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ST. PETERSBURG ATTACK – CENTRAL ASIA IN FOCUS AGAIN

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Confirmation from the Russian investigators and Kyrgyz Security Services that the suicide bomber responsible for the St. Petersburg metro bombing on 3rd April is a Kyrgyz national, puts the spotlight on the Central Asian region once again. Akbarzhon Jalilov, a native of the Southern Kyrgyz city of Osh, who obtained Russian citizenship in 2011, is the main suspect. The motive behind the attack, which killed 14 people and wounded 50, is not clear and no group has yet claimed the responsibility. However, the initial assumption is religious radicalization and links with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). During further investigations, another six nationals from the Central Asian republics have been detained following a series of anti-terrorism raid by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), the Interior Ministry and National Guard in St. Petersburg on suspicion of recruiting for Islamic militant groups.

This is not just one odd case where the involvement of a Central Asian is been

established in a terror attack. Earlier, in January 2017, Abdulkadir Masharipov, an Uzbek, was involved in Istanbul nightclub terrorist attack, killing 39 people and injuring hundreds of people. Later on the ISIS claimed the responsibility of the attack. Similarly, the attackers who stormed Istanbul's Ataturk airport in June, 2016, reportedly, were Russian, Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationals. The list is long. But these incidents raise particular attention towards increasingly religious radicalisation among Central Asian migrants to Russia and active recruitment of Central Asian people by the Islamic State (IS), hence, posing serious challenges to the regional security.

What makes Central Asian migrants to Russia, radicalized?

The answer lies in increasing poverty, illiteracy, high unemployment, low salaries, job shortages and an idle work force in these republics. Consequently, there are hundreds of thousands of Central Asian people who have migrated to

Russia and are working mainly in oil-fields, construction sites and factories, thus making a big migrant force for the Russian economy. Unfortunately, they are often treated poorly by the local authorities and are subjected to humiliation and discrimination. Their path to radicalization starts from here. As has been rightly explained by Prof. Sergey Abashin of European University in St. Petersburg that “... a poor and uneducated Central Asian departing a rural community in search of work in Russia... is broken away from his traditional life and thrust into the chaos of Russian society, where he comes under pressure. The migrant is marginalized and not able to integrate, living in a ghetto of sorts with other Central Asians who work similarly difficult jobs. The stress of disconnection and isolation makes the migrant vulnerable to radicalization, especially as they seek a greater sense of community via their Islamic faith. In becoming more devoted, the migrant becomes exposed to more radical networks”¹

Further, these humiliating conditions in which migrants work and live, makes the Islamic State’s appeal to join them more attractive. Video statements, through social media, directly addressed to the migrant workers, such as, “working in Russia you become slaves of *Kafirs* (non-believers)...You’re *Churkis* (an offensive Russian word to describe Central Asians) for them, nothing more... Do jihad, come to the Islamic State. It is easier to get (here) from

there”, play an important role in the recruitment process². The young people from these republics find it hard to resist to such calls. Though escaping the socioeconomic situation back home brings them to Russia but the injustice and abuse they face here makes them vulnerable to ISIS propaganda. With the lure of a better life and pay of \$500 to \$1000 per day, the migrants are persuaded to fight for IS. Also, the migrants who have not been paid for months and are in deep financial problems turn to mosque for prayers. During these weaker moments, the recruiter reaches out to help³.

Russia, creating a fertile ground for ISIS recruits from Central Asia is one aspect, otherwise also, growing number of people from the Central Asian region are travelling to West Asia to fight or otherwise support the Islamic State (IS).

Central Asia and ISIS

Though there is no reliable data on IS fighters from Central Asia, but some estimates reveal that there are 500 Uzbeks, 360 Turkmen, 250 Kazakhs, 350 Kyrgyz, and 190 Tajiks fighting with ISIS. The Soufan Group, which provides security and intelligence assessment to countries and multi-national organisations estimated that Central Asian militants comprise the third largest component of foreign fighters for IS⁴ and *Russian* has emerged as the second most popular *language* for ISIS. *This shows the presence of ISIS “sleeper cells” in the region.*

The reasons why Central Asian people support violent Islamist groups are complex. Religion may not be the only one. In fact, not a single reason can be cited as a motivation for them to join the ISIS ranks. It can be money, employment, spirit of Jihad, anger, finding meaning to life, adventure, deception, better living standards, permission to take family along... so on and so forth. For ISIS, Central Asian region offers ideal geographical space and the economic resources (oil/gas) to spread its ideology. Also, ISIS's idea of establishing Khorasan State is becoming inspirational for the Central Asian *Jihadis*. The eventuality that Central Asian fighters who have joined the militant ranks of the ISIS might attempt to return in the region, trained and possibly tasked with carrying out terrorist attacks, is a matter of concern. Presently, with ISIS's losses in Iraq and Syria, they might have appealed the returnees or the new recruits to support the "cause" at "home" as an alternative to joining them in Iraq and Syria. St. Petersburg attack, could be such an example.

From the above discussion, it is quite clear that the issue of religious radicalization is quite serious in the Central Asian region. The region because of its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and West Asia, porous borders, ethnic linkages and internal weaknesses is quite vulnerable. Also because of its geographical location (situated at the Heart of Eurasia) implies that developments here will have wider

implications for the Eurasian region. Therefore, all the major regional and global powers have a key stake in ensuring durable peace and stability in the region. Hence, stepping up joint efforts to combat the scourge of terrorism becomes imperative. The region needs that care.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Quoted from, Catherine Putz, "Challenging the Central Asian Migrant Myth: Separation and Radicalization", *The Diplomat*, 06 April, 2017, <http://the-diplomat.com/2017/04/challenging-the-central-asian-migrant-myth-separation-and-radicalization/>, accessed on 7th April, 2017

² Abduljalil Abdurasulov, "Central Asian respond to the lure of Islamic State", *BBC News*, 02 June, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32960340, accessed on 5th April, 2017

³ Iris Oppelaar, "Central Asia and Islamic State: The Russian Connection", *The Diplomat*, 08 March, 2017, <http://the-diplomat.com/2017/03/central-asia-and-islamic-state-the-russian-connection/>, accessed on 27th March, 2017

⁴ "The Rising Islamic State Threat in Central Asia", www.timesrecordnews.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/02/06/rising-islamic-state-threat-in-central-asia/97555516/, accessed on 07th February, 2017