

SECURITY INSIGHTS



Foreign Fighters and Regional Security in Central Asia

By Gregory Gleason and Roger Kangas

Introduction

Violent extremists seized control of large territories in Iraq and Syria in 2013 under the banner of the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or “Da’esh.” The extremists expanded their control of territory by force of arms in 2014 through brutal atrocities, including murder, assassination, torture, beheadings, crucifixions, and immolations. ISIL is an anti-modernist, imperial project more vicious, brutal, and unprincipled than any other we have witnessed in the modern world. In spite of al-Baghdadi’s pretensions to Islamic religious justification, ISIL is essentially a political project infused with a violent, extremist ideology and driven by greed and gain. ISIL has managed to compound its extremist political program with the agendas of professional insurgents, revolutionary mercenaries, and a broad spectrum of international miscreants and radicalized youth. ISIL has taken advantage of a security vacuum in Iraq and has exacerbated the disorder of the civil war in Syria. ISIL’s rise in influence and expansion of territory reached a high point in June 2014 with the proclamation of the establishment of a Caliphate by the Islamic State under the leadership of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Alarmed by the violent rise of ISIL and repelled by its vicious tactics and calculated strategy, the international community has struggled to reverse ISIL’s gains, recapture territory, and stabilize the region. International coalitions have emerged to combine diplomatic and military efforts in order to degrade, defeat, and destroy ISIL in Iraq and in Syria. These coalition efforts are making incremental progress and can be expected to eventually succeed in their military objectives. But the coalitions, based on local opposition to ISIL combined with foreign assistance and intervention, are fragmented, divided, and working at multiple cross purposes. In such circumstances,

success on the military battlefield does not necessarily ensure success in post-conflict political stabilization. Moreover, ISIL’s hostilities are being conducted by a mix of local insurgents and foreigners—“foreign fighters” recruited from abroad—who have been contracted or cajoled to join the core violent extremists.

ISIL fighters will lose the military battle in Iraq, but the ISIL war will not necessarily terminate with the destruction or unconditional surrender of all fighters. ISIL’s defeat will result in either the death or displacement of fighters. It may also result in the dispersion of some of the thousands of fighters who are either now engaged in ISIL forces or seek to join those still operating in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, or elsewhere. Finally, ISIL’s defeat may result in the return of some escaping ISIL fighters to their countries of origin.

The eventual dispersion of battle-hardened and ideologically-driven fighters to other parts of the world is an important consideration. Those who do not perish in this regional “ISIL war” and succeed in escaping to fight again are likely to be even more dangerous than they are now. Similar phenomena have been seen before. A number of Mujahedeen fighters from earlier periods in the Afghanistan conflict simply moved from one battlefield to the next. Even more ominously, during the 1970s many Latin American insurgent fighters lost their revolutionary mission only to become mercenaries in the narcotics business, maintaining the same level of violence in their actions. Will the battle-hardened ISIL foreign fighters who escape Iraq return to their countries to create further problems, either by recruiting new extremists, staging new insurgencies, or promoting new forms of transnational organized crime?

While ISIL foreign terrorist influence has been focused on European states, there are indications that those who are promoting violent terrorist doctrines may turn to the east or south as possible targets for their activities. The states of the North and South Caucasus, the Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the archipelago states of South Asia are frequently identified in terrorist publications and social media communications as the “next area of activities.”

Just a few years ago, the most knowledgeable Central Asian officials typically expressed the view that ISIL was an external problem, not a domestic problem, in Central Asian states. Some Central Asian analysts stressed that the “returning foreign fighter” threat should not be exaggerated. The officials emphasized that, with a few exceptions, foreign fighters had circulated through Russia and had been radicalized as a result of that experience rather than radicalization in the moderate social and political environments of Central Asia. Some western observers have argued that Central Asians, once radicalized as ISIL fighters, are not likely to return to the Central Asian states—even claiming the Central Asian fighters who have joined jihadists traveling to Syria have viewed their trip as a “one-way ticket.” Western observers have also argued that even if fighters of Central Asian origin would return to their home countries, they would not be likely to find much fertile ground for radicalization.

Other officials and analysts, particularly from the Russian Federation, have insistently argued that Afghanistan-based as well as ISIL terrorist extremists could be expected to eventually move back into the Central Asian region unless the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and other Russian-led security initiatives are given the authority to lead anti-terrorist activities throughout the Central Asian region. Many Central Asian officials were reluctant to accept this line of argument, concerned about being drawn into anti-terrorist activities that could compromise their own state sovereignty. Each of the five Central Asian states has its own view on engagement in collective defense and collective security organizations, as well as the extent to which Russia could, or should, be a “regional leader.”

In recent months, perspectives on the threats posed by the fall-out of Afghanistan and Syrian insurgent activities has substantially changed in Central Asia. The reasons for this change are quite practical. In June 2016, an armed group conducted a small-scale attack on a gun store and small military facility in the Kazakh city of Aktobe. Local police quickly quelled the violence. Kazakhstan’s President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, soon thereafter announced that the events were not mere hooliganism, but were caused by a

determined group of extremists who were “supporters of radical pseudo-religious movements.” Nazarbayev said the attack was organized from abroad and designed to induce a foreign-initiated revolution. The Aktobe events in Kazakhstan underscored the importance of addressing the question of the threat ISIL presents to Central Asian states.

The changes in the perspective of officials and analysts in the Central Asian states raise important questions for the long-term posture of anti-ISIL coalition members. What are the threats of contagion from ISIL to the Central Asian states? Are there aspects of Central Asian society and institutions that make ISIL recruitment a threat to Central Asia? What can western partners do to assist the Central Asian states in effectively and equitably addressing these risks?

Foreign Fighters

While estimates vary, Central Asian sources have referred to between 1,000 and 4,000 ISIL fighters involved in Iraq and Syria who hail from Central Asian countries. There is a debate as to how many come from Central Asia directly, as opposed to the Central Asian diaspora in countries such as Russia or Turkey. Many early adherents to ISIL’s ideology seem to have been influenced by the insurgent wars of the past decades in Russia’s north Caucasus, but more recent terrorist events, such as the January 2017 night club shooting by the Uzbek citizen Abdulkadir Masharipov in Istanbul, Turkey, may reflect a new pattern in the movement of recently radicalized violent extremists.

It is also unclear how many of these fighters have already returned to their Central Asia. The identification of “returning foreign fighters” is a high-priority topic for Central Asian security officials. The border services and security services in all the Central Asian countries currently have screening operations underway to identify returning fighters and are taking steps to ensure battle-hardened extremists do not succeed in bringing their experience in recruiting, radicalizing, and fighting back home.

In the Central Asian countries, just as in the European and Middle Eastern states, there is an ongoing discussion of the root causes of susceptibility, particularly of young people, to violent extremist explanatory narratives and their calls to action. In the Central Asian media and public policy debate, there is quite a lot of discussion of economic hardship, lack of opportunities for gainful employment, obstacles to social mobility, constraints on educational and cultural development, and so on. One hears proposals for various kinds of social or political modernization programs offered as responses to terrorist proselytizing, however the security sectors in the Central Asian countries—the ministries and agencies of

police, military, intelligence, justice, and foreign affairs—do not consider questions of economic and political development to be germane to their own responsibilities. There is of course considerable reference to the socio-economic “root causes” of instability, but these issues are not a policy area in which the security sector can have much influence. Such long-term social stability issues are not included within the mandates of the security sectors, nor are they within the competence of these agencies and the people who work within them. It is natural, then, that police, military, border services, and the other “power ministries” of the Central Asian countries tend to focus on what steps can be taken in the short term to address the present challenges and deter those who present immediate risks.

Tracking potential terrorists is inherently difficult because these people often take great effort to hide or disguise their agendas and intentions. While the accuracy of estimates about the number of potential terrorists is questionable, there nevertheless are indications that large numbers of Muslims from former Soviet republics have joined ISIL and other jihadist groups in Syria. There are a few well-publicized cases. For instance, there is the case of the former Tajikistan Special Forces commander, Gulmorad Halimov, who was reported in 2015 to have joined ISIL combatants in Syria. There is also the Tajik Deputy Defense Minister Nazarzoda, who in September 2015 raided a Tajik Ministry of Defense armory and then holed up in the mountains with supporters to fight Tajik government forces. Additionally, there is the case of Akhliddin Usmonov, who according to Tajik sources was arrested by Tajik authorities in July 2016 on his return from Syria. Usmonov was tried, convicted, and sentenced to twelve years in prison for what he claimed was only one week of involvement with ISIL in Syria. Finally, there is less reliable data on how many other people of Central Asian origin and of less visibility may have travelled to Syria or other countries to participate in ISIL operations or to receive training.

Some scholars and journalists have argued that the Central Asian states face the greatest risk not from the dangers posed by returning foreign fighters but rather from excessive political repression and counterterrorism policies, which may counterproductively drive ordinary and legitimate political opposition into extremism. The Open Society Foundation and the International Crisis Group, for example, have published reports expressing the fear that greater U.S. security assistance concentrated on fighting terrorism will play into the hands of “illiberal politicians” seeking foreign support for their short-term focus on political power consolidation. Following this line of thought, some scholars urge that security assistance be focused on “soft power” activities to promote socio-economic opportunities, sponsor

de-radicalization programs, and provide technical training for border monitoring, inspection, and interdiction.

There is an element of truth to the problem of security support for partner countries unintentionally contributing to illiberalism. While limited “soft power” approaches do appear to take the moral high ground by avoiding association with heavy-handed techniques of Central Asian leaders, they also run the risk of being inappropriate technology as they can be ineffective forms of assistance. For the past two and a half decades, the governments in Central Asia have been painting opposition figures as potential or actual terrorists; they have cast broad nets to exercise state control over all representatives of the opposition—including violent extremists but also including people who might be characterized as “loyal opposition” in other societies. We should certainly decry the unwillingness of Central Asian partners to distinguish between political opposition and terrorist extremists, but it may be difficult for many westerners to fully comprehend the Central Asians’ assessment of their own security situation. The Central Asian security context is indeed quite a bit different from the western context. In western countries where the concept of “loyal opposition” has existed for centuries and is widely considered to be a legitimate source of equilibration of government policy, it is quite easy for westerners to see stark distinctions between political opposition and political terrorism. We in the west look at these two categories and discern them as representing phenomena that are distinctly different from one another. The same is not true for Central Asians. Some Central Asian officials see neither the distinction nor the difference in the way loyal opposition is viewed in western countries.

Central Asia’s Security Terrain

Central Asia is a region of ancient societies but young states. All of the Central Asian states are products of the Soviet Union in the sense that none of the Central Asian states existed within their present borders as independent countries prior to the existence of the USSR. Today, the Central Asian states have many common cultural features, but also subtle yet important differences. The states that emerged from the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 were envisioned to be secular and modernizing states. All the states soon adopted international standards of modern government with a constitutional order, governed by a deliberative assembly, carried out by an accountable executive, with guarantees of judicial impartiality, characterized by a separation of powers, including assurances of civil rights, and periodically renewed through a competitive electoral process and fixed term limits. In the two and a half decades since independence, however, these states have not strictly followed the “Anglo-Saxon” model. During the early days

of the systemic transition, carefully managed elections in all the states saw the leaders of the Soviet-era Communist Party take control. The previous Communist Party leaders became presidents. The countries established “presidential systems,” giving the presidents the power to rule by decree with “the force of constitutional law.” Term limits were sidestepped in all the Central Asian countries through the introduction of new constitutions. Soon none of the governments had what could be described as an independent judiciary. None of the governments had what could be described as a deliberative legislature with true powers of the purse.

The security sector agencies—primarily intelligence, police, the military, and border agencies as well as some units in justice, revenue, and foreign affairs—soon became the presidents’ most direct and important instruments of enforcing authority within these countries. In all the Central Asian cases, domestic political consolidation was the first priority of the government and international coordination became secondary. Counter-terrorism efforts were focused first of all on protecting the state and its citizens. This is true of all the Central Asian states, with slightly different emphases. It is useful with respect to each state to ask: What are the current conditions, what are the vulnerabilities, and what are the capacities?

We propose that there are five aspects to the specific features of the risks of insurgency and foreign fighters in the Central Asian region as a whole.

1. Afghanistan’s Legacy

The legacy of decades of war in Afghanistan is omnipresent in the Central Asian states. Fighters from the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) returned from Soviet combat forces and shifted flags, joining with Mujahedeen-inspired insurgencies in Central Asia taking up fighting in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

2. Insurgency in Every Central Asian State

When the June 1997 Tajikistan peace accord brought Tajikistan’s opposing factions into a single, united Tajik government, the last major civil conflict in the region appeared to have come to a resolution. Yet the conflict reignited when a Tajik Civil war commander Makhmud Khudaiberdiev seized the city of Hujand in the northern province of Tajikistan. The takeover of Tajikistan’s key northern city was unsuccessful. But it has been followed by two decades of foreign-inspired and foreign-funded insurgencies specifically designed to overthrow the Central Asian governments such as the Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The politics of insurgency and counterinsurgency has shaped most of post-communist transition in the core Central Asian states.

3. “Color Revolutions” and the Arab Spring

After the dysfunction of the USSR in the late 1980s led to the collapse of the Soviet order in 1991, the succeeding post-Soviet republics went adrift by experimenting with various forms of hybrid quasi-democratic, patron-client political systems. Efforts to consolidate democratic processes led to systemic transformations that have come to be known as “color revolutions.” Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” of November 2003, Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution” of December 2004, and the “Tulip” Revolution of March 2005 in Kyrgyzstan found their opposition in the reactionary nationalist restoration movements under the control of what are called the “power ministries,” mainly the police and intelligence agencies. When the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia in December 2010, it seemed to be an isolated event. But when the Tunisian events ignited a revolutionary fervor, which swept across Egypt and brought down the rule of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s president since 1981, Central Asian political officials began making comparisons with their own states’ positions. When a revolt broke out in February 2011 in Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, who had ruled since seizing power in a coup in 1969, ridiculed the idea of a revolution in Libya. But by October 2011, Gaddafi was gone. Events in the Maghreb were followed by civil wars in Syria and Yemen. Major public protests took place in a number of Middle Eastern and North African states, causing leaders and citizens alike to support measures that would ensure stability. When the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution foiled Moscow’s efforts to coax, cajole, and coerce Ukrainian back into an eastward-leaning economic union in preparation for expanding a much larger, more expansive Eurasian political union, the Kremlin retaliated through infiltration, annexation, and conducting a hybrid war dividing the country. Overall, these episodes of political and social turbulence have been interpreted in Central Asia as reasons to maintain a strong central government. They have also led Central Asian leaders criticize western efforts to improve domestic governance as simply masquerading to conceal efforts to influence their domestic political affairs.

4. The “Great Game” in Central Asia

Anyone following the discussion of international relations in the Central Asian region immediately sees the discussion is exclusively framed in terms of zero-sum competition among competing powers, reminiscent of the strategic rivalry and conflict between the British Empire and the Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia in the latter 19th century.

Imaginative observers have appropriated the 19th century concept to apply it to contemporary political developments. They speak of a “new Great Game,” referring to the competition over control of energy resources throughout Caspian region and access to rapidly growing markets energy markets in China and India.

But comparisons between 19th century competition over the control of territory and the contemporary situation surely distort more than they contribute. These references contribute to the idea of a global competition over “spheres of influence,” meaning privileged areas where certain states enjoy the right to dominate. For Kremlin leaders today, the concept implies at least two things: an area of special obligations and an area of special opportunities. In terms of opportunities, Russia’s central and predominant geographical position and economic weight have direct implications for the idea that Russia exercises the right to politically and economically direct the countries in its “area of responsibility.” All the Central Asian countries, given the realities of geography, tradition, language, and national security resources, are obliged to maintain good relations with Russia, although the specific bilateral ties with Russia vary. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are part of the Russia-led CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are not. However, officials from all five states agree that no conceivable regional security arrangement in Central Asia will be successful if Russia does not at least tacitly comply with its existence. The same cannot be said to be true for any other outside country.

5. ISIL as the War of the Clash of Civilizations

These factors—the legacy of the Afghanistan conflict, the constant pressure of anti-government insurgency, the rise of anti-government public sentiment, and the pressures attributed to the competition of Great Powers for control of the local governments— create a set of conditions that gives rise to a psychology that is attuned to the elimination of opposition. The clash between western and Asian cultural values is greatly exacerbated by these factors. When Samuel Huntington, in an article published in 1993 in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, drew attention to a “clash of civilizations” between the Islamic world and western societies he claimed—in what has become one of the most frequently quoted maxims of contemporary international political commentary—“The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.” Huntington was speaking of cultural differences that are real and substantial but are also plastic and malleable and could be instrumentalized by those with the intention and resources to manipulate public attention for their own ends.

Enhancing Security Cooperation: Four Concrete Steps Forward

Coalition forces in Iraq are now moving toward the battleground defeat of ISIL forces. The security sector institutions of the Central Asian states have requested insights and lessons learned, both positive and negative, from western efforts to deal with the security problem of foreign fighters. Some western observers caution against direct interaction with the security sector and favor “robust” support for socio-economic assistance to expand domestic opportunities for Central Asian citizens. In our view, avoiding direct engagement with Central Asian security institutions for fear of enabling repressive Central Asian agencies to undermine democratic traditions and the civil rights of the civilian population closes off discussion with the partners who are most important to achieving our common objectives. It is wishful thinking to expect that “robust socio-economic assistance” is more likely under the present circumstances to promote greater political liberalization in today’s Central Asian states than western assistance programs had been in the two and a half decades since independence to promote definitive systemic transitions in the core Central Asian states.

USAID and other U.S. government organization have been providing substantial social and economic assistance to the Central Asian countries since they became independent of the Soviet Union. Many critics of the nexus between altruism and foreign assistance diplomatic objectives feel these assistance efforts in many cases have actually exceeded aid-effectiveness thresholds. These USAID efforts have been focused on the promotion of democracy, framing markets, advancing improvement in governance and civil rights, and supporting social improvements. Yet none of the core Central Asian countries can be described as democratic, market-oriented economies with substantial achievements in the area of post-communist transition. Offering more assistance along these lines is not likely to be cost-effective in achieving political, economic, and social objectives and is likely to have negligible effect in the security arena. Moreover, substituting workshops on “civil society building” in exchange for activities focused on building security sector capacity is certain to be a bad choice. A shift toward “soft-power” enhancements would further erode the Central Asian security sector’s confidence in the U.S. as a security partner. Worse, it would invite the Central Asian governments to turn to foreign partners who would offer them credible hard security assistance without the addition of multiple and conflicting caveats.

In our view, there are ways that we can promote democratic principles and forge close and enduring ties with our foreign partners in Central Asia. We suggest the following four points:

- First, it is important to direct attention away from domestic threats and refocus attention on international cooperation with western coalition partners on common problems. Returning foreign fighters from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan is such a common problem. Our activities will proceed with greater partner support if we propose to work collectively on these issues.
- Second, it is important to move beyond tactical level competence-building to engaging in strategic level exchange with respect to international cooperation on CT understanding, monitoring, and in some cases cooperative interdiction.
- Third, it is important to build a deeper set of cooperating institutional partnerships on foreign fighter problems. This may extend to policy-oriented research and exchange focused on this specific issue. The GCMC and NESA Center Alumni communities have a broad and deep cadre of specialists who could be drawn into this kind of cooperative activity.
- Fourth, it is important to involve policy-oriented officials and analysts from the Central Asian partner countries who would take part in policy-oriented sessions, either in person or via video exchanges, on the subject of returning foreign fighters. The U.S. DoD regional centers and the National Defense Universities of the U.S. as well as of the partner countries would provide ideal venues for this.

As Coalition forces in Iraq close in on the goal of defeat of ISIL forces, it is crucial to ensure this effort and the ultimate sacrifice it will for many ultimately entail is not diminished by the danger of ISIL simply being displaced rather than destroyed. The security sector institutions of the Central Asian states have requested insights and lessons learned from western efforts at dealing with foreign fighters. Every effort should be made to assist them with common goals.

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