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Islamist Threats to Central Asia

The End of ISAF

On 31 December 2014, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan officially ended combat operations. The very next day saw the launch of the follow-up “Resolute Support Mission” (RSM), which is also led by NATO. The new security arrangement with the Afghan government amounts to more than a change of name. Following ISAF’s withdrawal, only 13,195 troops remain (from 87,207 in August 2013).¹ The remaining troops come from 42 countries, with the largest contingents being provided by the USA (6,839), Georgia (885), and Germany (850). After responsibility for security assistance and the defence of Afghanistan was handed over to local Afghan security forces, NATO units assumed the function of trainers and military and security consultants.² The NATO defence ministers had decided in June 2013 that the troops should no longer perform combat roles.³

The security situation in Afghanistan remains precarious. While the Taliban has been weakened by the international operation, they have not gone away. Whether local security forces can meet the challenge they present is highly questionable. Afghan troops are generally considered to be poorly trained, and levels of desertion are high. Casualties among security forces, already considered to have reached critical levels in the first two quarters of 2014, were half as high again in the first half of 2015, with ca. 4,100 Afghan soldiers and police being killed and more than 7,800 wounded.⁴ There does not appear to be sufficient political stability to exclude the possibility of the government being overthrown or at least having its authority critically undermined.

Note: Based in part on: Thomas Kunze/Michail Logvinov, *Central Asia Facing ISAF Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Islamist Threats and Regional Solutions*, KAS International Reports 12/2013, pp. 45-68.

- 1 Cf. NATO, *International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): Key Facts and Figures*, 1 August 2014, at: <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf>.
- 2 Cf. NATO, *Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures*, at: http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_06/20150622_2015-06-RSM-Placemat.pdf.
- 3 Cf. Karen Parrish, *NATO Defense Ministers Set Post-2014 Afghanistan Mission*, American Forces Press Service, Brussels, 5 June 2013, at: <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120218>.
- 4 Cf. Joseph Goldstein, *Afghan Security Forces Struggle Just to Maintain Stalemate*, in: *New York Times*, 22 July 2015, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/world/asia/afghan-security-forces-struggle-just-to-maintain-stalemate.html>.

Islamist Terrorism and Jihad: The Greatest Dangers for Central Asia

The withdrawal of ISAF creates security challenges for Afghanistan's neighbours, the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. While the secular rulers of the largely authoritarian states of Central Asia keep the Islamist danger in check, fear of Islamist terror is growing. There is a real if latent danger that radical Islamist groups could exploit Afghanistan's power vacuum and that Islamist terror could spread to the countries of Central Asia. If Afghanistan once again becomes a breeding ground for radical Islamist terrorism, this could also destabilize Central Asia's authoritarian secular regimes.

Islamist groups in Central Asia have tried to overthrow governments before. During the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989, they fought alongside the Mujahideen, out of whose ranks the Taliban later emerged, against the "Godless Soviets". Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, several states and organizations in the Muslim world established missions to reach "forgotten Muslims". Activities of this kind were undertaken by Saudi Arabia, the Turkish *Nurcular* Brotherhood, and organizations in Pakistan, among others. They provided financial and "moral" support. Persophone Tajikistan was able to rely on the help of Iran. Although the population of the former Soviet Central Asian republics largely rejected militant Islamism, Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) were able to recruit sufficient supporters to successfully carry out terrorist attacks in Central Asia that were led from Afghanistan. The effectiveness of the militant Islamists was in no small part due to the support they received from the Taliban and Al-Qaida.

Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Chinese province of Xinjiang, which is home to many Muslim Uyghurs, play key roles in Al-Qaida's strategic calculations. The terrorist network recruited Chechens, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Uyghurs for its fight against the Northern Alliance and US forces in Afghanistan.⁵ Osama Bin Laden is said to have written a letter to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 2002 in which he stressed the vital importance of Central Asia in the "jihad".

Afghanistan is increasingly functioning as a safe haven and transit country for citizens of Central Asian states seeking to join terrorist militias such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and to gain combat experience. Several thousand individuals are believed to have moved to Afghanistan in the last few years from the secular post-Soviet states of Central Asia. If these radicalized migrants were to return to their home countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, it could develop into a threat to the security and stability of the region. The politically decisive question is whether these countries are willing to intensify their co-operation as required by the new security environment. Either the Russia-led Collective

5 Cf. Michael Scheuer, Central Asia in Al Qaeda's Vision of the Anti-American Jihad, 1979-2006, in: *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 2/2006, pp. 5-10.

Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which is dominated jointly by Russia and China, could play a key role in this, assuming the member states share a similar assessment of the security situation.

The Ferghana Valley: Breeding Ground of Central Asian Islamism

Uzbekistan deserves particular attention. The country is an anchor of stability in the region. There have seen several outbreaks of violence in the Ferghana Valley, which is shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and densely inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups. During Soviet times, the underground Islamist organizations that ultimately became the IMU terrorist organization were already present in the Ferghana Valley. The IMU was established by Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Khojaev (aka Juma Namangani) in the early 1990s. Because of the government's commitment to secularism, the Uzbek state became the declared enemy of the IMU. The former mullah of Namangan, Yuldashev was considered a gifted organizer with a charismatic personality. He sought to establish a theocracy. Namangani learned to fight during the Soviet-Afghan War.⁶

In 1991, this pair moved to challenge the Uzbek government. An agitated mob stormed government offices and public buildings in Namangan. The Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, was able to end the unrest, initially using negotiations and then applying force. Yuldashev and Namangani fled to Tajikistan, and later to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has been claimed that the Pakistani intelligence service provided Yuldashev with financial support and helped him to hide: "From 1995 to 1998 Yuldashev was based in Peshawar, the center not only of Pakistani and Afghan Islamic activism but also of pan-Islamic jihadi groups. Here he met with the 'Arab-Afghans' [...] who were later to introduce him to bin Laden [...]."⁷

The IBU later split, with some members founding the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). Both groups have their bases of operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some of the members of these militant groups support the "holy war" being waged in other countries. The IBU was certainly supported by Al-Qaida and the Taliban, as well as other organizations (*Harakat ul-Ansar* and *al-Jihad*). It may even have been Osama bin Laden's initiative to establish an Uzbek jihadist group to combat the Karimov regime.⁸

6 "He is essentially a guerilla leader, not an Islamic scholar and he is easily influenced by those around him, such as today he is influenced by the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. [...] He is a good person but not a deep person or intellectual in any way, and he has been shaped by his own military and political experiences rather than Islamic ideology, but he hates the Uzbek government [...]", according to a high-ranking member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), in: Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Yale 2002, p. 143.

7 Ibid., p. 140.

8 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 148.

Following the arrest by German police of three IJU members in the Sauerland area of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, security experts had to acknowledge that terrorism originating in Central Asia had become an immediate threat to Germany. For their part, Namangani and Yuldashev, the former leaders of the IBU, no longer pose a threat. Namangani was killed in a US operation in northern Afghanistan in 2001. According to the Pakistani secret service, Yuldashev was killed in 2009 in a US drone attack in South Waziristan, a mountainous region of Pakistan near the Afghan border. Before his death, the intimate of Osama bin Laden had made a DVD on which he threatened attacks on the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan: “Karimov, Bakiev, and Rakhmonov had better remember that they will be punished for their persecution of the Muslims – in this life as well as before the judgement of heaven”.⁹

In September 2014, the current leader of the IBU, Usman Ghazi, pledged his support to the terrorist militia in Syria and Iraq. The IMU has begun to transform itself into an umbrella organization that encompasses groups such as *Jamaat Ansarullah*, which was founded by IMU supporter Amriddin Tabarov in 2010 and is recruiting people from Tajikistan to fight in Syria.¹⁰ The IMU also began recruiting for IS in the Ferghana Valley. It further acts as a bridge for Uyghur extremists in western China seeking to gain combat experience in Afghanistan or Pakistan. The IMU is not entirely without self interest in this, as it benefits from new sources of income and growing support for its campaign in Central Asia.¹¹ Recently (August 2015), reports have been circulating according to which the IMU has dissolved itself, placing its structures under the control of IS.¹²

Islamist terrorists have carried out several attacks in various parts of Uzbekistan in recent years. In February 1999, six bombs exploded in Tashkent killing 16 people and injuring more than 100. The IMU are believed to be responsible for the attack. The IMU wishes to bring about the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan and the release of Muslims held in Uzbek prisons. According to an IMU declaration, issued on 25 August 1999, the Emir of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and chief commander of the Mujahideen, Muhammad Tahir Farooq, “has announced the start of the Jihad

9 Peter Böhm, Comeback der Islamisten [Comeback of the Islamists], in: *Südwind* 12/2006 (author's translation), at: <http://www.suedwind-magazin.at/comeback-der-islamisten>.

10 Cf. International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing No. 72, Bishkek/Brussels, 20 January 2015, p. 6, at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.aspx>.

11 Cf. *ibid.* pp. 6-7.

12 Cf. Merhat Sharipzhan, *IMU Declares It Is Now Part Of The Islamic State*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 6 August 2015, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>; *RIA Novosti*, “Islamskoe dvizhenie Uzbekistana” zayavilo o prisoedinenii k IG [“Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” Declares Membership of IS], 6 October 2014, at: <http://ria.ru/world/20141006/1027067431.html>.

against the tyrannical government of Uzbekistan”.¹³ In March and April 2004, women wearing explosive belts and armed men carried out further attacks on police stations in Tashkent and Bukhara. These left 33 terrorists dead, alongside ten police officers and four civilians. In July 2004, two bombs exploded near the US embassy in Tashkent, killing two Uzbek guards. All these attacks were claimed by the IJU.

To this day, social discontent and opposition to secular rule continue to play into the hands of militant Islamists in the Ferghana Valley. Russian security agencies estimate that between 500 and 2,500 of the 4,000 Central Asians fighting for IS come from the area. The largest single group consists of Uzbeks from both Uzbekistan and from Kyrgyzstan, the latter largely from the region around Osh. One reason for the participation of so many Uzbeks is the outbreak of violence against ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, in which over 400 people died. Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan are often too scared of being ostracized or blackmailed to ask the state for help when they observe that their neighbours or family members are becoming radicalized. The political and economic marginalization of ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan is a further contributing factor. This plays into the hands of radical groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (the “Party of Liberation”).

Tajikistan’s Struggle over Secularism

According to the former head of the Kyrgyz security service, Kalyk Imankulov, a terrorist network going by the name of the Islamic Movement of Central Asia (IMCA) had been established as early as 2002.¹⁴ Groups involved in this include the IMU, as well as the “Islamic Movement of East Turkestan”, an amalgamation of Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Afghan, Chechen, Uzbek, and Uyghur fighters. The network’s goal is the establishment of a state under Islamic law from the Caucasus to Xinjiang. The founding of a “Central Asian Caliphate” encompassing Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic is intended as the first step towards uniting all the Muslims of Central Asia in an Ummah (community of Muslims as an “Islamic nation”). The second stage of the ICMA’s plan is the expansion of this theocracy into the neighbouring territories of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and north-western China. Many supra-regional Islamist organizations are active in Central Asia. The largest and most significant is the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which was founded in the Russian city of Astrakhan in 1990. It has gained particular prominence in Tajikistan.

13 The Call to Jihad by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, in: Rashid, cited above (Note 6), Appendix, pp. 247-249.

14 Cf. Sergei Blagov, Moscow on alert for Muslim militancy, in: *Asia Times Online*, 19 September 2002, at: http://atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/D119Ag01.html.

From 1993 to 1997, Tajikistan was in the throes of a bloody civil war between secular and Islamist forces in which some 100,000 people lost their lives. Following the conclusion of a peace accord in 1997, Tajik Islamists and secularists agreed to co-operate. In this way, the Tajik branch of the IRP, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) distanced itself from other Islamist organizations, becoming the only legal political party in Central Asia with a “religious mandate”. While the IMU was becoming an international terror network and ultimately part of the international Islamist movement, the IRPT was being transformed from armed opposition into a legal party with a stake in Tajikistan’s constitutional development. However, this did not end the tension. The president of Tajikistan needed to perform a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, his government was attempting to suppress Islamist movements before they gained a foothold, which also led to “collateral damage” as non-Islamist opposition forces fell under general suspicion. At the same time, the officially registered IRPT must be granted the rights guaranteed it in the 1997 peace accord. Although it is still the only legal Islamist political party in Central Asia,¹⁵ the significance of the IRPT has been declining for years. For a while now, radical party members have been accusing the party’s leadership of capitulating to secularism. The government has also succeeded in marginalizing the party, classifying it as “fundamentalist” since 2011.¹⁶ The IRPT is no longer represented in Parliament since the most recent (2015) election.

The vacuum left by the decline of the IRPT has made it easier for radical groups to gain ground in Tajikistan. The most significant of them is *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which has also gained a foothold in other Central Asian countries.

Founded in East Jerusalem in 1953, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* was initially active in the Middle East as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. It later expanded its radius of action, becoming a transnational network. *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is proscribed in a number of countries, including Germany. In the 1980s, the organization was already successfully smuggling propaganda texts into the Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics. The first cells began to operate in the Ferghana Valley. From this starting point, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* began to spread into other parts of Central Asia. Since the Central Asian population had little knowledge of either the Arabic language or the group’s ideology, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* needed to adapt rapidly to local conditions, and translations of party literature and propaganda leaflets began to emerge in the region. Today, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is the fastest growing Islamist organization in Central Asia – probably in part because it faces almost no competition. *Hizb ut-Tahrir* likes to present itself to the outside world as non-violent. Nonetheless, it openly

15 This was correct at the time of writing. However, the IRPT was banned in August 2015, cf. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Tajik Islamic Party Banned, Given Deadline To Stop Activities*, 28 August 2015, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik-islamic-party-banned/27213877.html>.

16 Cf. Tajikistan: Islamic Party Facing Pressure in Dushanbe, in *Eurasianet*, 3 February 2001, at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62820>.

opposes the secular state, which it would like to see replaced by an “Islamic caliphate”, and makes use of aggressive, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic rhetoric. In addition, the organization legitimizes jihad against Israel and the USA, which obviously conflicts with claims of a policy of non-violence. There is thus no shortage of ideological affinities between *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the IS terrorist militia, which has already claimed the title “caliphate” for itself. *Hizb ut-Tahrir* rejects political compromises, and the only acceptable form of political system is the Islamic state, in which every article of the constitution and every legal opinion should be derived from sharia. *Hizb ut-Tahrir* party literature outlines a three-stage model by which all Muslims are to be united in a modern caliphate based on an interpretation of the historical mission of the prophet Mohammad in founding the first Islamic state: The first phase is to recruit Muslims to take the party’s propaganda out into the world. The second requires interaction with the Ummah, working to embed Islam in everyday life, the state, and society. Finally, the third phase describes the process of assuming power and the comprehensive and total introduction of an Islamic political and social system. Starting in Central Asia, Muslims everywhere should rise up and unite to form a caliphate.¹⁷

There is little reliable information on the number of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* members in Central Asia. Their decentralized cells operate in secret, and they take their security precautions very seriously. Only the leaders of the cells know the identity of their superiors. Experts believe that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has a streamlined, pyramidal organizational structure built up from “locally based units, regional organizational levels, and a superregional leadership [...] The regional representative is chosen by a central political council at the international level.”¹⁸ Experts estimate that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has some 25,000 members in Central Asia.

In recent years, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* cells have significantly contributed to the radicalization of young Muslims in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular. Potential for radicalization also exists in Uzbekistan, but the Uzbek security services use authoritarian means and are thus effective, including their “collateral damage”. In Central Asia, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has been especially attractive to young men, who suffer from very high unemployment rates and a lack of opportunities. It campaigns for a caliphate by distributing literature and CDs in bulk and engaging in online propaganda. There is a great deal of receptiveness to the claim that only an Islamic state can solve the region’s social and economic problems.¹⁹ The government in Tajikistan has claimed that Islamists were responsible for several attacks in recent years, including an

17 Cf. Rainer Freitag-Wirringhaus, Russia, the Islamic Republics of the Caucasus, and Central Asia, in: Werner Ende/Udo Steinbach (eds), *Islam in the World Today*, Ithaca, NY, 2010, pp. 269-296.

18 Ibid. p. 290.

19 Cf. Tajikistan Country Report 2014, in: American Foreign Council, *World Almanac of Islamism 2014*, Lanham, MD, 2014, pp. 709-720.

assault on a high-security prison in 2010.²⁰ During a police operation targeting extremists in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek in June 2015, large amounts of illegal propaganda material encouraging terrorist acts was recovered. It is believed that *Hizb ut-Tahrir* was responsible.²¹

Tajikistan responds with severity to terrorist activities. A good example of this is the major military operation that was carried out following the 2010 assault on the prison. Between September 2010 and November 2011, government forces fought Islamists who had withdrawn to the Rasht Valley. For a short time, the government placed the whole region under the control of the military. During the operation, the soldiers succeeded in neutralizing influential Islamists, and either recaptured or killed the escapees. More than 100 people were killed during this operation.²² Following the withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan, Islamists have started to focus on Tajikistan. The Tajik border to Afghanistan is 1,300 kilometres long and hard to secure, particularly along the Panj River, which defines much of the frontier. To this must be added that northern Afghanistan is populated by ethnic Tajiks, and monitoring the cross-border movement of people is difficult. The incursion of Islamist forces into Tajikistan therefore cannot be ruled out. There is already a wave of emigration in the other direction. The Tajik security service estimates that over 400 Tajiks are fighting for IS. The actual numbers could well be much higher. Although fighters are recruited from all over the country, most come from the provinces of Sughd and Khatlon. In September 2014, more than 20 residents of a single village left the country for Syria.²³

The Response of the Central Asian States

After the defection to IS in May 2015 of no less significant a person than the head of Tajikistan's "OMON" special forces unit, Gulmurod Khalimov, the government in Dushanbe felt forced to act. From then on, any Tajik who joined a terrorist organization abroad would have their citizenship revoked. Ironically, OMON is responsible for anti-terror activities. Khalimov undertook several courses of training in the US and Russia. He also belonged to the unit that was charged with protecting the Tajik president, Emomali

20 Cf. Andrew McGregor, *Radical Islamic Groups in Central Asia and their External Contacts*, in: *Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus: Salafis, Shi'ites, and Jihadists*, Dubai, 2014, pp. 105-126 (in Arabic), available online in English in: Aberfoyle International Security, Monthly Archives: October 2014, at: <http://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?m=201410>.

21 Cf. *V 2015 godu v Bishkeke vyjavleno 48 faktov rasprostraneniya idey RJeO «Hizb-ut-Tahir» - GUV D* [City police report 48 instances of propaganda by the religious extremist group "Hizb ut-Tahrir" in Bishkek in 2015], Kyrtag, the Kyrgyz Telegraph Agency, at: <http://kyrtag.kg/society/v-2015-godu-v-bishkeke-vyyavleno-48-faktov-rasprostraneniya-idey-reo-khizb-ut-takhir-guvd>.

22 Cf. Tajikistan Country Report 2014, cited above (Note 19), p. 714.

23 Cf. International Crisis Group, cited above (Note 10), p. 4.

Rahmon. The new IS recruit has since taken his threats to the internet, now wearing a black headscarf and brandishing a machine gun: “Listen, you American pigs, I’ve been three times to America, and I saw how you train fighters to kill Muslims [...] God willing, I will come with this weapon to your cities, your homes, and we will kill you.” He has also threatened Russia, and above all his former homeland, Tajikistan: “Listen, you dogs, the president and ministers, if only you knew how many boys, our brothers are here, waiting and yearning to return to Tajikistan to re-establish sharia law there.”²⁴ He has called upon the people of Tajikistan to join the struggle of IS.

Jihad has also reached Kazakhstan, despite its wealth of resources and relatively high degree of stability in regional terms. During 2011, the number of terrorist attacks and threats against the regime by in the name of a group calling itself the Soldiers of the Caliphate (*Jund al-Khilafah*, JaK), a group based in Pakistan, increased. Following the online publication in several radical forums of an interview with the leader of the JaK’s *Zahir Baibars Battalion*, Rawil Kusaynov, on 9 November 2012, experts now know a little more about this new player in transnational jihad. According to Kusaynov, the JaK brigade consists of several battalions, which are active mostly in Afghanistan, but also “in other parts of the world”.²⁵ The truth of this was demonstrated in September and October 2012, when videos were posted in various jihadist forums of attacks carried out on a US base in the province of Afghan province of Khost in June and July. Experts have suggested that the *Zahir Baibars Battalion* is co-operating with the *Haqqani* network, which is affiliated with Al-Qaida. This group keeps a close eye on developments in Kazakhstan and dedicates a large part of its resources to the country.²⁶ According to Kusaynov, 90 per cent of his battalion’s members are Kazakhs, although the cell also includes members of various nationalities.²⁷ Kusaynov has stated that “we believe that the region of Central Asia, in addition to the Islamic Maghreb [...] and Yemen, are candidates to be the nucleus for the return of the Caliphate State in the future”.²⁸ A further video emerged in October 2013, allegedly showing some 150 Kazakhs in Syria.²⁹ So far, Kazakhstan has avoided harsh measures, hoping that growing prosperity and education will contribute to the struggle against terrorism. Yet this does not mean

24 Cited in: Dmitry Solovyov, *Commander of elite Tajik police force defects to Islamic State*, Reuters, 28 May 2015, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/28/us-mideast-crisis-tajikistan-idUSKBN0OD1AP20150528>.

25 Maseh Zarif, *Jund al Khilafah Targets Kazakhstan*, AEI Critical Threats, 15 November 2011, at: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/other/zarif-jund-al-khilafah-targets-kazakhstan-november-15-2011>.

26 Cf. Bill Roggio, *Kazakh jihadi leader seeks restoration of Islamic caliphate*, in: *The Long War Journal*, 10 November 2011, at: www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/11/kazakh_jihadi_leader.php.

27 Cf. *ibid.*

28 Quoted in: *ibid.*

29 International Crisis Group, cited above (Note 10), pp. 3-4.

that Islamists are to be treated with tolerance. Most needs to be done by liberal Kyrgyzstan, which it considers to have the most porous borders, and where airport staff are poorly trained and open to bribery. Suspicious individuals and the incursion of Islamist ideology are systematically ignored.

The Central Asian countries are attempting to arm themselves. Alongside Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have made fighting abroad and visiting training camps criminal offences. In September 2014, the Kyrgyz parliament drafted a law making participation in armed conflict abroad or visiting a training camp punishable with prison sentences of between eight and 15 years. In addition, from 22 to 24 July 2015, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan cooperated with Russia under the title “Barrier-2015” in conducting simulations of crisis situations and joint exercises. The exercises were jointly organized by the Kyrgyz state border service, the general staff of the Kyrgyz armed forces, Tajik border troops, and Russian military experts. The simulated scenario concerned a massive border incursion of terrorists and mass border crossing of local residents during a crisis situation at the border area.³⁰ The aim of the joint exercise was to improve vertical and horizontal co-operation and communication among the various units.

Common Interests and Combating Terrorism by Means of Trans-regional Organizations

Russia, China, the “West” – i.e. above all the USA and the EU – and the Central Asian countries themselves all have a shared interest in stopping the spread of increasingly totalitarian Islamism, and, with regard to Central Asia, preventing extremists and their Islamist ideology from expanding into the secular post-Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In this regard, Central Asia acts as a buffer region for Russia and China. However, it appears that the above-named states are only partially aware of their common interests. There is barely any co-operation between the West and Russia. With their relations at a low point thanks to the Ukraine crisis, Russia and the USA would rather compete over global influence and military bases in the region.

Two organizations currently have relevance for Central Asia in terms of security: The Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The CSTO was established in May 2002 on the basis of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Collective Security Treaty, and is sometimes thought of as a kind of “Eastern NATO”. Military experts, however,

30 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Tajik border guards participate for first time at OSCE-supported simulation exercise*, Bishkek, 22 July 2015, at: <http://www.osce.org/bishkek/174041>.

have criticized the CSTO as merely a “paper tiger” with no future.³¹ The main burden of “Operational Reaction” in the post-Soviet area is borne by Russia, which contributes nearly half of the CSTO’s budget, and Kazakhstan. While Russia has offered to provide 8,000-10,000 troops for the CSTO’s rapid-reaction force and Kazakhstan about 3,000, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have offered 300 apiece. Uzbekistan is yet to offer to provide any manpower at all.³² Should the negative threat scenarios become reality and Islamist terror spread to Central Asia, the CSTO’s collective security system will face numerous problems. For all the CSTO’s proclaimed successes in conducting anti-terror exercises,³³ decision-makers in Russia and Central Asia can hardly be serious in describing the planned 13,000-strong reaction force as an agency for “operational reaction”. To react rapidly and effectively to attacks by militant Islamists, what the CSTO countries require are well-drilled and highly trained special forces with, above all, the most modern weapons and equipment, capable of rapidly mobilizing and deploying at the location of an attack in support of national security forces.

Nor is the SCO an “alpha predator” in the field of security. Established in June 2001 on the basis of the “Shanghai Five” security arrangement, the SCO declared war on the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism³⁴ and has established a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. Yet the SCO’s security architecture remains underdeveloped. There is a lack of clearly defined military structures. Furthermore,

31 Cf. Aleksandr Khranchikhin, “Bumazhnye tigry” NATO i ODKB [NATO and the CSTO as Paper Tigers], in: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 6 March 2009, at: http://nvo.ng.ru/forces/2009-03-06/1_tigers.html.

32 Cf. Michail Logvinov, *Russlands Kampf gegen den internationalen Terrorismus* [Russia’s Struggle against International Terrorism], Stuttgart 2012, p. 127.

33 Cf. Viktor Mikhajlov, “Rubezh” protiv terrora [“Borders” against terror], in: *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 26 March 2010, at: http://nvo.ng.ru/forces/2010-03-26/16_rubezh.html.

34 The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism defines terrorism, separatism and extremism as follows: “1) ‘terrorism’ means:

a. any act recognized as an offence in one of the treaties listed in the Annex to this Convention [...] and as defined in this Treaty;

b. other act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict or to cause major damage to any material facility, as well as to organize, plan, aid and abet such act, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, violate public security or to compel public authorities or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, and prosecuted in accordance with the national laws of the Parties;

2) ‘separatism’ means any act intended to violate territorial integrity of a State including by annexation of any part of its territory or to disintegrate a State, committed in a violent manner, as well as planning and preparing, and abetting such act, and subject to criminal prosecuting in accordance with the national laws of the Parties;

3) ‘Extremism’ is an act aimed at seizing or keeping power through the use of violence or changing violently the constitutional regime of a State, as well as a violent encroachment upon public security, including organization, for the above purposes, of illegal armed formations and participation in them, criminally prosecuted in conformity with the national laws of the Parties.” Cf. Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism*, 15 June 2001, at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/49f5d9f92.html>.

the Tajik and Kyrgyz armed forces are poorly equipped and trained. It is also unlikely that China would approve the deployment of troops outside the borders of the People's Republic.

Conclusion

For the moment, Central Asia remains relatively stable. This can be explained in part by the success the authoritarian Central Asian regimes have so far enjoyed using repressive measures to combat the emerging terrorist threats. Yet their ability to do so is declining, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Islamist networks already have a presence in Central Asia. The Central Asian states are only partly prepared to deal with transnational developments, which is why closer co-operation on regional security matters within the existing SCO and CSTO frameworks, as well as with NATO, is in the interest of their common security.

Tajikistan, which was the poorest of the Soviet republics, has remained the economically weakest of the Central Asian countries and is most likely to provide radical groups with a way in to the region.

The West and Russia, and also China, which is pursuing its economic interests very actively and successfully in Central Asia, need to join forces to support both Tajikistan and the other secular states of Central Asia in combating the rising danger of terrorism – and to set priorities for their co-operation, certainly not only in Central Asia. The proxy conflicts currently being fought out in Ukraine are unhelpful in this regard and focus energy on the wrong place. With Islamism emerging as a new totalitarian threat, there is no time for a revival of the Cold War.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, the IMU, the IJU, the Taliban, Al-Qaida, IS: The potential for co-operation between such organizations must not be permitted to gain momentum in Central Asia. For all their many internal contradictions, deficits, and problems, the secular countries of Central Asia – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan – are partners in need of support – something that is directly in the interest of Russia, the “West”, and China.