear still to have some sympathy for the Islamic State

that may extend to ISK. Some of those involved in recent foiled or executed attacks have relatives who fought in Syria, including Crocus suspect Dalerjon Mirzoev.<sup>27</sup> Three other suspects arrested or killed in Europe and Russia had links to returnee women, though at this stage it is not clear whether those links were the cause of suspicion or discovered after suspects were identified in their own right. The authors have found in field assessments during projects supporting returnee reintegration that pockets of disaffected, isolationist Islamist communities continue to exist in the hotspots that returnees came from and are returning to in at least Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the same problems that pushed people into the Islamic State remain unresolved.

### Risk and Protective Factors Remain Unaddressed

The unexpected scale of mobilization to the Syrian conflict and the response from U.S. agencies and international organizations led to a similarly unprecedented investment in research such as USAID's Central Asia Secure and Stable Societies project (CASSS) in which both authors were involved as lead investigators. From this and other projects, including monitoring efforts that involve fieldwork in hotspot communities and projects supporting returnees seeking to reintegrate into the communities they left, significant evidence is available on the push/pull or risk and protective factors that contributed to that mobilization and remain risks for future vulnerability, not only to far-off groups such as ISK but to explosions of protest and conflict such as those that erupted in 2022 in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Systemic factors that terrorist groups have used to drive recruitment are not hard to identify and have remained consistent over the last two decades. Authoritarian governance, corruption, and violations of religious freedoms, such as hijab bans, crackdowns on beards, and restrictions on religious education are perennial themes.<sup>28</sup> These grievances are particularly acute for certain communities that have been hotspots of recruitment, such as ethnic Uzbeks from the south of Kyrgyzstan who have witnessed discrimination and ethnic violence, especially since 2010; the Rasht Valley in Tajikistan, which the central government has brutally suppressed since the civil war; and 'rust belt' towns like copper mining monotown Zhezkazgan in Kazakhstan, areas that are far from economic hubs where opportunities are lacking and where strikes and organized labor have been brutally suppressed.<sup>29</sup> Unresolved grievances against the government for its corrupt, repressive rule and the lack of opportunities helped make these communities particularly vulnerable.

Another important factor is how the governments of the region have politicized religion and sought to control it. Not only have these policies generated grievances that terrorist groups have capitalized on, but they have limited the population's access to mainstream religion. Restrictions on religious education exist across the region but are particularly prominent in Tajikistan, where all madrassas were closed by 2016, and religious education abroad and even basic religious instruction for children have been severely restricted since 2011.<sup>30</sup> Many citizens lack the knowledge and critical thinking skills to challenge the simplistic 'good versus evil' narratives of violent extremist organizations. Positive religious networks—trusted imams and elders to whom a young person can turn to ask questions about a video they have seen or a narrative they have heard—have been decimated, leaving those young people to pursue their religious interests alone online and afraid of asking



questions or discussing what they find there with others in their community.

Gender also matters. Around 15 to 20 percent of those who mobilized to Syria and Iraq were women.<sup>31</sup> Women often lack any access to formal religious education. This means they lack the knowledge to engage with violent extremist narratives critically and, similarly to men, lack supportive trusted networks they can turn to for advice. Respondents in the authors' research regularly pointed to the gendered nature of restrictions on religious freedom, such as the prohibition of the hijab in schools and government offices and the lack of sanctioned opportunities for women's religious education.

On a more personal level, push factors include personal crises or trauma, from losing a job or marital breakdown to domestic or sexual violence. Under such circumstances, particularly when social support networks are degraded or lacking entirely, such as in migration, individuals have found themselves vulnerable to groups that can offer an alternative life. This possibility of an alternative life seemed particularly to resonate when the Islamic State controlled territory, an organized network of support, and a means of channeling their anger. A common trajectory following these traumatic events is the rapid 'rediscovery' of religion and recruitment into terrorist organizations of those seeking a meaning-making mechanism and a network of support. This is seen, for example, in the profiles of the Crocus City Hall attackers, none of whom were particularly religious according to their families.<sup>32</sup>

Another pull factor—though often the authors have found arguably the least important—is the attractiveness of the ideology and messaging of violent extremist organizations. Much of the messaging draws on grievances related to religious freedom and shows the success of these groups in operations globally. But at the same time, much of the online messaging is positive. It shows the organizations' brotherhood, sense of community, and 'pure' life that is ordered, predictable, and—with deadly irony—safe, if not for the individual, then for their broader community through sacrifices made by the one for the many. These narratives have become less appealing as groups such as the Islamic State have lost territory, but they are still prominent and resonate with some Central Asians, offering them a chance to become part of something bigger and portrayed as powerful enough to push back against forces that seem hopelessly beyond their control.

But here especially, there are key differences between recruitment dynamics a decade ago and today. In 2014, the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida-aligned groups were 'winning,' taking about a third of the territory in Syria and Iraq at its peak; this offered Central Asians a place to go to build a new life, attracting a much broader group of people than terrorist organizations without control over a territory. With that territory largely gone, these groups have been fragmented. The online space has also changed, with a significant crackdown by governments and platforms on violent extremist content.

### Assessing the Terrorist Threat and Approaches for Prevention

The world is unlikely to see mass mobilization by Central Asians to terrorism for several reasons. No group has emerged to replace the Islamic State or emulate its success. Central Asian-led rivals to the Islamic State have effectively stopped recruiting and have transitioned to a different, long-game strategy. Furthermore, the

online environment is more controlled. And although there has been an uptick in online recruitment efforts by ISK, particularly in local languages, these channels are reaching a small audience in the low hundreds.

Very few Central Asians have become involved in terrorism partly because they have tight-knit communities and extended families that form key systems of social support, despite widespread corruption, authoritarian governance, the collapse of social support from the state, and few economic opportunities. These help protect them and help them cope with injustices. Existing research has indicated that in communities where these networks are lacking or have been disrupted, such as in migrant communities in Russia, conflict-affected regions of southern Kyrgyzstan or areas where perceived injustice and institutional violence have become entrenched across generations, recruitment has been far more successful in the series of mobilizations tracing back to the late 1990s when the jihadi threat first emerged in the region. In all countries except Kazakhstan, where internally displaced migrants play an important role, the process of recruitment and mobilization has largely occurred among migrant and diaspora communities outside of Central Asia.<sup>d</sup>

Since the threat of the Syrian conflict has waned, both the international community and local governments have failed to build resilience against the resurgence of the Islamic State. It would be a serious mistake to assume that messaging or propaganda is the primary cause of terrorism and should be the focus. ISK publishing magazines in Tajik that very few people read is unlikely in itself to cause more violence, but failure to address the root causes that inspired so many people to migrate to Syria in search of a new state or to pay a smuggler to get them across the U.S. border thousands of miles away<sup>33</sup> has much wider effects than even this year's deadly attacks. Focusing narrowly on disrupting ISK's messaging is akin to applying a band-aid on a fingertip when the whole arm is broken. Instead of looking primarily at the content and volume of messaging with the assumption that it plays a causal role in mobilization, one should look first at the drivers that displace and disconnect Central Asians from the protective networks that help ameliorate against both the push factors and grievances that can otherwise drive conflict.

In addition to intelligence tools that help identify and monitor small cells and person-to-person recruiting (online or off), in terms of predicting further mobilization, one may be better served monitoring changes in these root factors such as displacement, discrimination, crackdowns on religious expression, and disruption of networks of social support to predict and assess the continued threat from terrorist networks.

The world is already witnessing a crackdown on violent extremism in the region in the wake of the Crocus City attack. While this will target those who are genuinely linked to terrorist organizations, it will also see governments continuing to use counter-extremism to

d For example, despite the frequent characterization of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as rooted in the Fergana Valley in the early 1990s, it was created in fact in Afghanistan only in the second half of the 1990s in the early salafi-jihadi milieu when the Taliban offered safe haven to Usama bin Ladin and other ideologues who influenced the IMU's founders years after they were displaced from their homeland. Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Noah Tucker, *Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Uzbekistan: A Risk Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2013).

target pious Muslims, independent journalists, political opposition, and others with heavy-handed tactics. This will generate grievances that will continue to drive small-scale recruitment and lone wolf attacks, and will exacerbate the same issues that in time lead to the

next round of protests and deadly crackdowns. Each cycle pushes Central Asians out of their homes seeking a better life anywhere they can hope to find it in a vicious circle that undermines their security and the world's. **CTC**

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