



EVOLVING SECURITY LANDSCAPE: CENTRAL ASIA'S TERRORIST NETWORKS AND THEIR TRANSNATIONAL IMPACT



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The recent killing of two suspected militants by Tajikistan's security forces is raising fresh concerns in Central Asia regarding the Taliban's effectiveness in preventing attacks by terror groups based in Afghanistan.¹ In fact, the United Nations Security Council report also mentions that Afghanistan continues to pose a significant terrorist threat to the Central Asian Region (CARs).² These threats emanate from various extremist organisations like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K), Al-Qaida, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as well as East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Group, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), Khatiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ), Jamaat Ansarullah (unlisted), and others. While the Taliban primarily operates in Afghanistan, there have been instances where terrorist organisations in Central Asia have sought assistance from, or collaborated with, the Taliban. The major terrorist groups that claim Taliban's assistance include the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and Hizb ut-Tahrir.

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Mapping the Terror Groups in the Central Asian Region

East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

While primarily active in China's Xinjiang region, the ETIM has also shown a presence in Central Asia. The ETIM is a group that has utilised violence to advance its objective of establishing an independent 'East Turkistan'.³ ETIM has been designated a terrorist

organisation by the UN Security Council's Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee in 2002. However, the year 2020 saw the group being removed from the US list of terrorist organisations, as per the country's assertion that there is no reliable evidence that ETIM is still functioning.⁴ However, ETIM has maintained tight relations with the Taliban, Al-Qaida, and the IMU ever since it was founded. In fact, Al-Qaida, as well as organised crime activities like drug trafficking, arms smuggling, kidnapping, extortion, and looting, were the main sources of finance for ETIM activities.

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China, which has charged ETIM with being responsible for over 200 terrorist acts in Xinjiang between 1990 and 2001, carefully regulates information regarding the group's activities. China has charged ETIM with carrying out assaults that resulted in the deaths of 162 people by bombing buses, markets, and government buildings, as well as killing local authorities, Muslim leaders, and civilians.⁵ The Chinese government has also charged the organisation with planning violence outside of its borders, claiming that ETIM was behind two attacks on the Chinese embassy in Turkey in the late 1990s and was also involved in the murder of Nighmet Bosakof, the head of the Uighur Youth Alliance in Kyrgyzstan, in 2000.⁶ In addition to being a threat to its internal security, China sees the ETIM as a threat to the progress of its two major infrastructure projects, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As important commercial routes cross through Xinjiang, the region becomes key for China's infrastructure projects.⁷

Further, with the change in power dynamics in Afghanistan, the Taliban have become strategically important for the region's stability. However, the future of the CARs will be impacted by how the Taliban evolves from being a fundamentalist terror group to a legitimate government entity at the international level. It seems highly unlikely that the Taliban would jettison its jihadist tendency, including its connections with terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda or ETIM. The ETIM itself had vociferously congratulated the Taliban when it came to power in Afghanistan, describing their rise to power as the result of a protracted and difficult battle and God's major gift to Muslims around the world.⁸ In fact, China is worried that due to the Taliban's failure to take any significant measures against the ETIM, the Tehreek-i-Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) will be effective in obtaining support from local jihadist Uyghur groups in the region. Hence, China is concerned about ETIM and its connections to at least three terrorist organisations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, including the Baloch Liberation Army, IS-K, and Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. These three organisations have openly expressed anti-Chinese sentiments.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The IMU was originally formed in the early 1990s with the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. It has been active in Central Asia and Afghanistan and has had historical ties with the Taliban. The IMU and its offshoot, the IJU, posed the greatest terrorist threat to the region during the first 15 years of Central Asian independence.⁹ Between 1999 and 2000, the IMU organised hostage-taking armed operations in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from its base in war-torn Tajikistan. Early in August 1999, a mountain town in the Batken region was taken by an IMU detachment.¹⁰ A mayor and three government personnel were kidnapped by IMU on August 9 in the Osh area in southwest Kyrgyzstan.¹¹ The Kyrgyz Interior Ministry Forces commander, as well as a meteorological station, were also taken captive by the militants.¹² Four Japanese geologists were among the additional hostages that the IMU abducted on August 23.¹³ Moreover, the IMU was held accountable by the Uzbek government for explosions in Tashkent in 1999, while the IJU was held accountable for assaults in Bukhara and Tashkent in 2004.

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Further, there is growing agreement that the IMU was instrumental in the narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan to Osh in Kyrgyzstan, where it is more likely that the drugs were distributed to further channels that could transport them farther north and west. The IMU's camps and activities in the late 1990s were geographically close to the primary drug trafficking routes into Kyrgyzstan, which suggests, at the very least, a mutually beneficial relationship between the two groups.¹⁴ IMU has utilised both Afghanistan and Pakistan as bases to launch attacks into Central Asia. CARs, particularly Uzbekistan, suffered tremendously as a result of IMU's engagement in transnational terrorism and criminal activity. A group's engagement in criminal activity alters the equation, determining how it interacts with society and the state. Crime makes the group richer, allowing it to buy more advanced weapons, hire more fighters by paying them, bribe government officials, and spread its ideology throughout the populace.¹⁵ Hence, IMU is considered to be both criminal and terrorist in nature because of its direct involvement in the drug trade as well as its explicit political declarations.

Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)

The IJU is an extremist group with origins in Uzbekistan. It emerged in the early 2000s and has conducted attacks in Central Asia. It has reportedly received support from the Taliban and operates in close collaboration with them. Between March 28 and April 1, 2004, IJU carried out several suicide bombings (as well as other attacks) in a local marketplace,

targeted Uzbek police in Tashkent, and attacked a house in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. IJU released a statement on April 11, 2004, taking credit for all terrorist activities in Uzbekistan.¹⁶ On July 30, 2004, IJU carried out synchronised bombing assaults in Tashkent, targeting the Israeli and American embassies as well as the prosecutor general's office, leaving at least two people dead and nine injured. IJU also took credit for several assaults on International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel in Afghanistan in the spring and summer of 2008. Further, by 2013, 3,000 IMU and IJU fighters were actively involved with the Taliban, as well as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Al-Qaeda. These terrorist organisations used the 'Af-Pak' area as their base to plan 19 terrorist attacks in the CARs between 2008 and 2018, which resulted in the deaths of 138 individuals, primarily in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷

Terrorism in Central Asia primarily represents a political concern, largely intertwined with the presence of ethnic conflicts either within or in close proximity to the respective countries. Moreover, various public and political factions have also exploited terrorism and political extremism as instruments in their pursuit of power.

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a more moderate and political Islamic organisation. It advocates for the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate.¹⁸ It has a presence in Central Asia and has been subject to government crackdowns. While the group itself does not have direct ties to the Taliban, they share similar ideological goals. Although Hizb ut-Tahrir condemns the aggressive jihad practised by certain other Muslim organisations, it employs the same "pre-violent Jihad" ideas and tactics to achieve the establishment of an Islamic State in Central Asia and beyond.¹⁹ This terror group is active in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This group is a cause for security concern as it aims to sow instability in the region by removing existing administrations and forcing their political ideologies on the people residing in Central Asia by provoking their religious feelings.

Factors Fuelling Terrorism in Central Asia

There are a multitude of factors responsible for terrorism in the CARs. First, the proliferation of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia is predominantly driven by endogenous political factors.²⁰ Scholars have contended that terrorism in Central Asia primarily represents a political concern, largely intertwined with the presence of ethnic conflicts either within or in close proximity to the respective countries. Moreover, various public and political factions have also exploited terrorism and political extremism as instruments in their pursuit of power. Concurrently, the escalating influence of religion on diverse social and political aspects in Central Asia has accentuated the significance of religious factors in shaping the rationales and contexts behind the escalation of political extremism. Further, on the global stage, geopolitical dynamics have engendered

persistent political rivalries and disputes among Central Asian countries, providing a conducive environment for the sustenance and proliferation of extremism and terrorism. In fact, extremist entities have evolved beyond mere criminal organisations and now serve as pawns in the context of larger geopolitical rivalries.²¹ Secondly, terrorism and extremism in Central Asia are closely interlinked with the region's socio-economic challenges.²² The prevailing economic backwardness has engendered a proliferation of social issues, leading to a rise in criminal activities and social conflicts. Furthermore, this socio-economic adversity has exacerbated ethnic tensions and contributed to the deterioration of security conditions in specific areas within Central Asia. Thirdly, the return of terrorists further complicates the counterterrorism landscape in Central Asia. Foreign Islamic extremist entities not only disseminate extremist political ideologies in the region but also extend financial support and weaponry to local Islamic extremist organisations. They actively aid in establishing military training camps, impart training to new recruits, and collaborate with Central Asian extremist groups to orchestrate diverse forms of terrorist incidents. Additionally, immigration factors contribute significantly to the dynamics of terrorism in Central Asia.²³

Terrorist organisations exploit social networks to establish interactive relationships and employ online and offline strategies to entice young immigrants, especially those unrecognised by other countries. Their focus lies in stimulating a profound sense of identity, belonging, and purpose among these youth living abroad. Consequently, immigration activities create a favourable environment for the 'spillover' of terrorism.

Cross-Border influence of Terrorist Groups

Terror groups in the Central Asian region have the potential to cause a spillover effect throughout the area due to several interconnected factors. For instance, these terror groups engage in radicalization and recruitment efforts, drawing foreign fighters from neighbouring countries who might later return home with new skills and motivations, posing a security threat. The region's porous borders facilitate the movement of terrorists, weapons, and funds, making it easier for these groups to evade law enforcement and extend their activities beyond national boundaries. Moreover, Central Asia's ethnic and religious diversity can be exploited by these terrorist groups to advance their agendas, leading to attacks that exacerbate tensions and result in retaliatory violence in neighbouring regions. Conflict and instability caused by terrorist activities can trigger large-scale displacement, creating a refugee crisis that impacts neighbouring countries, potentially leading to further security challenges. Additionally, the financing of terrorist operations through illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and kidnapping, can spill over into neighbouring economies, fueling corruption and instability. In fact, outside actors with interests in the region may also support different terrorist groups as proxies in geopolitical struggles, further intensifying conflicts and expanding the reach of terrorist

activities beyond national borders. Furthermore, cyber terrorism is employed by these groups to spread propaganda, recruit members, and plan attacks, influencing vulnerable populations in neighbouring countries and potentially leading to radicalization.

Currently, while India might not be experiencing immediate consequences, the borderless nature of terrorism and radicalism necessitates India to remain extremely vigilant regarding these extremist factions. The potential threat posed by these terrorist organizations knows no geographical bounds, underscoring the importance of India's continuous monitoring and proactive measures to counteract their activities.

Addressing the spillover effect of terrorist groups in Central Asia necessitates a coordinated regional approach, involving intelligence sharing, enhanced border security, counter-radicalization programs, and joint efforts to combat cyber terrorism. Cooperation among Central Asian countries and international partners is crucial to effectively mitigate the multifaceted threats posed by these terrorist organizations and promote stability in the region.

Notes:

¹ Lucas Webber, "Afghanistan-based extremists spark terror fears in Central Asia", Nikkei Asia, June 10, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/Afghanistan-based-extremists-spark-terror-fears-in-Central-Asia>. Accessed on July 21, 2023.

² "31st report of the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team", United Nations Security Council, February 13, 2023, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/sanctions-committee-documents/. Accessed on July 21, 2023.

³ "Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement", United Nations Security Council, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

⁴ "US Drops ETIM From Terror List, Weakening China's Pretext for Xinjiang Crackdown", Radio Free Asia, November 5, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/etim-11052020155816.html> . Accessed on July 21, 2023.

⁵ China Internet Information Center, "East Turkistan" Terrorist Forces cannot get away with impunity", <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Jan/25582.htm> . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

⁶ "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)", Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/background/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim>. Accessed on June 9, 2023.

⁷ Adil Rasheed and Saman Ayesha Kidwai, "The ETIM Question: Taliban's Moment of Truth", Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/etim-question-taliban-rasheed-kidwai-291121#footnote7_mpn6boo . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

⁸ Uran Botobekov, "How Taliban Victory Inspired Central Asian Jihadists", Modern Diplomacy, September 17, 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/09/17/how-taliban-victory-inspired-central-asian-jihadists/> . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Svante E. Cornell, “Narcotics, Radicalism, and Armed Conflict in Central Asia: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2005, p. 619-639.

¹¹ Michael Fredholm, “Uzbekistan & The Threat from Islamic Extremism,” *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, March, 2003, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/92519/03_May_2.pdf. Accessed on June 9, 2023.

¹² VV Naumkin, “Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, 2003, https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/2003_06-naum.pdf. Accessed on June 9, 2023.

¹³ David Leheny, “Tokyo Confronts Terror”, Hoover Institution, December 1, 2001, <https://www.hoover.org/research/tokyo-confronts-terror> . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

¹⁴ n. 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Islamic Jihad Group”, United Nations Security Council, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/islamic-jihad-group . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

¹⁷ Edward Lemon, “Talking up terrorism in Central Asia”, Wilson Center, no. 38, (December 2018), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_38.pdf . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

¹⁸ “Radical Islam in Central Asia: Responding to Hizb ut- Tahrir”, International Crisis Group, June 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160511200300/http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/058-radical-islam-in-central-asia-responding-to-hizb-ut-tahrir.aspx> . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

¹⁹ Sean Mac Cormac, “Jihad In Post-Soviet Central Asia”, Center for Security Policy, June 3, 2015, <https://centerforsecuritypolicy.org/jihad-in-post-soviet-central-asia/> . Accessed on June 9, 2023.

²⁰ Gang Luo, “The Situation, Causes and Trends of Terrorism Crimes in Central Asia,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 580, 2021.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “The Examples of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Political Extremism, Terrorism, and Media in Central Asia”, International Media Support, August 2008, <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-political-extremism-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-2008.pdf>. Accessed on July 22, 2023.

²³ Luo, n. 20.



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