

# ISIS AND ITS PRESUMED EXPANSION INTO CENTRAL ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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During the Soviet period, it was predicted by some analysts that Islamic radicalism would be the cause of the demise of the Soviet Union. Their belief was based on the fact that underground Islamic activism, which had persisted through the Soviet times, would emerge to challenge the successors to the Communist rule.<sup>1</sup> However, these apprehensions did not prove to be real. Then in 1991, again some voiced the fear that religious extremism, led by radical Islam, would be a serious destabilising factor to the newly independent Central Asian Republics (CARs)<sup>2</sup>. This time, these fears proved to be true, as post-independence, a closer analysis of radicalisation in the CARs reveals that both internal and external factors played an important role in fuelling it.

Central Asia is a complex geopolitical region whose geographical location at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent, together with the abundance of important natural resources not only increases its strategic value within the international arena but also places it at the “heart of

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1. Alexander Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) as cited in ICG Asia report, no.14 “Central Asia: Islamist Mobilization and Regional Security”, March 1, 2001, p.7.
2. Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, “Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2002, p. 194.

**War in Syria and the emergence of the ISIS in 2014 has completely changed the scale and face of the terrorist threat. A growing number of people from the Central Asian region are travelling to West Asia to fight for or otherwise support, the ISIS.**

risks and challenges". Internally, the region has its own local terrorist formations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), etc. Externally, it is surrounded by territories that are deeply impacted by extremist attacks. For example, Afghanistan in the south is a breeding ground for the Taliban, and more recently home to an increased presence of terrorist groups affiliated to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); in the Chinese province of Xinjiang to the east, the Uighur separatist groups are active; and to the west, the region faces the Caucasus, where *jihadist* groups are fighting to establish a North

Caucasian Emirate<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, war in Syria and the emergence of the ISIS in 2014 has completely changed the scale and face of the terrorist threat. A growing number of people from the Central Asian region are travelling to West Asia to fight for, or otherwise support, the ISIS. A number of Central Asian extremist groups are active in Iraq and Syria, where many are taking up leadership positions, and a number of radicalised fighters are returning home assumedly to wage a *jihad* against the ruling regimes.<sup>4</sup> The ISIS, through its radical propaganda, has also been successful in creating its "sleeping cells" and so-called "lone wolves" in the region.<sup>5</sup> Further, it should also be noted that the internal terrorist groups are extremely adaptive. For example, initially the IMU positioned itself as an ally of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but in 2015, it pledged its allegiance to the ISIS. All these factors are serving to amplify the threats and risks to regional

3. "Central Asia's Growing Role in the War on Terror", Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs, [ecfaenglis.objects.dreamhost.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ECFA-Occasional-Paper-Central-Asia-Growing-Role-in-the-war-on-terror\\_rev.pdf?dm\\_i=25TR.3PQGD.FNWMR4.DD8H3.1](http://ecfaenglis.objects.dreamhost.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ECFA-Occasional-Paper-Central-Asia-Growing-Role-in-the-war-on-terror_rev.pdf?dm_i=25TR.3PQGD.FNWMR4.DD8H3.1). Accessed on April 3, 2017.
4. Nodirbek Soliev, "Central Asia's New Threat Landscape: An Assessment", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, vol. 7, issue 6, July 2015, pp. 38-39.
5. Erlan Karin, "Central Asia: Facing Radical Islam", *Russie.Net.Visions*, No.98, ifri, February 2017. Accessed on April 24, 2017.

stability and security. In fact, the recent terrorist attacks in Istanbul (January 2017), St. Petersburg (April 2017) and Stockholm (April 2017), committed by perpetrators with their origin in Central Asia and their probable affiliation with the ISIS underscore the increasingly important role of Central Asians in the ISIS' transnational operations.

Against this background, this paper aims to analyse the threat posed by the creeping expansion of militant extremism and religious radicalism in the Central Asian region. An attempt will be made to explore the extent of the ISIS' presence in the region. Finally, the paper will discuss how India and the CARs can cooperate with each other in fighting terrorism.

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#### **BACKGROUND: RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA**

The independence of the Central Asian Republics brought along a deep crisis for the region, with a leadership that appeared to be directionless and fearful of the future. The apprehensions were genuine as their security, economy, social services, etc., were all enmeshed with Russia. From electricity grids to oil pipelines to roads and the military, these republics were tied to Russia. Moreover, their view of the outside world was also dependent on Moscow. Thus, the leaders of these republics inherited, along with independence, a huge management crisis i.e. problems of inflation, economic development, job creation, foreign policy, security, etc. Consequently, deteriorating economic conditions heightened the local political and ethnic tensions, which led to the rise of ethnic and border disputes between the states. Further, the leaders were aware that the policies of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* had exposed the Central Asians to new political ideas and new religious trends, which could threaten their own political survival. Therefore, to deal with the

crisis, the leaders of all these republics adopted very repressive policies and forced the politically active elements—intellectuals, mullahs, new politically parties, etc.—to go underground.<sup>6</sup> Further, the ruling elites also strengthened their positions by introducing different constitutional reforms and justifying these as necessary steps in that transitional period.

On the other hand, Gorbachev's<sup>7</sup> policy of *Glasnost* had a dramatic impact in reviving Islam, which as a religious tradition and as a form of cultural identity, acquired new meaning. People increasingly started observing Islamic rites like adoption of *Assalam walekum* as a form of greeting, religious marriages, performance of daily prayers and attendance at mosques, etc. There was also a phenomenal increase in the construction of religious places. The number of unaccredited mullahs increased and there was proliferation of mosques, particularly in the rural areas. Where there were no mosques, *chaikhana*s (teahouses) were used as prayer houses.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of 1992, M. Abdulla Islamailov (in charge of international relations at the Spiritual Administration of Religious Affairs of Central Asia) enthusiastically declared, "Three years ago, Uzbekistan had eighty mosques. Today, there are one thousand in the Namangan region alone (Namangan is one of the most religious regions). We had only two *madrassas* in the whole of the Soviet Union for the instruction of religious leaders. Today, there are twelve"<sup>9</sup>. The main reason for this explosion was that Islam had always been the dominant religion of the CARs but under the Soviet rule of seven decades, it had been repressed. However, even during the Soviet period, it was the "unofficial" Islam that sustained the true faith, despite the fact that it had gone underground.

Also, the revival of Islam in the CARs was a cultural, social and religious phenomenon as people publicly wanted to demonstrate their separateness

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6. For details, see Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2002).
  7. Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of the erstwhile Soviet Union, introduced the policies of *Perestroika* (restructuring) and *Glasnost* (openness) in the 1980s.
  8. K. Warikoo, "Soviet Central Asia in Ferment", in K. Warikoo and Dawa Norbu, eds., *Ethnicity and Politics in Central Asia* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1992), pp. 62-70.
  9. Giampaolo R. Capisani, *The Handbook of Central Asia: A Comprehensive Survey of the New Republics* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), p. 124.

from the Communist system. Yet, popular knowledge of the religion of Islam was minimal and information on political activism, ideas and debates in the Islamic world beyond Central Asia was almost non-existent. But the arrival of funds, Korans, literature and mullahs from the neighbouring countries enabled the spread of their particular version of Islam in these countries. Thus, the new religious environment was further strengthened by the arrival of new Islamic missionaries from outside the Central Asian region specially from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and many other Islamic countries. Thousand of mosques were built, Korans and other Islamic literature was brought in from these countries and distributed free amongst the people and itinerant mullahs became public prayer leaders overnight.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, this new Islam was based on the ideas from the Islamic world outside Central Asia. The growing involvement of outside powers increased as the Wahhabi groups from Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and some Sunni fundamentalist parties in Pakistan took advantage of the unprecedented political opportunities. The vacuum created by the lack of leadership from the official Islamic hierarchy allowed fundamentalist groups to proliferate. The refusal of the governments of the CARs to allow Islamic education in government schools resulted in the spread of unofficial Islamic schools. People learned to bypass official Islam as they set up their own mosques and other structures.<sup>11</sup>

Further, Afghanistan has always been crucial in the security of the Central Asian states. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan set in place a model of the extremist Islamic fundamentalism unknown in this part of the Muslim world. With the help of Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan became a base for exporting Islamic militancy to these neighbouring countries. It became the centre for training terrorists and spreading instability in the region.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Rashid, n.6, p.43.

11. Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 244-45.

12. Meena Singh Roy, "Terrorism in Central Asia: Imperatives for Regional Cooperation" in Mahavir Singh, ed., *International Terrorism and Religious Extremism- Challenges to Central and South Asia* (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2004), p. 187.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FERGANA VALLEY

It needs to be mentioned here that in the Fergana Valley, which has always been the most religious part of the region, radical Islamic elements were on the rise and had transformed the area, using radical Islam, into a stronghold for the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). It became the “educational centre” for Central Asia’s fundamentalists. Most of Central Asia’s religious figures were still in the ‘proselytising phase’, more interested in training new clerics and increasing the level of religious learning among the population than in getting the laws of society to conform to those of Islam.<sup>13</sup> A massive propaganda operation was underway in outlying villages in order to reconvert the population. “First Fergana, then Uzbekistan and then the whole Central Asia will become an Islamic state”, said Imam Abdul Ahmad in Namangan. Imams in the Fergana Valley aspired to overthrow the ‘Communist government’ of Uzbek President Karimov and spearhead an Islamic revolution throughout Central Asia.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the discussion of radicalism and extremism would be incomplete without mentioning the importance of Fergana Valley. The valley, comprising the territories of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has been the centre of many radical or Islamist movements. At first, four radical Islamist groups were active here: Adolat(Justice), Baraka (Blessings), Tauba (Repentance), and Islam Lashkarlori (Warriors of Islam). These groups existed underground during the Soviet period, but emerged in the era of Gorbachev’s reforms. Over time, other groups also became active in the region, including the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and its splinter groups Akramiya and Hizb-un-Nusrat, as well as Uzun Soqol (Long Beards), Tablighi Jamaat and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>15</sup>

The development of these groups was not spontaneous as they were promoted and supported by many foreign organisations. In early 1992,

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13. Jed C. Snyder, *After Empire: The Emerging Geopolitics of Central Asia* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1995).

14. Rashid, n.11, p. 100.

15. Zeyno Baran, S. Frederic Starr and Svante E. Cornell, “Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU”, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Programme, [http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2006\\_07\\_SRP\\_BaranStarrCornell\\_Radicalism.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2006_07_SRP_BaranStarrCornell_Radicalism.pdf). Accessed on February 1, 2017.

missionary groups from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan illegally entered the Fergana region and had negotiations with local religious leaders, aiming to establish an Islamic republic.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the Fergana Valley, other areas where radicalism flourished were Tajikistan (Tajikistan went through a murderous civil war from 1992-97) and southern Kyrgyzstan which was very much the result of the growing interaction between Tajikistan and Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation of the latter. However, northern Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were not affected by the same degree of radicalisation.<sup>17</sup>

In view of the increase in Islamic sentiments, the Central Asian governments tried to fit the bill by embracing Islam. Most of the presidents of the CARs performed *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to the Islamic holy sites; Uzbek President Islam Karimov was sworn into office holding the Koran; and Islamic structures and symbols were restored in all the five republics, etc. At the same time, they maintained strict control over the religious groups to avoid the formation of any sort of political opposition, thus, undermining the autonomy of important religious institutions. Further, funds from foreign Islamic organisations were banned and all communications with them (banking, commercial, charitable, etc.) were closely monitored.<sup>18</sup> In Uzbekistan, large-scale operations were conducted to confiscate weapons, and the activities of the IRP were banned and many Islamist activists were arrested.<sup>19</sup>

The control exercised by the governments of the five republics, along with other internal and external factors, set the stage for the spread of religious extremism and the resultant unrest in the region. To understand the threat from the religious extremist groups, it is imperative to know about the nature and activities of these groups in the region.

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16. V. Nagendra Rao, "Religious Extremism in Central Asia: Towards A Conceptualisation", in V. Nagendra Rao and Mohammad Munir Alam, eds., *Central Asia: Present Challenges and Future Prospects* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2005), p. 102.

17. Murat Laumulin, "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia", in K. Warikoo, ed., *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 140-141.

18. Sebastiano Mori and Leonardo Taccetti, "Rising Extremism in Central Asia? Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia", [www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS\\_Briefing\\_2016\\_Mori\\_Taccetti\\_central\\_asia.pdf](http://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS_Briefing_2016_Mori_Taccetti_central_asia.pdf). Accessed on January 19, 2017.

19. Rao, n.16, p. 103.

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## **EXTREMIST GROUPS OF CENTRAL ASIAN REGION**

At present, the several Islamic groups that are operational in the region, are quite different from each other. Some are deeply extremist while others are comparatively moderate in their outlook. For example, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is the most aggressive among them all.

### *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*

This group was formed by the leaders of the Adolat, Islam Lashkarlari and Tauba movements i.e. Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, in 1998. Juma Namangani was the military leader of the group while Tahir Yuldashev was the political leader. Both were formerly from the Namangan province located in Uzbekistan's portion of the Fergana Valley. It had its headquarters in Afghanistan. Several thousand Uzbek and Tajik religious extremists underwent training in Afghan-based camps for fighting and acts of terror and sabotage.<sup>20</sup> Several terrorist attacks aimed at overthrowing the Uzbek government and at establishing an Islamic state were perpetrated by this group in the last two decades. Among the attacks attributed to the IMU was a series of bomb attacks in Tashkent in February 1999, targeted against the then Uzbek President Islam Karimov, incursions in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, in August 1999 and August 2000 respectively, hostage taking in Kyrgyzstan, and violence in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, etc.<sup>21</sup> In a bid to widen its scope, in 2001, the group renamed itself as Hizb-i-islami or the Islamic Party of Turkestan, thus, declaring that all its members

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20. Valentin Kunin, "Kabul to be Centre for War against all Infidels", *National Herald*, September 17, 2000. Also see, Tatiana Sinitsyna, "Uzbekistan- Nine years in company with Independence", *National Herald*, September 1, 2000.

21. For details, see Poonam Mann, "Religious Extremism in Central Asia", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. xxv, no.9, December 2001, pp. 1032-35..



were not only Uzbeks but also Uigurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Chechens. This also reflected the expanding aspirations of its leadership. Now they wanted to liberate the whole of Turkistan—from Xinjiang to the Caspian Sea. They hoped that the overthrow of Uzbek President Karimov would have a domino effect and make the other Central Asian states weaker.<sup>22</sup>

Further, the IMU received critical support and training from the Taliban in Afghanistan. In fact, it acquired the permanent infrastructure in the form of training camps over there. It not only supported the Taliban's fight against the Northern Alliance but also intensified its contacts with other terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda. In the post September 11, 2001 crisis, when the United States started its attacks against Taliban, the IMU offered full support to the latter.<sup>23</sup> In fact, it became a vanguard of the Taliban forces in the north of the country, with Namangani becoming the commander-in-chief of all Taliban forces in the north. During the course of the fighting, the movement suffered heavy losses and its fighters were forced to flee to the tribal territories in Pakistan. This also ended the first phase of radical Islamic militancy in Central Asia that was quite violent, with attempts by the extremists to take over power by a revolution or military actions by exploiting the weakness of the newly formed state structures of the CARs.

Of course, the enormous losses, including the death of Juma Namagani, after September 11, comprised a big blow to the radical Islamists in Central Asia, but it was also considered mainly as a temporary lull. As the series of events that have occurred since 2004 indicate, the problem of violent extremism has not gone away. These groups have managed to adapt to the new reality, changed their shape, methods and tactics and

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220 Daan van der Schriek, "The Central Asian Taliban", *The Times of Central Asia*, vol. 3, no. 42(137), October 18, 2001, p.5.

23. Ibid.

started to achieve some successes. For example, Uzbekistan was hit by two waves of terrorist attacks in 2004, including the region's first ever female suicide bombing. The first attack was aimed at the Uzbek police and private and commercial facilities, while the second one targeted the US and Israeli Embassies in Uzbekistan as well as the prosecutor general's office. Further, the Kyrgyz 'Revolution' and Andijan events of 2005 explain the strengthening of the radical groups. Incidents like January 2006, when terrorists raided a Tajik prison, killed the warden and freed a prisoner with alleged IMU ties, and the May 2006, armed men's attack at a border post killing several guards and seizing a stockpile of weapons in Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, raised the concerns of the authorities.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Kazakhstan, which was till now considered as being free from the occurrences of Islamic terrorism, witnessed several violent and terrorist attacks in 2011. The attacks which included shooting, bombings, suicide attacks and skirmishes with the law-enforcement forces, were carried out by a new organisation, the Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate) with a goal to radicalise the Salafist community in Kazakhstan. It is believed that the organisation is not an independent one but only a cell within the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) which represents the IMU's armed splinter.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout these years, the governments of these republics have managed to control the situation and these extremist groups have not succeeded in achieving their desired objective in the region. However, in due course of time, the IMU, by forging an understanding with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, has evolved beyond the traditional region of interest and is now reaching a global scale i.e. waging global *jihad*. As revealed in one of their statements, "IMU is continuing its *jihadi* activities in the Khorasan region which started 12 years ago...And we hope from Allah that the opening of Khorasan is very near following future conquests in Mawarounnahr region".<sup>26</sup> Along

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24. Baran, et.al., n.15.

25. Jund al-Khilafa [Kazakhstan], <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/jak.htm>, Accessed on February 17, 2017.

26. Bill Roggio, "IMU, Taliban Launched Joint Suicide Assault in Panjshir", [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/imu\\_taliban\\_launched.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/imu_taliban_launched.php). Accessed on February 16, 2017.

with the Taliban, the IMU has participated in fighting in the provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, Balkh, Baghlan, Samangan, Jowzjan, Faryab, Badakhshan and Badghis, which border Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The IMU, along with the IJU, has imparted extensive militant training to terrorists from around the world and their fighters have experience of combat fighting. They possess a wide arsenal of weapons and equipment. They have their own websites and are active on the internet *jihadi* forums and online social networking services, produce and publish audio-visual propaganda materials in a number of languages. Thus, through the use of digital technology, they have been successful in widening their social support and social recruitment base.<sup>27</sup>

Another significant move by the IMU in recent years has been the pledging of its allegiance to the ISIS, despite the fact that there exist fundamental differences between the Taliban, the IMU's long-term ally, and ISIS. However, it is claimed that when Usman Gazi, the leader of the IMU, announced his loyalty to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi of the ISIS, he was killed by the Taliban in 2015 as punishment for his betrayal.<sup>28</sup> However, serious concerns still remain about terrorism in Uzbekistan as a large number of Uzbek fighters have been united under the Kateebat Imam Al- Bukhari (KIB), a Central Asian militant unit fighting in Syria since 2013.<sup>29</sup> In the process of shifting loyalties, while the IMU's leaders remained the militants from Uzbekistan, and its declared goal the establishment of an Islamic state in Central Asia, it lost its Central Asian character and focussed on fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the side of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and later on, in Syria, along with the ISIS (treating Central Asia only as a source of recruits, rather than a theatre

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27. Jozef Lang, "The Radical Islamic Militants of Central Asia", OSW Report, Centre for Eastern Studies, November 2013, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-report/2013-11-13/radical-islamic-militants-central-asia>. Accessed on February 1, 2017.

28. Jacob Zenn, "The IMU is Extinct : What Next for Central Asia", [www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/articles.html/053530b5-59e6-47d5-a9e7-e320823796d7](http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/articles.html/053530b5-59e6-47d5-a9e7-e320823796d7). Accessed on January 16, 2017.

29. KTB is a subsidiary branch of the Taliban in Syria. See Nodirbek Soliev, "Annual Threat Assessment : Central Asia", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, vol. 9, issue 1, January, 2017, [www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CTTA-January2017.pdf](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CTTA-January2017.pdf). Accessed on February 10, 2017.

of operations).<sup>30</sup> As a result of the civil war in Syria since 2011, the influx of recruits to the IMU also significantly decreased, yet it remained a serious security threat. It not only served as a source of potential recruits, but mainly as a cultural role model of the modern post-Soviet *jihad* – that enabled the phenomenon of mass departures of volunteers to Syria and Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

### *Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT)*

The comparatively moderate Hizb-ut-Tahrir is a transnational Islamic religious-political organisation which has presence over 20 countries across the world. It seeks implementation of the pure Islamic doctrine and the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia with an ultimate goal of uniting the entire *ummah*, or Islamic world community into a single Caliphate.<sup>32</sup> According to the organisation, the creation of an Islamic state in Central Asia is to be realised in three different stages:

- First, members of the group will undertake underground work, recruiting young people into the party and providing training to them. This underground work will help create a leadership structure.
- After establishing the structure, the members will openly declare their objectives through distributing leaflets and organising meetings, processions and public appeals.
- Once the structure is deemed sufficiently strong, the organisation will overthrow the incumbent constitutional and secular regimes and then will build the Islamic state according to the *Shariah*.<sup>33</sup>

The group has a large following in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It is estimated that there are more than 10,000 followers. Though the group has not been involved in any violent action or any known terrorist activity as it wants to achieve its objectives through non-violence, its radical ideology is

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30. Maciejfalkowski, Józeflang, "HOMO JIHADICUS: Islam in the Former USSR and the Phenomenon of the Post-Soviet Militants in Syria and Iraq" (Warsaw: Center for Eastern Studies, September 2015), available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194511/homojihadicus.pdf>. Accessed on July 5, 2017.

31. Ibid.

32. "Hizbut-Tahrir al Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation)", available at [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizb-ut-tahrir.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizb-ut-tahrir.htm). Accessed on July 5, 2017.

33. As quoted in Col T.J. Razakov, "Religious Extremism in Central Asia", *The Times of Central Asia*, vol.3, no.44(139), 01 November, 2001, p.1.

considered a major threat to stability in the region. Even if the HT opposes the aggressive *jihad*, it uses the same “pre-violent *jihad*” strategies and tactics as the Muslim Brotherhood to achieve the creation of an Islamic state in Central Asia and beyond.<sup>34</sup>

Further, an important point to be noted is that the radical threat present in the Central Asian region is transnational in nature. The radical groups mostly operate via Central Asia into their immediate neighbourhood and beyond. The porous borders of the region make it simple for them to move with relative freedom and intensify their links with other extremist and violent movements active in the Heartland. One such group that operates from Xinjiang to Waziristan is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which is considered a terrorist organisation by China, and has perpetrated several attacks in Central Asia and China. The members of ETIM are supposedly getting training in Pakistan and Afghanistan, work in close contact with the IMU and are getting finance from Al Qaeda.<sup>35</sup>

#### ***Central Asia and ISIS***

The war in Iraq and Syria has been a game changer so far as religious extremism is concerned. The ISIS’ skillful marketing has given it a global reach. Manifestations of the ISIS’ reach have shown up in places where dramatic *jihadist* terrorism was not an expected threat, such as Brussels and Paris, etc. It has built up its ranks by recruiting fighters from across the globe. The potential for fighters to return to their home states with an objective to undertake organised *jihad* is a major international security concern. Central Asia is no exception. Rather, Central Asia is considered to be the third largest source of foreign fighters in Syria. The advent of the ISIS has led to the comparative decline in the old militant organisations in the Central Asian region, on the one hand; and, on the other, popularised the trend to travel to distant lands to engage in *jihad*. There are divergent view-points among the analysts on the issue of the ISIS’ threat to the Central Asian region. Some

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34. Sebastiano Mori and Leonardo Taccetti, “Rising Extremism in Central Asia?: Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia”, Briefing Paper, available at [www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS\\_Briefing\\_2016\\_Mori\\_Taccetti\\_central\\_asia.pdf](http://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS_Briefing_2016_Mori_Taccetti_central_asia.pdf), accessed on January 19, 2017.

35. Ibid.

experts are of the opinion that because of the geographical distance between the two regions and the Central Asians defining themselves as different from people of the West Asian region—psychologically, politically, culturally—the fear of the ISIS has been exaggerated.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the ISIS' ultimate plan to expand its territories to West Asia, North Africa, mainland Spain, Iran, Russia's southern territories, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent is a major concern. The fact that a number of Central Asian groups are active in Iraq and Syria, with many taking up leadership positions, and a number of radicalised fighters returning home, assumedly to wage a *jihad* against the ruling regimes, increases the fear.<sup>37</sup> Hence, the emerging threats should not be ignored.

The militants from the CARs are divided into *jamaats* on the basis of ethnicity and language. This has led to the formation of the 'Kazakh Jamaat' and 'Tajik Jamaat' that are fighting alongside the ISIS. The Uzbeks, however, have established the Kateebat Imam al Bukhari (KIB) and Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), and they are fighting alongside the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra.<sup>38</sup> These Jamaats and Kateebats are also using digital /social media for propaganda and attracting more people from the region.

Though there is no reliable data on ISIS fighters from Central Asia, some estimates reveal that there are 500 Uzbeks, 360 Turkmen, 250 Kazakhs, 350 Kyrgyz and 190 Tajiks fighting with it.<sup>39</sup> The Soufan Group, which provides security and intelligence assessment to countries and multi-national organisations has estimated that Central Asian militants comprise the third largest component of foreign fighters in the ISIS.<sup>40</sup> This shows the presence of ISIS "sleeper cells" in the region. The emergence of an ISIS flag on a Tashkent bridge in September 2014, further sent shock waves across the region. This

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36. Timur Toktonaliev, "Does Islamic State Threaten Central Asia?", <http://iwpr.net/global-voices/does-islamic-state-threaten-central-asia>. Accessed on February 7, 2017.

37. Nodirbek Soliev, "Central Asia's New Threat Landscape: An Assessment", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, vol. 7, issue. July 6, 2015, pp.38-39.

38. Ibid.

39. Andrei Kazantsev, "Fragile Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged by Radical Islam", *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 1, January-March 2016, p. 205.

40. "The Rising Islamic State Threat in Central Asia", available at [www.timesrecordnews.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/02/06/rising-islamic-state-threat-in-central-asia/97555516/](http://www.timesrecordnews.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/02/06/rising-islamic-state-threat-in-central-asia/97555516/). Accessed on February 7, 2017.

was followed by Abu-al-Baghdadi appointing a Tajik *jihadi* as the *amir* of Syria's Raqqa province<sup>41</sup> and the defection of Tajikistan's Head of Special Forces, Col. Gulmurod Khalimov, to the ISIS in May 2015.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the ISIS has been successful in attracting recruits from the region. As mentioned earlier, it is not any one single factor that can be cited as a motivation for them to join the ISIS ranks. It could be money, employment, spirit of *jihad*, anger, finding meaning to life, adventure, ignorance, deception, better living standards, permission to take the family along....the list

is long. But for the ISIS, the Central Asian region offers the ideal geographical space and the economic resources (oil/gas) to spread its ideology. Also, the ISIS' idea of establishing the Khorasan State is becoming inspirational for the Central Asian *jihadis*.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the possibility that after suffering setbacks in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS is seeking to shift the main focus of its activity from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and the neighbouring states, needs due attention. Obviously, it is looking for new territories. As Gen. Andrey Novikov, the head of the Anti-Terrorist Centre (ATC) of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), while addressing two UN Security Council committees, emphasised, "The Taliban never laid claim to territories outside Afghanistan, while the Islamic State in 2015 announced the creation of a new 'province' with a center in Afghanistan that should also have included the territories of the Central Asian states."<sup>44</sup>

Presently, the ISIS fighters are engaged in a bitter confrontation with some Taliban forces over control over some Afghan territories. Therefore, the

**The prospect of the ISIS setting a goal of expanding its influence in the northern regions of Afghanistan and gaining access to the border regions of the Central Asian states as well as to the Chinese Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region cannot be ruled out.**

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41. P.Stobdan, "ISISinCentralAsia", [www.idsa.in/issuebrief/isisinCentralAsia\\_pstobdan\\_221014?q=print/15154](http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/isisinCentralAsia_pstobdan_221014?q=print/15154). Accessed on January 12, 2017.

42. Soliev, n.37.

43. Stobdan, n. 41.

44. "ISIS Shifting Focus to Afghanistan, Threatens Central Asia: CIS Anti-Terrorism Chief", available at <https://www.rt.com/news/393817-isis-focus-activity-afghanistan/>. Accessed on July, 4 2017.

prospect of the ISIS setting a goal of expanding its influence in the northern regions of Afghanistan and gaining access to the border regions of the Central Asian states as well as to the Chinese Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region cannot be ruled out.<sup>45</sup> Also, since the ISIS fighters include people from Central Asia and other post-Soviet republics, the Afghan branch of the ISIS is definitely specialised for Central Asia, and Russian is one of its working languages.<sup>46</sup> How far, the ISIS will be able to achieve its goals is yet to be seen. Considering the Central Asian region's geographical proximity to Afghanistan and West Asia, the porous borders, ethnic linkages and internal weaknesses, the risk factor cannot be ignored. Also, its geographical location (situated at the heart of Eurasia) implies that developments here will have wider implications for the Eurasian region. Hence, all the major regional and global powers have a key stake in ensuring durable peace and stability in the region.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Extremism and terrorism comprise a global phenomenon. The process of universalisation and globalisation of religious extremism has intensified the interdependence between Islamic organisations, widening their social support and social recruitment base. Religious extremists have been able to attract recruits from different backgrounds, professions and countries. Therefore, an unstable extended neighbourhood could pose a major security challenge to any country. India is no exception. Besides, India has been bearing the brunt of this menace in its state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and elsewhere for more than two decades. The militants, who receive support, safe sanctuaries and training from across the border, have declared a *jihad* against India and their activities are posing a challenge to India's integrity. Therefore, given their transnational nature, the *jihadist* groups of the Central Asian region, including their links with the Taliban and other militant groups in the

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45. Ibid.

46. "10,000 ISIS Fighters in Afghanistan, Trained to Expand to Central Asia and Russia", available at <https://www.rt.com/news/340200-isis-afghanistan-threaten-russia/>. Accessed on July 4, 2017.



Af-Pak region, could create problems for India. The radical forces will continue to whip up *jihadist* ideologies in the region and, if not checked, will eventually pose a serious threat to India's security, especially in the state of Kashmir.

Secondly, instability in Central Asia could be a challenge because of the median position of Afghanistan. The defeat of the Taliban and the ongoing war on terror has not succeeded in destroying the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan or in stabilising the country. In fact, it is been argued that terrorism has received a new lease post 9/11 situation. The hub of terrorist activities has gradually shifted to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. It is primarily from bases in the FATA that terrorists are carrying out their attacks and spreading insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup> With the footprints of the ISIS there, the situation is getting worse. Destabilisation of Central Asia, which is tensely connected to the developments in Afghanistan, can produce rapid strengthening of all kinds of Islamic radicalism in the area and increased competition between the major powers, with their attempt to use the chaos there to their own advantage.<sup>48</sup> It will become difficult for India to balance its interests with all the big powers. For example, at the moment, the IMU is more active in the FATA region and its aim largely is to fight for the global *jihad*. Due to the past collaboration with other *jihadi* groups, it would be difficult to negate the possibility of the IMU joining hands with the *jihadi* outfits that target India. To add to this potent mix, the ISIS has already declared its aim to establish the Khorasan State which borders India. The perception of the threat by India and by the other regional / major players like Russia, China, Pakistan, etc. seems to be different, with the latter three wanting to involve the Taliban in a negotiated settlement with Afghanistan. The CARs have not indicated until now what line they will follow. But from the Indian perspective, this is a very important challenge.

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47. Nirmala Joshi, ed., *Reconnecting India and Central Asia-Emerging Security and Economic Dimensions* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2010), available at [https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2010\\_03\\_MONO\\_Joshi\\_India-Central-Asia.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2010_03_MONO_Joshi_India-Central-Asia.pdf). Accessed on July 6, 2017.

48. Fyodor Lukyanov, "India and Central Asia-Responses", *FPRC Journal*, no.2, 2012, available at <http://www.fprc.in/pdf/J-10.pdf>. Accessed on July 6, 2017.

Thirdly, with the rise of terrorism and extremism, there is fear that the terrorists could target the hydrocarbon resources of the Central Asian region, which energy-hungry India is also keen to access.

Fourthly, closely associated with the rise of religious extremism and terrorism is the relative growth in other nefarious activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling of small arms and organised crime. These negative tendencies have given rise to powerful cartels which, in turn, sustain religious extremism and terrorism. In this context, both India and particularly some of the CARs, are being used as transport corridors. Such activities pose another challenge for India and the CARs on the security front.

Thus, India has a critical interest in maintaining close and cooperative relations with all the CARs in this task of securing itself and its extended neighbourhood against terrorism. In fact, both have taken various steps to counter religious extremism. For example, India has set up Joint Working Groups (JWGs) to deal with extremism and counter-terrorism with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The aim of each JWG is to review and analyse the regional security scenario, coordinate information, and share experiences. The JWG frameworks also envision the training of paramilitary personnel. Regular meetings are held to share information and concerns on this crucial area. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are also India's declared strategic partners in the region.<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, another major area of cooperation for India and the CARs is in peace and stability of Afghanistan where both have major stakes. India and the CARs previously cooperated in helping the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. The CARs are also appreciative of the Indian efforts with project financing and training of people that India has undertaken in Afghanistan. They have done their bit by throwing open transit facilities, providing power and collaborating with India and Afghanistan.

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49. Address by Secretary (East) at a seminar on "Enhancing India-Central Asia Engagement Prospects and Issues", organised by the United Service Institution of India, March 18, 2013, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/21540/Address+by+Secretary+East+at+a+Seminar+on+Enhancing+IndiaCentral+Asia+Engagement+Prospects+and+Issues+organized+by+The+United+Service+Institution+of+India>. Accessed on February 20, 2017.

Thirdly, both are working together through various multilateral and regional organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA), etc. Among its structures, the SCO has established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) which serves to promote cooperation among member states against terrorism, separatism and extremism, and for intelligence sharing and military exercises and cooperation in the defence context. Now, after acquiring full membership of the SCO in June 2107, India can jointly work with RATS for getting key intelligence information on cyber security and the regional terror outfits and their networks. The mutual exchanges on counter-terrorism issues would be beneficial for all the stakeholders.

But, perhaps, this is not sufficient. A lot more needs to be done. The above mentioned measures are just the one aspect of the solution. The answer lies in bringing back the disillusioned people by winning their “hearts and minds”. India needs to get engaged on a large scale in the economic development of the CARs as these republics are still struggling with their low socio-economic conditions. Till date, India has mostly relied on its soft cultural power and earlier goodwill, dating back to the time of the erstwhile Soviet Union. But today, there is a whole new generation of young unemployed people, who may not have the same feelings for India, and who can be radicalised very quickly. Therefore, economic activity is vital to engage these young people. Economic development will also help to undercut the appeal of the Islamic radicals. Given India’s economic potential, vast experience and institutional capabilities, the country can add value and share best practices at both bilateral and regional levels.