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How Serious is the ISIS Threat to Tajikistan?

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Key Points

- As it reorients itself from the Middle East to South Asia, the Islamic State now represents an even greater threat to the security of Central Asia than when it was at its zenith in Syria and Iraq. Given its competition with al-Qaeda, ISIS aims to reemphasize its strength and global nature by inspiring attacks in countries like Tajikistan, which were previously off its radar.
- ISIS's main strategies for recruitment and inspiring attacks are to take advantage of existing cleavages in different societies and to discredit governments across the globe. The current policies of the Tajik government only fuel ISIS propaganda and facilitate recruitment efforts. Small- to medium-sized incidents such as attacks on foreigners, bombings of buildings and cars, and riots are likely to take place in the near future. Given Tajikistan's mountainous terrain and weak institutions and policing in the provinces, Islamic insurgency, which has occurred in the past, is a possibility.
- Large-scale attacks in Tajikistan should not be expected. In the Islamic State's strategy, Tajikistan is likely to continue serving as a breeding ground for recruits.
- One possible negative externality of the presence, real or perceived, of ISIS militants in South Asia will be a question of Tajikistan's sovereignty.
- Reform of the prisons may help limit the threat of returnees, while reform of education focuses on those who have not yet been radicalized.

Introduction

As of July 2019, both the Kremlin and the White House have declared the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). President Putin praised the victory over ISIS in December 2017, almost two years after the Kremlin intervened militarily in Syria.¹ President Trump pronounced the end of ISIS in March 2019. In light of this optimism, a series of horrendous bombings orchestrated by the Islamic State on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka caught the world by surprise. The suicide attack resulted in the death of at least 250 civilians and left more than 500 wounded. The lesson was clear. Although it lost most of its territories in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State still poses a significant threat, lying in wait to attack at unexpected moments. ISIS was more than a terrorist semi-state with functioning institutions and a well-trained army. It embodied a complex set of beliefs that persist among the group's adherents across the world. As it reorients itself from the Middle East to South Asia, ISIS now represents an even greater threat to the security of Central Asia than when it was at its zenith in Syria and Iraq.

As evidenced by recent developments, Tajikistan remains the most vulnerable country to ISIS influence not only in Central Asia but in the whole post-Soviet space. Up until 2018, Tajikistan was mainly an exporter of extremist fighters with violence taking place outside of its borders. By various estimates, between roughly 1,100 and 1,900 Tajiks traveled abroad to fight in the Middle Eastern conflict.² This was the highest number in Central Asia. Furthermore, a report by the International Center for Counter-Terrorism indicated that Tajikistan was the foremost supplier of suicide bombers to the Islamic State.³ Regardless, the security environment in Tajikistan remained largely stable even after the infamous high-profile defection of Gulmurod Khalimov, former Police Special Operations chief, to the Islamic State in May 2015. However, in the summer of 2018, the tables turned against Tajikistan. On July 29, in the Danghara district, a group of five young Tajiks attacked seven foreign cyclists from the United States, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Four of the cyclists died on the road. Following the attack, ISIS media released a video showing the five Tajiks pledging allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. Although incidents of terrorism have occasionally broken out in Tajikistan and across the region, the July attack was the first of its kind to be connected to the Islamic State, but it would not be the last.

Another violent incident followed a few months later in Khujand. ISIS was implicated in a prison riot, which, by some estimates, claimed the lives of as many as 50 prisoners.⁴ According to the Islamic State's media outlet, the riot was instigated by a prisoner who fought for ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, as subsequent government reports indicated,

¹ Andrew Roth, "On Visit to Syria, Putin Lauds Victory over ISIS and Announces Withdrawals," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/putin-makes-first-visit-to-syria-lauds-victory-over-isis-and-announces-withdrawals/2017/12/11/f75389de-de61-11e7-8679-a9728984779c_story.html.

² Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia," Kennan Cable No. 38, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-38-talking-terrorism-central-asia>.

³ Frud Bezhan, "Tajikistan's Deadly Export," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 12, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-deadly-export-islamic-state-suicide-bombers/28365044.html>.

⁴ "Tajikistan Admits to Prison Massacre," *Eurasianet*, November 23, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-admits-to-prison-massacre>.

the Khujand prison contained many ISIS fighters. The riot attracted new government attention to the country's prisons that resulted in a series of inspections. However, this did not prevent another prison riot from breaking out just half a year later. This time, a deadly riot in a Vakhdat prison claimed the lives of at least 32 people. Given that it took ISIS a month to claim responsibility for the violence, it appears doubtful that the Islamic State was truly behind the second riot. Indeed, the question remains how highly isolated prisoners would even communicate with external militants. However, the mere prospect that someone might perpetrate violence under the ISIS banner is worrisome for Tajikistan.

Why is Tajikistan a good target for ISIS?

ISIS ideology was and remains attractive to some individuals across Central Asia. After the collapse of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, individuals inspired by ISIS have effectively been left with two options as they see it. One is to join regional branches of ISIS (e.g., the Islamic State of Khorasan). The second is to respond to ISIS's calls for jihad by carrying out acts of violence in their own countries. Hussein Abdussamadov, the mastermind of the summer 2018 attacks in Tajikistan, opted to pursue a combination of both options. In an interview with Rukmini Callimachi, a *New York Times* journalist, he revealed that he was part of a group in Syria whose initial target was the European Parliament. However, once he was unable to obtain a visa, he recruited four Tajik teenagers to fulfill the "duty" of jihad in his home country. Elsewhere, in distant and not-so-distant parts of Tajikistan, there are cases of active recruitment of locals by fellow Tajiks who either had direct experience in Syria and Iraq or who are part of the global chain of ISIS recruitment. Indeed, Tajikistan arguably offers one of the most fertile grounds for recruitment in Eurasia.

Over the last decade, the government of Tajikistan has actively fought against the Islamization of society. In 2011, authorities imposed a ban on underage children praying in mosques, claiming the ban would safeguard Tajik children from radicalization.⁵ Only students of state-run religious institutions were exempted. Meanwhile, authorities demanded the return of all Tajik students studying religion abroad in countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Iran.⁶ The Tajik President, Emomali Rakhmon, pointed out that students studying Islam abroad needed a "healthy education," or else they would become "extremists and terrorists in five or ten years."⁷ At the same time, receiving religious education has become increasingly difficult. Previously, the government briefly introduced classes on the foundations of Islamic ethics at secular schools across the country. However, in 2011, the government canceled the classes. As a result, some parents sent their children to unofficial *imams* and *bibikhalifas* to receive religious education and learn Arabic in addition to obtaining a secondary school education.

⁵ "Tajik Mosque Ban for Kids Takes Effect," RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty, August 3, 2011, http://www.rferl.org/a/tajik_president_signs_law_banning_children_from_mosques/24285911.html.

⁶ Michael Schwartz, "In Tajikistan, Islam's Rise Worries Government," *New York Times*, July 17, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/world/asia/17tajikistan.html>.

⁷ Edward Lemon, "Tajikistan: Dushanbe Forcing Students Abroad to Return Home," *Eurasianet*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62460>.

In the last few years, the government took more serious steps to curb Islamization. For instance, in 2015, authorities forcibly shaved the beards of approximately 13,000 men, some of whom were later detained.⁸ From the government's perspective, "overly long" beards are alien and inconsistent with the national culture. A similar assault was made on veils when the government introduced a ban on hijabs in educational institutions.⁹ In the end, this law came to be enforced in all state institutions.¹⁰ In 2015, the government shut down around 160 shops that were selling veils and fined the owners about \$1,700.¹¹ Authorities also claimed that they were able to "convince" more than 1,700 women to unveil themselves.¹² In March 2017, President Rakhmon denounced all women who wore "foreign" clothes, especially black veils.¹³ After that, national television aired a documentary movie about hijab-wearing prostitutes who claimed that their veils helped them to drive up prices for their services and provided relative safety from "verbal assaults in streets" and police raids.¹⁴ These restrictions on religious freedom have been widely criticized by the international community, but Tajik authorities claim that they fear Tajikistan will become another Afghanistan, Syria, or Iraq if they do not take the measures necessary to curb radical and extremist trends in the country.¹⁵

The revival of Islam has indeed been a trend in the country since the late Soviet period. By 2008, more than 75% of the population believed that Islam played an important role in their lives.¹⁶ Further Islamization of society seems an inevitable process, as the Russian-speaking intelligentsia has been largely replaced by waves of migrants from rural areas of Tajikistan. The new occupants of urban centers have continued to espouse conservative values even after their migration from the countryside. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) was the main party representing the Islamic electorate in the Tajik parliament. After its downfall in 2015 on charges of terrorism, a sizable segment of the population lost its channel to air grievances to the government. Government measures against Islamization are viewed by the religious segment of Tajik society as a full-blown attack on Islam. In a country where Muslims constitute more than 95% of the total population, it should come as no surprise, then, that many individuals feel disenchanting with the government. Eric McGlinchey claims that militant Islam in Tajikistan faded away following the civil war of the 1990s because the Islamist opposition was institutionalized into the government structure via political competition.¹⁷ The legitimate presence of political opposition in

⁸ "To Fight Islamist Radicals, Tajikistan Shaved the Beards Off 13,000 Men," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/21/to-fight-islamist-radicals-tajikistan-shaved-the-beards-off-13000-men/>.

⁹ "Islam-Fearing Tajikistan Says Hijab Is for Prostitutes," *Eurasianet*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72816>.

¹⁰ "Tajikistan's Battle Against Beards To 'Fight Radicalisation,'" *BBC News*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35372754>.

¹¹ "Islam-Fearing Tajikistan Says Hijab Is for Prostitutes," *Eurasianet*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72816>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Tajikistan State TV Says Prostitutes Are Wearing Hijabs to Drive Up Prices," *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/01/tajikistan-state-tv-says-prostitutes-are-wearing-hijabs-to-drive-up-prices/>.

¹⁵ Michael Schwartz, "In Tajikistan, Islam's Rise Worries Government," *New York Times*, July 17, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/world/asia/17tajikistan.html>.

¹⁶ Edward Lemon, "Tajikistan: Dushanbe Forcing Students Abroad to Return Home," *Eurasianet*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62460>.

¹⁷ Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: The State and Islam in Central Asia," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25, no. 3 (2005): 554-566.

the legislative and executive branches limited the appeal of militant Islamic ideologies.¹⁸ However, the IRP's downfall, coupled with government measures to curb Islamization, has given an easy hand to ISIS recruiters.

Tajikistan and ISIS Strategy

Elsewhere in the Middle East, ISIS has attempted to discredit the governments of Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. For example, Al-Baghdadi accused the Saudi royal family of being "apostates," ostensibly for attempts to secularize the country. ISIS recruits may similarly employ the same tactic of delegitimizing the government of Tajikistan, portraying it as a puppet of the Christians and an enemy of Islam.

As of now, in its competition for leadership with al-Qaeda, ISIS is attempting to signal to global jihadist networks that it remains a powerful organization despite the loss of its territories in Syria and Iraq. As such, it aims to inspire individuals and conduct operations in countries that have been not been targets of ISIS in the past, and Tajikistan will likely remain on the group's radar for recruitment and operations. Nonetheless, it is improbable that the country will experience well-organized and large-scale attacks like those seen in Paris and Brussels, let alone attacks on the scale of the Sri Lanka bombings.

The Islamic States takes advantage of acute ethnic and religious tensions as well as the security vacuum present in different countries. Over the years, ISIS exacerbated sectarian divisions in Syria and Iraq by specifically targeting the Shia population. The same technique is in use at the moment in South Asia: ISIS routinely attacks Shia Hazara communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In contrast, the divisions in Tajikistan are not as acute as in South Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, emigration of the non-Muslim ethnic groups, mainly Slavs and Germans, made the country one of the most homogenous in the region. What remains a potential source of concern is Pamir. The mountainous region is home to a Shia Ismaili community and a neighbor of the volatile South Asian region. Local institutions in Pamir remain weak. In addition, the border with Afghanistan is certainly not impermeable. All of this creates an opportunity for ISIS. Fortunately, as a legacy of the Soviet Union, the Sunni-Shia division is not as pronounced in Tajikistan as in the Middle East or South Asia. Hence, sectarian violence becomes a less appealing strategy for ISIS in Tajikistan. Bombing of Ismaili Pamirians is unlikely to draw support from the Sunni Tajiks and may even lead to the alienation of potential ISIS supporters in the country.

Despite the frequent recurrence of its attacks in South Asia, the Islamic State is a seriously wounded animal at this point. ISIS is now evidently more fragmented than it used to be. Its human and financial resources have become significantly more strained. Its ability to conduct operations in Tajikistan is limited. ISIS has been eager to exploit religious divisions in South Asia. Therefore, South Asia is likely to remain the main target

¹⁸ Eric McGlinchey, "Autocrats, Islamists, and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia," *Current History* 104, no. 684 (2005): 340

of ISIS operations in the near future, as evidenced by the formal establishment of the provinces (wilayah) of Pakistan and India in May 2019. As such, military incursions into Central Asian states, like that of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the early 2000s, is unlikely. The Islamic State of Khorasan, at the moment, does not have the capacity to capture cities as ISIS did in Libya and the Philippines in 2015 and 2017, respectively. What is likely, though, are small- to medium-sized incidents such as attacks on foreigners, bombings of buildings and cars, and riots. Given Tajikistan's mountainous terrain and weak institutions and policing in the provinces, Islamic insurgency, which has occurred in the past, is also a possibility. Nevertheless, the first and foremost goal of the Islamic State and its affiliates would continue to be recruiting fighters from Tajikistan for other war theaters, mainly Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indian Jammu and Kashmir. In this regard, ISIS-implicated incidents would be instrumental: they will help outbid al-Qaeda, inspire followers, and intimidate enemies.

Another key thing to keep in mind is that the Islamic State's shift from the Middle East to South Asia may cause a negative externality for the sovereignty of Tajikistan. Great powers have always been concerned primarily with potential sources of instability in Central Asia. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Russia has already strengthened its military presence in Tajikistan ostensibly in response to the potential threat emanating from the Islamic State of Khorasan on the Afghan border.¹⁹ Earlier in 2019, the Russian Deputy Minister of the Interior stated that Islamic State militants were being transported by helicopter from Pakistan to northern Afghanistan, which borders Tajikistan. Similarly, in February 2019, the Russian ambassador in Dushanbe stated that there were 2,500 to 3,000 ISIS combatants on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.²⁰ He underlined the presence of a Russian military base in the country and Tajikistan's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as deterrents against ISIS aggression. Currently, the border with Afghanistan is guarded by Tajik security forces, which have not confirmed the Russian claims on the presence of ISIS militants. In May 2019, another statement followed from Alexander Bortnikov, head of the Russian Federal Security Service, that around 5,000 militants of the Islamic State of Khorasan had been transported to northern Afghanistan. Whether there is an actual or perceived presence of ISIS militants on the border, Moscow can use this card to increase its leverage over Tajikistan. An increased number of Russian forces on the ground will enable Moscow to maintain its influence in Dushanbe. Given that Tajikistan is also part of the Russia-led CSTO, Moscow may even try to return its troops to the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. Russian forces patrolled the border with Afghanistan up until 2005, and ever since their withdrawal Moscow has expressed its interest in taking on the "duty" again on numerous occasions. Dushanbe has been successful so far in resisting the Kremlin's pressure, but this may change in the future.

¹⁹ "Россия Укрепляет Базы в Таджикистане и Кыргызстане для Борьбы с Боевиками из Афганистана" Asia-Plus, June 7, 2017, <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20170607/rossiya-ukreplyaet-bazi-v-tadzhikistane-i-kirgizstane-dlya-borbi-s-boevikami-iz-afganistana>.

²⁰ Bakhmaner Nadirov, "Посол России: Вооружённые Силы Таджикистана Дадут Достойный Отпор Любым Угрозам на Границе, но и Мы Поможем," Asia-Plus, February 20, 2019, <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20190220/posol-rossii-vooruzhyonnie-sili-tadzhikistana-dayut-dostoinii-otpor-lyubim-ugrozam-na-granitse-no-i-mi-pomozhem>.

China's activities in Tajikistan are no longer restricted solely to the economic domain. Earlier in 2019, the *Washington Post* published an article evidencing a Chinese military presence in Tajikistan.²¹ Satellite images showed a small Chinese military outpost in the southeastern corner of Pamir, not far away from the city of Murgab. A few months later, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Tajik government gave Beijing permission to build up to 30 or 40 military outposts on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.²² Beijing's persistent fear of insecurity in Xinjiang, which borders Pamir and the rest of South Asia, may prompt the Chinese to increase their military presence in Tajikistan as well. This would leave Tajikistan squeezed between Russia and China.

Recommendations

As mentioned earlier in this paper, at least a thousand Tajiks have become foreign fighters for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Some of them were killed by competing factions, and some were captured by Kurdish and Iraqi forces, but some have also freely returned to Tajikistan. Like Hussein Abdussamadov, they managed to escape detention without abandoning their allegiance to ISIS. In order to address the threat that ISIS presents to Tajikistan, the Tajik government should consider taking the following actions:

- First, the government should loosen its restrictions on Islam. By tightening its grip on the religion, the Tajik government plays into the narrative of ISIS recruiters.
- Second, the government needs to do more to address the situation in prisons. Despite increased attention, prisons in Tajikistan remain unreformed and unprepared to counter radicalization and recruitment there. Tajik authorities should consider keeping militants of terrorist networks separate from other prisoners.
- Third, the government should create anti-riot troops to maintain order in prisons and take relevant actions when necessary. In the absence of anti-riot troops, authorities have had to use special operations forces, which are typically reserved for military matters. Professionally trained anti-riot troops will ensure that the number of casualties decreases.
- Fourth, the government should consider the idea of reintroducing classes on Islam back into school or university curricula. Official state-designed curricula will help authorities to counter violent extremism and Salafi jihadism. In this regard, widely recognized and respected religious leaders in Tajikistan can help authorities to safeguard the Tajik youth from falling into the traps of violent ideologies.

²¹ Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops," *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html.

²² Craig Nelson and Thomas Grove, "Russia and China Vie for Influence in Central Asia as US Plans Afghan Exit," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-china-vie-for-influence-in-central-asia-as-u-s-plans-afghan-exit-11560850203>.

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