

ISIS in Central Asia

P Stobdan

P Stobdan is a former Ambassador and Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

October 22, 2014



Summary

There is no single factor cited for motivating Central Asians to join ISIS ranks. However, the search for employment and earnings remain the main driver. More than 4 million migrants (Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz) engaged in low-paid jobs in Russia are vulnerable to the jihadi network.

It has now become imperative to assess the impending security situation in Central Asia, India's extended neighbourhood, after the recent appearance of ISIS footprints that sent shockwaves across the region. Like in Srinagar, it started in early September with the emergence of an ISIS flag on a Tashkent bridge. Soon after, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appointed a Tajik jihadi to be the "Amir" of Syria's Raqqa province. News report also quoted ISIS having chosen an anonymous person as "Amir" of Uzbekistan. Not just that, towards the end of September, the leader of the Waziristan based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Usmon Ghazi rejoiced the astonishing success of ISIS in Iraq and declared allegiance to Islamic State. The IMU faced sustained losses after Pakistani military bombed hideouts following Karachi airport attack that killed 37 in June. Ghazi is said to be raising fresh recruits and hopes to unite with Taliban and ISIS.

There are no confirmed reports on how many Central Asian fighters may have gone to Syria except for scattered evidence and information from online videos available on sites. The estimates vary from 500 to 1000. This author, however, recalls how the phenomenon of Central Asians flocking towards Syria and Iraq began from early 2012. It appeared then that the recruits were either freshly drawn from the pool of Tabliqi cadres, schools, universities, madarasas, Central Asian expatriates in Russia or from homegrown terrorist outfits in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

To be sure, all the prerequisite – historical, political, socio-cultural – including demand for creating Caliphate in Central Asia existed even from the Soviet times. Several outfits such as IMU, IMT, HuT and others surfaced immediately after the Soviet collapse. They remained outlawed in the region but sustained their operation across from the Af-Pak throughout the 1990s backed by the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Their aim was to overthrow the regimes and establish Caliphate in Central Asia.

Relatively advanced and stable Kazakhstan started experiencing serious terrorist attacks since 2011–2012. The *Jund al-Khilafah* (Soldiers of the Caliphate) and others emerged in 2012. However, more seriously, a video showing 150 Kazakhs inside Syria with ISIS banner in October 2013 came as a surprise. Media reports claim that some Kazakhs are even believed to be among the founders of ISIS. Subsequently, media flashed that 250 people travelled to Syria via Turkey (Kazakhstan has a 30-day visa-free regime with Turkey). Some Kazakh jihadis may have returned home since then but they face serious prison sentence. As recently in August, Abu Muaz of ISIS's Kazakh Jamaat gave a call to Kazakhs to join jihad in Syria. Kazakhstan recently banned *Takfir wal-Hijra*, a radical Islamic group linked to Al-Qaeda. Media also reported that the recent disappearance in Kazakhstan of a 50-kg container of Cesium 137 is being linked to ISIS. It suggests that the ISIS is looking for nuclear material. Reports on various websites indicate that ISIS has a separate Kazakh Jamaat perhaps called Jamaat Daoud consisting not only of Kazakh fighters but also Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Nogais, Karachaevs, Russians, Ossetians, Dagestanis, Chechens, Tajiks, Arabs, and a German. Kazakhstan may face lesser threat from ISIS but the country could

remain a source for new recruit, especially from Southern regions like Jambul, Chemkent and Kizil-Orda. Certainly, Kazakhstan could eventually become source of funding for jihadis groups fighting in Syria and Af-Pak.

With regards to Tajikistan, possibly over 200 jihadis are fighting along with the ISIS. The government figure is 110. It is established that from a single village Chorkishlik, 20 youth have gone to Syria. The Tajiks fighters are known for their brutality and ruthlessness and many of them may be battle-hardened veteran of the Tajik civil war (1990s) who later joined groups in Afghanistan. Reports suggest numerous instances of Tajik fighters being killed in Syria. But those returning from Syria are facing prison sentences. Some reports, possibly not credible, suggest that the Turkish Airlines has been transporting hundreds of Tajiks from Dushanbe to Turkey and then to Iraq and the Saudi Embassy in Dushanbe acts as the headquarters for recruiting.

Tajikistan faces the greatest threat in the medium term from ISIS trained jihadis returning from Syria. Appointing a Tajik as "Amir" could mean that ISIS has a design for Central Asia, especially for Tajikistan. It also means to inspire other Tajiks, especially Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) cadre. Some believe Tajiks in Syria could be experiencing factional fighting and division.

As for Uzbekistan, the level of radicalism has always been high. The breeding ground is the Ferghana Valley, shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Some 200-300 Uzbeks are supposed to be fighting along ISIS. An Uzbek, Abdullah at-Toshkandi, earlier led the well-known *Sabri Jamaat* in Syria. Toshkandi was killed in the Aleppo Central Prison storming. *Sabiri* is now a Dagestani Jamaat led by Khalid ad-Dagestani. Reports suggest it has at least 70 militants. A separate *Abu Hanif Jamaat* comprising of Uzbek fighters is mentioned in the literature. Some Abu Hussein is leading the *Seyfuddin Uzbek Jamaat*, which serves in the *Al Nusrat Front*. The front is known to have bomb-making skills like the *Khorasan* members. Abu Usman, who earlier served in Uzbek Intelligence Agency for 20 years, has recently appeared on video fighting in Syria. He went to Syria via Russia. Uzbekistan could face serious threat in the immediate and medium term. ISIS could reignite the weakened IMU to transplant ISIS model in Central Asia.

Not enough information is available on Turkmenistan although Radio Free Europe (RFE) estimate about 300-350 fighters in Syria. In October 2013, the Grand Mufti of Syria suggested 360 Turkmen fighting in Syria. Turkmenistan can face threat in the longer term. Figure for Kyrgyzstan vary. The country's economic backwardness and its remoteness, make it a fertile recruitment and training ground for ISIS. Provinces like Osh, Naryn, Batkent, Jalalabad have been prone to jihadi call. Saudi Arabia and Qatar opened their Embassies in 2012. Poverty is the main driver. Some reports suggest Kyrgyz members are paid approximately \$5,000, compared to about \$150 in their country or \$1500 they would be earning in Russia. The *modus operandi* to reach Syria is through Turkey. Many Kyrgyz have returned but many continue to fight for money.

Scores of young women from Central Asia have been recruited since 2012 mainly for employment in the Middle East. It is not clear whether they have joined *Jihad al-Nikah* (Sexual Jihad). In the past, Chechen Ingushstia women were used for weapon smuggling and suicide bombings inside Russia. The ISIS's widely known fighting brigade *Shishani Jamaat*, commanded by a Chechen, Amir Umar Shishani has in its ranks large number of Central Asian fighters. *Shishani* is a Russian-speaking Jamaats designed for optimum operational effectiveness. Others groups like *Jamaat Adama*, *Jamaat Akhmada*, *Abu Kamil Jamaat* and *Jamaat Khattaba* are composed of Russian speaking Chechens, Caucasus, Dagistanis and Central Asia jihadis. Many are said to be fighting on the forefront in Kobani.

Assessment

There is no single factor cited for motivating Central Asians to join ISIS ranks. Some are certainly driven by the spirit of jihad (righteous martyrdom) while others may be drawn to it due to ignorance and bigotry. However, the search for employment and earnings remain the main driver. More than 4 million migrants (Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz) engaged in low-paid jobs in Russia are vulnerable to the jihadi network. They are often tricked into the jihadi net by unscrupulous recruiters who promise them jobs in Turkey and Europe. One reason why Central Asian fighters find lucrative to rush to Middle East than to Af-Pak region, is because they find ISIS more inspirational, prestigious, and rewarding than fighting in Af-Pak region. Moreover, Central Asians are never empathetic towards the Af-Pak Taliban for they pose direct threat to the region. They perhaps find other reasons like better living standards (permission to bring family, permission to marry local women) to go to Syria. It is also less hazardous to reach Syria than Af-Pak as Turkey provides easy gateway. All the Central Asian States have favorable visa regime with Turkey.

There is no doubt that Central Asia has identical political environment and socio-cultural conditions for ISIS to grow. In addition, the region offers ideal geographical space and now the economic resources (oil/gas) for ISIS model to spread. Apart from learning from ISIS strategies and tactics, the new idea of establishing the *Khurasan State* becomes inspiring for Central Asian jihadis. In fact, ISIS is already developing alliances along nationalist lines that could provide useful inspiration to replicate ISIS success in Central Asia.

Clearly, perceptions among Central Asian officials over ISIS threats differ. Fear is that fighters could replicate ISIS model in the region. Clearly, concerns today are less about the Taliban infiltration but about trained ISIS jihadis returning to the region. So far, the regimes are acting tough on the returnees, imprisoning them probably to dissuade others from flocking to Syria. Of course, many view that the governments exaggerate ISIS threat as a pretext to rein in domestic opposition.

At the same time, no common Central Asian strategy exists on how to deal with ISIS. Any coordination is unlikely without the Russian initiative. Presently, the numbers are not so

significant but ISIS gives qualitatively a different type of the threat mainly to Russia and China. Large number of Russian and Turkish speaking jihadis from Caucasus, Central Asia and Xinjiang is a source of concern for Moscow and Beijing as they fear ISIS trained fighters could expand their operation along the southern-belt of Russian Federation and China. Russia has been undertaking several military measures with the hope to counter such threats. On October 16, 2014, John Kerry cited Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov saying that over 500 Russian citizens are still fighting in Syria. Russia is reported to have vast intelligence gathering system in Syria. To be sure, the US and Russia will eventually come together to fight the ISIS menace like they did to undermine the Taliban post-9/11.

Surely, Central Asian youth will continue to heed the ISIS's call for financial insensitive. However, the sustainability of their zest is doubtful and likely to shun their support for several reasons. Russian-speaking Central Asian fighters, barring Tajiks and Uzbeks are less prone to extremism. They come from Western-style upbringing and having tasted good life they are unlikely to commit for a jihadi life in the long term. Already, the disillusioned young returnees seem expressing serious apathy for fighting jihad, narrating their horror stories and experiences. So far, even the Taliban brand of terrorism, espoused by IMU and local outfits, have not gained popular support in the region. Even Al-Qaeda has miserably failed to set footing in Central Asia despite proximity to Af-Pak after 9/11.

For India, the Russian and Turkish speaking jihadis are unlikely to pose any immediate threat. The problem will emerge serious if they are allowed to network with other terrorist outfits in the FATA region. The IMU is part of that network and it needs careful watching by Indian security managers. Traditionally Central Asian Muslims hold India (*Indi* or *Hindustan*) in high esteem. The challenge for Indian diplomacy is to sustain the degree of goodwill among the Muslims of Central Asia and Xinjiang. The points of connecting with these forces may be missing now and serious efforts are required to harness the traditional links with them in the Ferghana valley. Of course, Xinjiang needs to be viewed by India in a wider political context and, therefore, requires a separate policy treatment.

The *Khurasan* concept under Caliphate, if it takes off, could have dangerous implications. The extremists could pursue their agenda of introducing *Shariah* law, Caliphate system and Sectarian goals in respective home countries. *Khurasan* idea aims to tear into non-Muslim territories. Mullah Fazlullah of Swat considered himself as the founder of the *Khurasan* movement. Recent pledge of support to ISIS by six-top leaders of *Tehreek-I-Taliban* (TTP) indicates that efforts are underway to unite various splinter groups in FATA to coalesce under the ISIS banner. The idea of situating *Khurasan* in Af-Pak region as its pivot baseline is to broaden the expansion to include Xinjiang and Kashmir in the next campaign. It would be difficult to imagine how Pakistan will avoid using the network without annoying the Saudis irrespective of what the Chinese might say to curb Uighur fighters. Though, the new re-grouping under the *Khurasan* may not be able to trigger a massive campaign like the one seen in Syria, the group will continue to inspire new radical elements in the region and pose formidable security irritant to India, China and Russia.