

## A Resurgent Threat? Islamism in Central Asia since the Taliban Takeover

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Central Asia as a net benefit. Most notably, it remains unclear whether the Chinese state and state-backed companies that have made significant investments in infrastructure, energy, and businesses across the region are willing to intervene directly to protect these investments in the event of security breakdowns. Although it is developing a more direct military and security role in Tajikistan, the Chinese military still lacks the infrastructure necessary to react quickly to a major militant incursion from Afghanistan. To at least some degree, therefore, the Chinese government is content for the

Russian military to play such a role, as its main concern is maintaining political stability in the region to protect its financial investments, allow it to retain political influence within the Central Asian states, and prevent militants from infiltrating Xinjiang Province via Central Asia. Increased political influence for Moscow in Central Asia that results from the Russian military's role as the primary security guarantor against spillover from instability in Afghanistan is thus unlikely to concern Beijing unduly.

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## ANALYSIS

# A Resurgent Threat? Islamism in Central Asia since the Taliban Takeover

By Vassily Klimentov

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## Abstract

The article discusses the danger of militant Islamism spreading to Central Asia from Afghanistan against the background of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. It argues that although that danger has increased, the threat ultimately remains limited because the Taliban's attention is on Afghanistan and more radical and transnational armed groups in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic State, have been weakened in recent years.

The Taliban conquered half of Afghanistan in July 2021. By mid-August, they had occupied Kabul, forcing pro-American Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to flee to the United Arab Emirates. The takeover happened even before the US completed its withdrawal. Kabul had been worse than Saigon.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their shock at the rapid collapse, few Western, Russian or other observers and policymakers had doubted that the Taliban would ultimately achieve victory in Afghanistan. Ghani's regime had suffered from endemic corruption, dependence upon Western military and economic support, and weak political legitimacy—and, overall, was unable to guarantee Afghans' security and improve their livelihoods. To many Afghans fatigued by years of war, the Taliban appeared no better or worse than the pro-US authorities. As the Taliban marched on the capital, few—even among the pro-Ghani military, militias, and local authorities—rose to fight them.

The Taliban's victory profoundly modified the geopolitical context in Central and South Asia. It was, however, a change for which regional powers had been preparing for some time. In the 1990s, Russia, Iran, India, and the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) had backed the Northern Alliance—a coalition of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara (Afghan Shia) armed groups led by Ahmad Shah Masoud—against the Taliban. The Taliban, for its part, had harbored al-Qaeda, threatened to export militant Islamism to destabilize its neighbors, and was one of just two governments ever to recognize Chechnya's independence. Moscow had thus threatened the Taliban with airstrikes even before 9/11. When the US intervened in Afghanistan, Russia and the Central Asian states (almost) wholeheartedly supported it. This support, however, turned lukewarm by the 2010s: Russia and its allies resented the US foreign policy of pro-

<sup>1</sup> <https://theconversation.com/from-saigon-to-the-mujahideen-the-many-historical-echoes-of-the-fall-of-kabul-166600>.

moting regime change in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space and considered that Washington was not up to the task of stabilizing Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, and as the US started negotiating with the Taliban after 2010, Russia, the Central Asian states, and other regional powers also reached out to them to prepare for the future. Their relations with the Pashtun-dominated movement did not have to be as conflictual as in the 1990s, the logic went. If the Taliban guaranteed inclusivity, notably regarding ethnic minorities, and did not support Islamists in the post-Soviet space, a mutually beneficial relationship could be forged.<sup>2</sup> China operated according to a similar logic, preparing to deal with the Taliban if they agreed not to meddle in Xinjiang. Both Russia and China therefore kept their embassies in Kabul open following the Taliban takeover.

Despite the Taliban's apparent readiness to provide the necessary guarantees, however, two main limits have surfaced. First, the Taliban's rise to power did not come after a political deal with Ghani's regime brokered in Doha or in Moscow, but after their military victory. This has reduced the regional powers' ability to pressure the Taliban into accepting a more inclusive and less radical government. Second, given the chaos that has engulfed Afghanistan, it is unclear whether the Taliban can provide stability and limit the militancy of rival groups such as the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan. These factors raise the possibility of militant Islamism spreading from Afghanistan to Central Asia.

### Militant Islamism in Central Asia

Wedge between Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Caspian Sea, Central Asia has been affected by political, economic, and security issues since the Soviet breakup in 1992. Headed by authoritarian rulers, the region's states face endemic corruption, cronyism, stunted economies, political and economic dependence on Russia and China, forms of regional and kin/clan competition among elites, and transnational tensions over the control of water resources and border delimitations. While Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have generally fared better than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan thanks to the presence of natural resources, including oil and gas, on the territory of the former, all five Central Asian regimes are fundamentally unstable. They have all witnessed episodes of political violence since independence, even if only Tajikistan has had a full-blown civil war. As exemplified by the current protests in Kazakhstan, contestation may ignite in even the seemingly most stable of the region's countries.

Among the drivers of conflict in Central Asia, militant Islamism occupies a special place. While Islam had been confined to the private sphere in Soviet times, the region saw a re-Islamisation in the 1990s. Mosques multiplied and many Central Asians started regularly and publicly engaging in rituals and practices associated with the faith. Islam came to occupy a prominent social space, but—counter to the predictions made by Western pundits during the Cold War—it seldom became an ideology for political contestation. Instead of Islamism overtaking the region, Central Asia saw communist authorities cloak themselves in nationalism and Islam to conduct a soft transition from the USSR to independence. Promoting what they labelled “traditional Islam,” these new-old leaders wanted a religion that would be in supposed symbiosis with local traditions; tolerant of diverse Islamic practices, including Sufism; and, most of all, loyal to the secular authorities. In fact, they made increasingly clear that there would be no tolerance for even non-militant Salafi movements advocating either for Central Asia's Islamic renovation or—worse—for a theocratic regime. To date, local authoritarian rulers see Islamism as a threat, fearing it could become a rallying point for people dissatisfied with them.

In regions where Islamism was stronger in Soviet times, the 1990s saw clashes between militant Islamists and the secular authorities. In Tajikistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) participated in the civil war (1992–1997), supporting one of the regional coalitions vying for power. In the peace deal that ended the conflict, the IRPT secured legal status, becoming the only official Islamist party in Central Asia. In 2015, as Tajik authorities cracked down on Islamists, it was, however, banned as an alleged terrorist organization.

In Uzbekistan, militant Islamist movements sprouted in the town of Namangan in the Fergana Valley amid the growing influence of Saudi preachers and local Salafis. Since they contested the control of the central authorities, Namangan's Islamists were crushed in 1992. Their leaders, Jumaboi Khojayev (Juma Namangani) and Tohir Yuldashev (Yo'ldosh), however, moved to Tajikistan and then to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they linked up with Osama bin Laden. In 1998, after the Tajik civil war, Namangani and Yo'ldosh formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Following terrorist activities in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, IMU was definitively pushed out into Afghanistan by 2000–2001. After the US intervention in Afghanistan, it fought alongside the Taliban and often aligned with its more radical wings, such as the Haqqani Network. IMU suffered heavy losses in the early years of the conflict but managed to replenish its forces and gain influence

2 <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20211229/bolshoe-intervu-zamir-kabulov-1044512128.html>

in the northern, Uzbek areas of Afghanistan. By 2014, IMU, having lost its historical leaders, aligned with IS, confirming its radicalism. In engagements with the Taliban, it again suffered considerable losses before splintering into pro-IS and pro-Taliban factions. To date, IMU's strength is difficult to gauge, but it has been weakened and likely has only limited ability to influence Central Asia. Given that it left the region some twenty years ago, IMU's support in Central Asia is also limited. Still, this does not mean that IMU militants could not theoretically conduct attacks or find supporters there.

Other Islamist groups have been present in Central Asia. Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) has support in the region, especially in the Fergana Valley and Uzbekistan. Although it has similar political goals to the militant Islamists, HT has stayed away from institutional militancy. Its supporters have nonetheless engaged at times in violent actions. Across Central Asia, the actual support enjoyed by HT is difficult to gauge, but it is generally seen to be sizable, in the thousands of people.<sup>3</sup> Local authorities consistently blame the group for popular protests and violence, albeit with little evidence. Infamously, the Uzbek authorities sanctioned the killing of hundreds of protesters in the town of Andijan in 2005 while accusing them of being HT members supported by IMU.

One sign of the potency of militant Islamism in Central Asia is the high number of people who have left to join IS and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq. One estimate indicates that over 500 fighters from Kazakhstan, over 500 from Kyrgyzstan, over 1,500 from Uzbekistan over 1,300 from Tajikistan, and over 400 from Turkmenistan had traveled there as of late 2016. The overall number is thus roughly equivalent to the number of fighters from the entire European Union.<sup>4</sup> Although numbers are patchy, hundreds of Central Asian women and children have also relocated to the Middle East. The egalitarian, prosperous, and uncorrupted religious utopia that IS promised evidently appealed to many Central Asians. While hundreds of them have since returned to Central Asia and may sympathize with Afghan Islamists, including ISKP,<sup>5</sup> the majority of Central Asian militant Islamists were killed in the Middle East. This seriously weakened Islamism's contestation potential in the region. Importantly, the same is true for Russia. Over 3,400 Russians left to fight in Syria and Iraq, an exodus that weakened militant Islamism in Russia despite IS creating its own affiliate in the North Caucasus in 2015.

## The Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan

Since August 2021, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated considerably, leading the UN to request a record US\$5 billion in humanitarian aid for 2022. Beyond this, the Taliban's rule has to date been marked by governmental reshufflings, a lack of political inclusivity toward minorities, a retreat on women's rights, and attacks on former security officials and ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup> To date, it remains unclear whether the Taliban will be able to administer the country, control its borders, provide services to the population, restore the economy, and prevent countrywide famine. Importantly, the Taliban's attitude toward humanitarian aid from Western organizations has yet to be clearly articulated.

As it tries to stabilize Afghanistan, the Taliban will need broad international support. In exchange for that and for diplomatic recognition, it will probably need to commit to respecting to some extent minorities and women's rights, curtailing opiate production, and reining in other militant Islamist groups that want to conduct attacks abroad. The Taliban's own fragmentation—the movement includes such groups as the Haqqani Network and IMU—and the emergence of ISKP will render tackling these challenges more difficult. If it is unable to keep its end of the bargain, the Taliban will face opposition from the US and regional powers that will want to deal with existing security threats themselves. A diplomatic isolation of Afghanistan and/or meddling in its affairs, including through drone strikes on ISKP, would, however, further undermine the Taliban's rule and worsen the humanitarian situation.

ISKP's strength grew tremendously in Afghanistan between 2014 and 2018. The group conducted hundreds of attacks on civilians, the Taliban, and pro-US forces, relying on suicide and indiscriminate tactics. As in the Middle East, it targeted Shia Muslims to foster sectarian conflict.<sup>7</sup> ISKP hence emerged as a radical militant Islamist alternative to the Taliban. Promoting the transnational idea of the Khorasan, eyeing other Muslim regions for expansion, and relying on Pakistani and international recruitment, ISKP challenged the Taliban's Afghan-centric nature and Afghan Pashtun membership. It also condemned the Taliban for the latter's negotiations with the US. The group has, however, suffered heavy losses and lost its strongholds in Afghanistan between 2018 and 2020.<sup>8</sup> Judging by its reduced rate

3 [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/127809/doc\\_asia\\_26.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/127809/doc_asia_26.pdf)

4 <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

5 <https://bulaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Report-on-Repatriation-in-Central-Asia-2.pdf>

6 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/5025/2021/en/>

7 <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>

8 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/hit-from-many-sides-2-the-demise-of-iskp-in-kunar/>

of attacks, it has been further weakened by the Taliban takeover. It has not, however, been annihilated—notably, it struck high-profile targets in Kabul in summer and fall 2021—and may be able to renew its strength with fighters coming from and through Pakistan. While it may be interested in attacking targets in Central Asia and Russia, there is no indication that ISKP currently sees this as a priority or can strike there with or without IMU's support. As it is now under heavy pressure from the Taliban, it will likely have fewer opportunities to divert resources to attacks abroad.

Since August 2021, a few thousand Afghan refugees have fled to Central Asia, mostly to Tajikistan.<sup>9</sup> Tajikistan was also the only Central Asian country initially open to backing an Afghan opposition. For Emomali Rahmon, who has ruled in Dushanbe since the civil war, this seemed like a way to use pan-Tajik solidarity to divert attention from the popular discontent with his regime. That being said, he never truly considered supporting the opposition.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, despite its pan-Tajik rhetoric, Tajikistan deported many refugees.

Other Central Asian states and Russia appeared ready to deal with the Taliban and showed even less interest in accepting refugees. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan thus reopened their borders for trade with Afghanistan in fall 2021. These positive attitudes may, however, change if the Taliban supports Islamists in Central Asia or is unable to stabilize the security and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, causing the flow of refugees to increase. In such scenarios, the threat of Islamist militants penetrating Central Asia would also increase. Testifying to such concerns, the Russian and Tajik presidents reiterated their ongoing military co-operation on the Tajik–Afghan border during a December 2021 meeting.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, for all post-Soviet countries, the issue of Afghan opiate trafficking via the so-called “northern route” running through the Fergana Valley to Russia remains important. To date, it is unclear how drug and other criminal networks will be reconfigured following

the Taliban takeover, but this, too, may increase volatility in the region and lead to the penetration of militants.

### **An Overestimated Threat**

Observers have speculated about an Islamist threat posed by Afghanistan to Central Asia since the Soviet–Afghan War. That threat has, however, never materialized—at least not beyond the anti-communist Mujahideen's few cross-border attacks in the late 1980s and half-hearted support for the Tajik Islamists during the Tajik civil war. Today, similar claims about militant Islamists targeting Central Asia and finding support there among local Salafis have come to the fore. Now, as before, this threat seems overestimated and appears to be mostly used by local authoritarian rulers to quell dissent.

Because the Taliban, a Pashtun-centric movement, has never wanted to expand to Central Asia, the threat to the region comes mainly from ISKP and IMU. These two groups did not, however, conduct attacks there at the peak of their strength in 2017–18. At present, they are weakened and locked in a battle for survival with the Taliban, which, ironically, has the support of the international community against them and largely controls Afghanistan's borders. It will be a long time before ISKP or IMU can divert resources to the post-Soviet space. Beyond this, even for ISKP, focusing on Central Asia would be challenging and counterproductive. The region is under the Russian security umbrella, has seen no major Islamist militancy in recent years, has an average quality of life significantly higher than Afghanistan and South Asia, and is likely not to be welcoming to Pakistani and Arab militants. It also holds limited strategic value compared to expanding operations to South and Southeast Asia. Hence, although there is a danger that Afghan militant Islamists will try to destabilize Central Asia, the real threats to the region's stability come from its endogenous issues, as shown by the current upheaval in Kazakhstan.

#### *About the Author*

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9 <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/85612>

10 <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/85223>

11 <https://news.ru/cis/putin-obespokoilsya-situaciej-na-afgansko-tadzhikistanskoj-granice/>