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## CENTRAL ASIANS FIGHTING IN SYRIA: THE DANGER OF ISLAMIC STATE RETOURNEES TO CENTRAL ASIA

### **Abstract**

On June 29 2016, a Russian, an Uzbek and a Kyrgyz perpetrated a terrorist attack in Istanbul Atatürk Airport. Roughly 3000 people from Central Asian countries have left their homes and joined the ranks of Islamic State (IS) in Syria. IS recruits them throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union and places them on the battlefield. Governments try to halt this flood of people – many of whom are youngsters — however they are not always very successful. Despite these recruits not holding great weight within the IS structure, social media has been quick to show its grave concern on the issue because of the “call effect” it could have. Thus, the jihadist threat in this region is once again at the top of the security agenda of the countries of Central Asia.

### **Keywords**

*Jihadism, Islamism, Central Asia, Islamic State.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union 25 years ago led to the birth of five republics in Central Asia. These republics needed to construct their nations, finding their own political, economic, social and cultural models for each territory. The regimes that were established at that time have used the jihadist threat as an excuse for increasing control measures over their populations; some analysts have not hesitated to point out that this threat is exaggerated or doesn't even exist at all. Others, however, believe that this threat is real and justifies, at least in part, the exceptional measures. To what extent is the jihadist threat real in Central Asia? What presence does the Islamic State (IS) have there? Is there a recruitment network operating there? How does the growth of IS and other jihadist insurgent groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan affect the region? How does the instability in South Asia and Central Asia affect Europe?

The appearance of IS in 2014 further complicated the already delicate situation in Iraq and Syria. It is estimated that around 3000 citizens of Central Asian origin have already joined the ranks of IS to fight on the battlefields as *mujahideen* or as suicide bombers. This jihadist group has clearly been able to exploit two circumstances: firstly, the porosity of the Central Asian borders with the so-called Af-Pak's huge cradle of jihadists and secondly, the discontent felt by some citizens towards their respective governments in the republics that make up Central Asia.

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1 See MUKHAMETRAKHIMOVA, Saule: "Kazakhstan's Islamists: Radicals Or Scapegoats?", *Report News Central Asia*, 20 July 2011, under <http://iwpr.net/report-news/kazakstans-islamists-radicals-or-scapegoats>, consulted 8 April 2015. See also MAYER, Jean-Francois.: "Hizb ut-Tahrir, The Next Al-Qaeda, Really?", *PSIO Occasional Paper*, 2004, [https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/32091/1/Krause\\_Thesis\\_HT\\_Al-Qaeda.pdf](https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/32091/1/Krause_Thesis_HT_Al-Qaeda.pdf), consulted 8 April 2015.

2 NEUMANN, Peter. R.: "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000, surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s", *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, 26 January 2015, under <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>, consulted 1 May 2015. SCIUTTO, J.; CRAWFORD, J. y CARTER, C. J.: "ISIS can 'muster' between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says", *CNN*, 12 September 2014, under <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/index.html>, consulted 1 April 2015.

3 See VOLKOV, Vitaly: "Children used as suicide bombers in Central Asia", *Deutsche Welle*, 30 December 2015, under <http://www.dw.com/en/children-used-as-suicide-bombers-in-central-asia/a-18952256>, consulted 25 January 2016.

4 Centuries ago, Central Asia was part of Greater Khorasan, a name that has since been usurped by a terrorist group made up of former senior members of Al Qaeda. See YAN, Holly: "Terrorist leader

## THE JIHAD IN CENTRAL ASIA

The jihadist threat is nothing new in Central Asia, where the process of Islamisation that started in the VIII century was halted by the advance of the Mongols in the XIII century and by their nomadic lifestyle and religious syncretism. The Tsarist Empire brought a certain amount of modernity to these lands and, at the end of the XIX century, a group of modernist Muslim reformers emerged – similar to the *Young Turks* in the Ottoman Empire – who sought to challenge both the traditional ulama<sup>6</sup> as well as the Russian invaders, with limited success.

Fruit of this activity, groups of revolutionaries emerged – the Basmachi – who rebelled against the Imperial Decree of 25 June 1916 which ordered the first non-voluntary recruitment of Central Asians into the army during the First World War. Their protest was of nationalist origin and they were able to take advantage of the opportunity offered to them by the internationalist Bolcheviks who promised them they would be able to build an independent republic. Those lands once again enjoyed self-governance from 1917 until the end of the Russian civil war when they were definitively swallowed by the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s.

From that point on, any religious demonstration – public or private – was considered dangerous, anti-communist, subversive and reactionary, meaning that religion was persecuted for seven decades – to a greater or lesser extent depending on the period and the place – although Islam managed to stay alive in a pseudo-clandestine manner to fulfil funeral and wedding rituals. Only on several occasions was it fully brought back to life, such as on the occasion of the visit of the king of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, to Stalin in 1945 during which permission was granted for a *haji* (pilgrimage) to Mecca; or when the Indonesian president, Sukarno, visited the USSR in 1961 and requested permission to visit the mausoleum of Imam Al Bukhari, buried close to Samarkand, leading to the rapid restoration of the site.

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killed in drone strike -- but what is the Khorasan Group?”, *CNN*, 22 July 2015, under <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/22/world/what-is-the-khorasan-group>, consulted 19 April 2016.

5 NAUMKIN, Vitaly. *Radical Islam in Central Asia: between Pen and Rifle*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

6 The reformers or supporters of the “new method” (*oʻsul-e jadid*) or Jadids (*jadidchi*) were generally younger than the defenders of the old school (*qadim*), also called *qadimchi*. See KHALID, Adeb. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 93.

7 ROY, Olivier. *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 46-49.

With the disappearance of the communist regime, these Islamic historical sites became not just places of religious pilgrimage but also tourist attractions, prompting the new states to invest large sums of money into their restoration<sup>8</sup>.

The new Central Asian regimes tried to keep Islam under government control just as had been done by the Tsarist Empire – Catherine the Great set up the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly in 1788 – and by its Soviet successors – who founded the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan<sup>9</sup>. In 1990, with Gorbachev's *glasnost*, the USSR started to ease up its hold and each republic became responsible for its own religious affairs, with each country creating an Assembly similar to its Tsarist predecessor. Shortly after, pilgrimages to Mecca began to return to normal and religious training institutions – madrasas, institutes, universities – were created to instruct new imams in traditional Islam. This was an attempt to avoid a repetition of the situation during the Soviet era whereby young men wanting to study the Koran ended up in the more radical madrasas of Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia<sup>10</sup>.

During the 1990s, Islamists took advantage of the limited room for manoeuvre that the governments allowed the opposition and created groups that served to channel the discontent felt by the people, such as Adolat (Justice), Tauba (Repentance), Baraka (Blessings), Islam Lashkarlari (Warriors of Islam), Hizb ut Tahrir al Islami (Islamic Party of Liberation) and Akramiya (Followers of Akram Yuldoshev)<sup>11</sup>. The Islamisation

8 There are now ziyarats managed by the government such as Kaffal Sasji in Tashkent; Khoja Bahauddin and Abdul Khaliq Ghijduvani in Bukhara; Shoh-i Zinda, Iman Al Bukhari and Khoja Ahrar Vali in Samarkand; Hakim al-Tirmizi and Palvan-Ata in Khwarezm; Sultan-Baba in Karakalpakstan; or Mawlana Ya'qub Charkhi in Tajikistan. See ABDULLAEV, Evgeniy. "Central Asian Integration and Islamic Revivalism", in TABATA, Shinichiro and IWASHITA, Akihiro (Ed.). *Ten Years after the Collapse of the USSR*, Hokaido: Slavic Research Center, 2002. See also KHALID, Adeeb. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. See also KALANOV, Komil and ALONSO MARCOS, Antonio. "Sacred places and "Folk" Islam in Central Asia", *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, n° 17, May 2008. See also KEMPER, M. and BUSTANOV, S. S.: "Administrative Islam: Two Soviet Fatwas from the North Caucasus", in ALFRID, K. y KEMPER, M. (Eds.). *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language*, Amsterdam: Pegasus Oost-Europese Studies, 2012, pp. 91-92.

9 Stalin set up this body in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the Muslims of Central Asia and thus persuade them to participate more actively in the Second World War. Officially, it was constituted upon the request of several Uzbek ulema.

10 See "Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement", *ICG Asia Report*, n° 72, 22 December 2003, pp. 5,7 and particularly 9.

11 BABADJANOV, Bakhtiyar. "Akramia: A Brief Summary", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 May 2006, under <http://carnegieendowment.org/2006/05/02/akramia/5wz>, consulted 27 April 2015. See also BARAN, Zeyno (Ed.). *The Challenge of Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Deciphering and Combating Radical Islamist Ideology*, Washington: The Nixon Center, 2004. Finally, see BARAN, Z. "Central Asia", in RUBIN, B. M. (Ed.) *Guide to Islamist Movements* (Vol. 2), New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2010, p. 166.

and radicalisation process started by these groups was later exploited by other, more violent, groups, including IS<sup>12</sup>.

Each country dealt with the question of religion in a very different way. Tajikistan is the only country<sup>13</sup> in which it is not illegal to form a political party based on religion, although the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) was made illegal in September 2015. In unstable Kyrgyzstan, there is less state control of religion. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the most economically advanced and stable countries in the region, have developed a model of broad tolerance and integration of the different religions and religious confessions on their territories, although they have taken a series of strict measures to try to stop the Islamist advance, such as a prohibition on carrying out any type of proselytism – that applies to all religions, including the Christian confessions – and the obligation to reregister all places of worship, including mosques. Finally, Turkmenistan continues to be a mystery, a cryptic regime, while retaining a policy of neutrality – a policy that is cracking due to the incursions by the Afghan Taliban along its porous border<sup>14</sup>.

The governments of this region are, above all, concerned by the problem of the “retournees” – jihadists who have been training and/or fighting in real combat situations. These retournees can be a source of problems in their countries of origin, but also in Russia, where there is a large number of immigrants from the ex-Soviet republics, in Turkey<sup>15</sup> and in other parts of Europe – Poland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and Germany – that receive large numbers of citizens from these countries<sup>16</sup>.

There are many uncertainties – and few certainties – as regards the genesis, evolution and establishment of IS among the local Central Asian population, and the information that is spread on the true number of militants, fighters and sympathisers

12 See RUZALIEV, Odil: “ICG Warns of Growing Radicalization in Central Asia”, *Voice of America*, 11 February 2015, under <http://www.voanews.com/content/international-crisis-group-radicalization-central-asia/2639355.html>, consulted 19 April 2016.

13 This is down to specific historical circumstances, namely the peace talks that put an end to the civil war (1992-97).

14 By PANNIER, Bruce: “Revisions To Turkmenistan’s Neutrality Policy”, *RFE/RL*, 12 October 2015, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan-afghanistan-positive-neutrality-revisions/27301927.html>, consulted 19 April 2016.

15 See “Trece detenidos en Turquía en una operación contra el EI”, *Información*, 1 July 2016, under <http://www.diarioinformacion.com/internacional/2016/06/30/policia-turca-lanza-redada-ei/1780129.html>, consulted 12 July 2016.

16 See WOLTERS, Alexander. “The State and Islam in Central Asia: Administering the Religious Threat or Engaging Muslim Communities?”, *Forschungspapiere Research Papers*, 2014, under <https://www.pfh.de/fileadmin/Content/PDF/forschungspapiere/the-state-and-islam-in-central-asia-wolters.pdf>, consulted 25 April 2015, p. 7. See also ALEXANDROVA, Lyudmila: “Is Islamic State’s threat to Central Asian countries real?”, *TASS Russian News Agency*, 18 November 2015, under <http://tass.ru/en/opinions/837576>, consulted 19 April 2016.

or their *modus operandi* should be read with utmost caution. What would appear to be undeniable, however, is that citizens of these countries have gone to Iraq and Syria to fight for various jihadist groups, not only IS, prompting the questions of what has motivated these people to undertake this journey, what makes these groups attractive to Central Asians, especially youngsters, why do they take their families, including their wives and children<sup>17</sup>, what similarities do these processes have to those of other fighters from other regions of the planet, and what can be done to stop IS from further penetrating Central Asia.

The action of these groups hinders the advance of democracy in these countries as, just as is happening in the West, laws that restrict freedom and civil rights are being passed, aimed at creating greater security for citizens – take, for example, the *USA Patriot Act*, the strict British and French anti-terrorist measures or the reform of the Spanish Criminal Code as regards radicalisation. If, in Europe, legislation has been passed in light of terrorist attacks such as those in London (2005), Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), it should come as no surprise that the same is happening in those countries surrounded by Iran, Afghanistan or Pakistan – who send their most radical missionaries into the zone<sup>18</sup>.

Back in 2003, the U.S. State Department stated that the main concern was the progressive withdrawal of ISAF troops from Afghanistan and how this would affect the usual groups of concern, mainly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) - destroyed and reconverted numerous times<sup>19</sup> - and the Islamic Jihad Union<sup>20</sup>. IS was not among their concerns at that time.

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17 See especially PARASZCZUK, Joanna: “The Child Soldiers Of Islamic State”, *RFE/RL*, 30 October 2014, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-child-fighters/26666558.html>, consulted 19 April 2016. See also “ISIL child training camp discovered in Istanbul”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 19 October 2015, under <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/isil-child-training-camp-discovered-in-istanbul-report-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=90052&NewsCatID=341>, consulted 19 April 2016. See also PARASZCZUK, Joanna: “Uzbek Imam Bukhari Jamaat In Syria Release New Training Camp Video”, *From Chechen to Syria*, 9 December 2014, under <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=23101#more-23101>, consulted 19 April 2016.

18 RASHID, Ahmed. *Los Talibán. El Islam, el petróleo y el nuevo “Gran Juego” en Asia Central*. Barcelona: Península, 2001. See also RASHID, A. *Jihad: The rise of militant Islam in Central Asia*. London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

19 One of these reconversions resulted in the Islamic Movement of Central Asia or the Turkistan Islamic Movement. See BLAGOV, S.: “Moscow on alert for Muslim militancy”, *Asia Times Online*, 19 September 2002, under [http://atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/DI19Ago1.html](http://atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/DI19Ago1.html), consulted 26 April 2015. The Uzbekistan Islamic Jihad also appeared and has openly recognised its participation in the Global Jihad; see “Islamic Jihad Group of Uzbekistan”, *Global Security*, 2007, under [http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/islamic\\_jihad\\_group\\_of\\_uzbekistan.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/islamic_jihad_group_of_uzbekistan.htm), consulted 25 April 2015.

20 This group appeared in the south of Kazakhstan and is also known as the Islamic Jihad Group; see WIGEN, E.: “Islamic Jihad Union: al-Qaida’s Key to the Turkic World?”, *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) Rapport*, 2009, under [http://cir.au.dk/fileadmin/site\\_files/filer\\_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/14.6-1.pdf](http://cir.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/14.6-1.pdf), consulted 26 April 2015. See also RONALD, S.: “The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)”, *NEFA Foundation*, 2008, under <http://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/09-00687.pdf>,

The Jihadist threat was not felt to the same extent in all countries: in Turkmenistan it wasn't present, in Kazakhstan there had only been a couple of attacks as of 2011, in Kyrgyzstan there hadn't been any major attacks, in Uzbekistan there had been several attacks<sup>21</sup>, and in Tajikistan they were part of the civil war. In addition, each government responds locally to the threat while the terrorist groups act internationally. The high level of porosity of these borders – except in official crossing points where the authorities are extremely punctilious – means that there are established routes that connect the Caucasus with the Afghan-Pakistani border, crossing the huge Central Asian steppes<sup>22</sup>. On top of this, this *Jihad* is global and the IMU swore allegiance to IS in March 2015<sup>23</sup>.

The IMU founded by the ideologue Tahir Yuldashev and by Juma (Kasimov) Namangani, former parachutist in the Soviet army, in 1998 in the Fergana valley to overthrow the Karimov regime has little in common with the current group. The group was strong between 1999 and 2000 when it had approx. 2000 fighters, but the allied attacks in the north of Afghanistan decimated its capacity between 2001 and 2002, Namangani was killed and Yuldashev fled to North Waziristan with a small group of followers, founding there the Uzbekistan Islamic Jihad. Yuldashev was killed on 27 August 2009 in a *Predator drone* attack in South Waziristan<sup>24</sup>. His successor, Usman Odil, was also killed in the same fashion in 2012. It was Odil's successor, Usman Gazi, who began to associate with IS in 2014 when one of IMU's most important

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consulted 26 April 2015. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2005", *US Department of State*, 2006, p. 107. See, finally, MOGHADAM, A.: "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the spread of Suicide Attacks", in BROWN, M. E.; COTÉ Jr., O. R.; LYNN-JONES, S. M. y MILLER, S. E. *Contending with Terrorism: Roots, Strategies, and Responses*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010, p. 79.

21 In the summer of 1999, IMU militants launched an attack from the Karategin, or Rasht, Valley (Tajikistan) to try and enter Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan. See ROTAR, Igor. "Will Tajikistan's Karategin Valley Again Become a Militant Stronghold?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, n° 9, vol. 166, 13 September 2012.

22 See "Background To The Drug Routes From Central Asia To Europe", *Geopium.org*, 4 November 2011, under <http://geopium.org/?p=196>, consulted 2 May 2015. See also Roggio, Bill and Lundquist, Lisa: "Jund al Khilafah emir killed in 'treacherous raid'", *The Long War Journal*, 17 October 2012, under [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/jund\\_al\\_khilafah\\_emi.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/jund_al_khilafah_emi.php), consulted 2 May 2015. See also HALBACH, Uwe: "Afghanistan 2014: Shadows over Central Asia?", *Security and Human Rights*, n° 24, 2013, pp. 137–148.

23 See "Uzbek Group In Afghanistan Pledge Allegiance To Islamic State", *RFE/RL*, 30 March 2015, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbek-group-in-afghanistan-behead-afghan-soldier/26928658.html>, consulted 2 May 2015.

24 ROGGIO, Bill.: "Uzbek jihadist group releases footage from Syrian training camp", *The Long War Journal*, 3 June 2014, under [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/uzbek\\_jihadist\\_group.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/uzbek_jihadist_group.php), consulted 2 May 2015.

“commanders”, Abu Abdur Rehman Almani – who prepared the attack on Karachi airport in June 2014 – was killed in a Pakistani military operation in North Waziristan<sup>25</sup>.

The group Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) – Society of Allah’s Soldiers – has become very active in Tajikistan in recent years, particularly in the Karateguin Valley and in the Tajik part of the Fergana Valley<sup>26</sup>. They first became active in September 2010 when they used a suicide car bomb, loaded with a GAZ-24 mine, to attack the Sughd police’s department of organised crime in Khujand, the country’s second most populated city, killing two policemen, two civilians and injuring 28 people<sup>27</sup>. The suicide bomber was called Akmal Karimov and was reportedly trained by Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The JA group aims to intimidate the population through videos and violent activities of this kind to force them to adopt *sharia law* and launch a *jihad* against the infidels: “Those who pray namaz, who follow fasting rules but support democracy are nonbelievers [...] Allah is killing nonbelievers by our hands and, thus, blesses us”<sup>28</sup>. Statements such as these led the Supreme Court of Tajikistan to illegalise this group in May 2012 and, like all other illegalised groups, it has been subject to persecution by the security forces.

There are other smaller groups that are also active in the area: the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, centred in the Chinese Autonomous Region of Xinjiang; Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami – the Islamic Jihad Movement; Lashkar-i-Taiba – the Army of the Pure, the armed wing of the Markaz Dawa-Wal-Irshad party; Hezbollah – that offers logistical and financial support to local groups; and some groups of Pakistani origin such as Harkat-ul-Mujahideen – Movement of Islamic Fighters.

Tablighi Jamaat – Society for spreading faith – does not carry out violent acts but attempts to radicalise the Muslims that fall into its hands, just like Hizb ut Tharir al Islami, Akramiya, Hizb un-Nusrat – the Party of Assistance, another splinter group of Hizb ut Tahri; Uzun Soqol – long beards; and Nurcular<sup>29</sup>. All of these groups have been declared illegal for being supremacist and radicalizing groups. This is not a

25 SHERAZI, Z. S. y HAIDER, M.: “Karachi airport attack mastermind killed in North Waziristan”, *Dawn*, 15 June 2014, under [www.dawn.com/news/1112901/karachi-airport-attack-mastermind-killed-in-n-waziristan-sources](http://www.dawn.com/news/1112901/karachi-airport-attack-mastermind-killed-in-n-waziristan-sources), consulted 2 April 2015. STENERSEN, A.: “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s Role in Attacks in Pakistan”, Combating Terrorism Center, 2014, under [www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-role-in-attacks-in-pakistan](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-role-in-attacks-in-pakistan), consulted 2 April 2015.

26 See ROTAR, I.: “Islamic Extremist Group Jamaat Ansarullah Overcomes Tajikistan’s Inter-Tribal Conflicts”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, nº 9, vol. 174, 2012.

27 KILNER, J.: “Militant Islamist group threatens Tajikistan”, *The Telegraph*, 19 September 2011 under [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tajikistan/8772906/Militant-Islamist-group-threatens-Tajikistan.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tajikistan/8772906/Militant-Islamist-group-threatens-Tajikistan.html), consulted 5 May 2015.

28 RAFIYEVA, M.: “Trial of 13 alleged members of Jamaat Ansarullah starts in Khujand”, *Asia Plus*, 2 February 2015, under <http://news.tj/en/news/trial-13-alleged-members-jamaat-ansarullah-starts-khujand>, consulted 28 April 2015.

29 Nurcular – Community of Light— brings together the followers of the 20th century theologian Said Nursi. See AHMAD, Ishtiaq: “Combating Terrorism in Afghanistan: Implications for Central Asian Stability”, in AHMAD, I. *Global Terrorism: Its Genesis, Implications, Remedial and Counter*

religious question, rather these groups are part of the production line of other groups with terrorist aims<sup>30</sup>. Paradoxically, when the Central Asian regimes called all radical groups “wahhabist”, despite having very little in common with Saudi ideology, some considered this to be an exaggeration and minimised the importance of this threat.

In any event, radical groups play an important role in the process of radicalisation of young people – although not exclusively -, in what some researchers have called the “conveyor belt” of terrorism<sup>31</sup>. Others prefer to talk of the “funnel theory” or the “funnel of radicalisation”, implying that all persons who end up fighting in jihadist groups have gone through a radicalisation process in other groups, although not all those who participated in these other groups then go on to enter into combat<sup>32</sup>. In fact, these groups have an official doctrine – presented to everybody, and an unofficial one – known only by a few insiders: “while the HT hierarchy proclaims a peaceful revolution in public, its true propaganda appears to produce sympathisers and admirers who are not so committed to peace”<sup>33</sup>.

The case of the Tsarnaev brothers –Tamerlan and Dzhokhar, the terrorists that perpetrated the bombings at the Boston marathon (15 April 2013) is a good example. Born in Kyrgyzstan of Chechen ethnicity, they fled to the USA as refugees in 2002.

Measures, Islamabad: Pan-Graphics, 2006. See also ALONSO MARCOS, A.: “Andiján, un año después: Repercusiones en la Política Exterior de Uzbekistán”, *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, nº 11, May 2006, p. 194.

30 See AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico: “De la gestión del salvajismo”, *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*, Documento de Análisis, nº 24, 2015, p. 2. See also PANNIER, B.: “Terror Threat Prompts Uzbek Security Alert”, *RFE/RL*, 30 April 2015, under [www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-uzbekistan-terror-alert/26986749.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-uzbekistan-terror-alert/26986749.html), consulted 2 May 2015. See also the report “If the Castle Falls: Ideology and Objectives of the Syrian Rebellion”, *Tony Blair Faith Foundation*, December 2015. See also HORSMAN, S.: “Themes in Official Discourses on Terrorism in Central Asia”, *Third World Quarterly*, nº 26, vol. 1, 2005. See also HORSMAN, S.: “Themes in Official Discourses on Terrorism in Central Asia”, in BHATIA, M. (Ed.) *Terrorism and the Politics of Naming*, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 199-213.

31 WESTROP, S.: “From Radical to Terrorist: The “Conveyor Belt” to Violent Extremism”, *Gatestone Institute*, 11 March 2014, under [www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4211/radical-to-terrorist](http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4211/radical-to-terrorist), consulted 20 April 2015. See also MALIK, S.: “The conveyor belt of extremism”, *New Statesman*, 18 July 2005, under [www.newstatesman.com/node/151092](http://www.newstatesman.com/node/151092), consulted 20 April 2015.

32 BAKER-BEALL, C. y HEATH-KELLY, C. *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 28.

33 CROSTON, M. *Fostering Fundamentalism: Terrorism, Democracy and American Engagement in Central Asia*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006, p. 147. Translation by author.

There they were radicalised<sup>34</sup>. They didn't have links to IS but they did to Al Qaeda<sup>35</sup>. Their escape was aided by two Kazakh students – Dias Kadyrbayev and Azamat Tazhayakov<sup>36</sup>.

## CENTRAL ASIA IN ISLAMIC STATE'S PLANS (IS)

The success of IS in the region is due to a combination of various factors. Firstly, seven decades of imposed atheism fostered a huge spiritual vacuum and a lack of capacity in the training of imams; thus, sons now feel the need to educate their parents in the faith. Secondly, it is clear – as can be seen from the biographies of the presumed terrorists of the Paris and Brussels attacks – that the material provisions that promised to fill this vacuum have not lived up to expectations and, additionally, the hyper-individualist model of consumerism has generated “inequalities” among a population group traditionally dedicated to the collective. Thirdly, there is much social discontent due to the perception that all – or at least most – of the wealth created over these 25 years of independence has been shared out among few players. Finally, IS's “military” successes have facilitated the handover from Al Qaeda as the leading player in the global *Jihad* and have served as a pull for hundreds of youngsters who have found a reason to live, fight and die in their ranks.

As has already been mentioned, some of these countries, such as Uzbekistan<sup>37</sup> and Kazakhstan<sup>38</sup>, have already suffered jihadist attacks carried out by Central Asians. A further step was taken as young volunteers appeared, prepared to go and fight in Iraq and Syria. They entered Syria through Istanbul<sup>39</sup>, starting their journey either from their country of origin or from Russia: “one of the detained, Adham Abdolloev, had

34 “Tracing the Roots of ‘The Brothers’ and the Boston Marathon Bombing”, *WPNR News*, 7 April 2015, under <http://wnpr.org/post/tracing-roots-brothers-and-boston-marathon-bombing>, consulted 3 May 2015. GHOSH, P. “Boston Marathon Bombings: The Deadly Legacy of Anwar Al-Awlaki”, *International Business Times*, 3 May 2013, under [www.ibtimes.com/boston-marathon-bombings-deadly-legacy-anwar-al-awlaki-1235463](http://www.ibtimes.com/boston-marathon-bombings-deadly-legacy-anwar-al-awlaki-1235463), consulted 3 May 2015.

35 Issue II (May 2013) of *Inspire*, the official magazine of Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, paid great attention to the “feat” of the two brothers.

36 It is not known why the border authorities allowed Tazhayakov to return to the country. See TAPPER, J.: “Government source: Bells should have gone off for student in custody in Boston case”, *CNN*, 1 May 2013, under <http://thelead.blogs.cnn.com/2013/05/01/government-source-bells-should-have-gone-off-for-student-in-custody-in-boston-case/?on.cnn=1>, consulted 3 May 2015. Translation by author.

37 In 1999 in Taskent and in 2004 attacks in Taskent and in Bujara.

38 Attacks in the south of the country in 2011.

39 “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia”, *International Crisis Group*, 20 January 2015, under <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/central-asia/bo72-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf>, consulted 25 February 2015, p. 5.

been trained in Waziristan [from] where he was then sent to Russia to recruit more members from among the large population of Central Asian migrant workers”<sup>40</sup>.

Fighters from the former soviet republics fighting in Syria are called “Chechens”<sup>41</sup>, not just to link them in some way to the “noble cause” but also because recruiters in Moscow come from the Caucasus networks, and are either Dagestani or Chechen<sup>42</sup>, as is the case of one of the most famous recruiters, the Ingush Abu Zarr al-Ingushi<sup>43</sup>.

### *IS's Central Asians*

In 2013, a few Central Asians began travelling to the north of Iraq to try and control the zone. During that year, the Syrian civil war became even more complicated due to the entrance on the scene of the then-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

From that point, ISIS became IS as it advocated for the creation of a single Islamic state – a caliphate – for the *Ummah*. Its call to fight in the *Jihad* rapidly spread and found resonance in these secularised societies where dozens of people answered the call. IS quickly and efficiently organised an entire system for the raising of funds and the recruitment of persons<sup>44</sup>.

IS in Iraq and Syria is structured into regional “battalions”, and these into *jamaat* – smaller factions or “brigades” that bind together fighters with a shared ethnic or national origin or linguistic similarity. This is highly useful on the frontlines as it facilitates quick understanding of orders. The three *jamaat* made up of Central Asians are Sabri’s Jamaat, Jannat Oshiklari – also known as Tawhid wal Jihod (TWJ), and Katibat Imam al-Bukhari – or Imam Bukhori Jamaat (IBJ). They all fight together with the Al-Nusra Front in the Syrian province of Aleppo, although they do so

40 VINSON, M.: “A Look at Tajikistan’s Jamaat Ansarullah Leader Amriddin Tabarov”, *Militant Leadership Monitor*, n° 4, vol. 8, 2013.

41 Supporters of the pro-Russian Ramzán Kadyrov, called kaderovce or kadyrovites, are among the Chechens. See PARASZCZUK, J.: “Anti-IS Chechen Militants: We Don’t Like Kurds But We’re Glad When Anyone Kills IS”, *RFE/RL*, 28 January 2015, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/anti-islamic-state-chechen-militants-cheer-kurds-in-kobani/26818140.html>, consulted 2 May 2015.

42 “Syria Calling...”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

43 PARASZCZUK, J.: “Radicalized in Moscow, Killed in Syria: The Story of An IS Sniper”, *RFE/RL*, 30 April 2015, under [www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-dead-ingush-militant-moscow-syria/26987151.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-dead-ingush-militant-moscow-syria/26987151.html), consulted 1 May 2015.

44 See “Rich women found to be fundraising for Islamic State”, *The Journal*, 22 December 2015, under <http://www.thejournal.ie/islamic-state-fundraising-by-rich-women-2514178-Dec2015>, consulted 16 March 2016.

independently as they have not formally pledged allegiance to the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda.

Name	Allegiance	Relationship to Jabhat al-Nusra	Other names
Sabri's Jamaat	Islamic State (IS)	They have fought together against Al Assad's regime	
Jannat Oshiklari	Islamic State (IS) <sup>2</sup>		Tawhid wal Jihod (TWJ)
Katibat Imam al-Bukhari	Islamic State (IS)		Imam Bukhori Jamaat (IBJ)
Seyfullakh al-Shishani's Jamaat	Jabhat al-Nusra		
Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar	Caucasus Emirate		

Sabri's Jamaat, however, pledged allegiance to IS and to Abu Omar al-Shishani, IS's leader in Syria<sup>45</sup>, in March 2014. This group is mainly made up of Uzbeks and Dagestanis, although there are also Tajiks and Chechens. They carried out the attack on the Tabqa air base in Raqqa (Syria) using an Arab suicide bomber. The first Emir ("General" in this context) of Sabri's Jamaat was Abdurahman, who died during the Duwayrineh attack in Aleppo (8 March 2013). Abdurahman was succeeded by Sabri, but he too died in an attack during the Mennagh air base battle. He, in turn, was succeeded by Abu Usman who was also killed in Homs province. Abu Usman was replaced by Abdullah at-Toshkandi who died immediately after in the Aleppo Central Prison siege (April 2013). As can be seen, there were many changes of leadership in a short time, leading to internal instability of this faction; perhaps precisely because of this, the group decided to pledge allegiance to al-Shishani. The group is currently led by Khalid ad-Dagestani.

In October 2014, the Katibat al-Imam Bukhari faction, made up mostly by Uzbeks, swore an oath of allegiance to IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, although it retains its allegiance (*bayah*) to *mullah* Omar, the then leader of the Taliban<sup>46</sup>. Katibat al-Imam Bukhari has been fighting in the Syrian province of Aleppo together with Jabhat al-Nusra and two other Chechen factions filled with Russian speakers: Seyfullakh al-Shishani's Jamaat, that pledged allegiance to Jabhat al-Nusra<sup>47</sup>, and Jaish al-Muhajireen

45 Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili, the Georgian better known by his war name Abu Omar al-Shishani, is one of the "commanders" of IS. It is not known whether he is dead or alive as he has been declared dead on several occasions. See "Iraq, catturato da Forze Speciali USA il leader del Daesh Al-Shishani", *Velino International*, 28 December 2015, under <http://www.ilvelino.it/it/article/2015/12/28/iraq-catturato-da-forze-speciali-usa-il-leader-del-daesh-al-shishani/681b5a81-f821-4e5c-b2bb-663be4660ada>, consulted 20 January 2016.

46 In July 2015, it was officially acknowledged that mullah Omar had died in a Karachi hospital in 2013. He was replaced by Akhtar Mohamed Mansur. See MENESES, Rosa: "Afganistán anuncia que el mulá Omar murió en 2013", *El Mundo*, 29 July 2015, under <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/07/29/55b898fb22601dbb0c8b457c.html>, consulted 23 January 2016.

47 A show of the visceral clash between the Al Nusra Front and IS can be seen in the words of Khalid al-Shishani, where he brings into question the military genius of Abu Omar al-Shishani, IS's leader

wal-Ansar, a branch of the Caucasus Emirate. Although Katibat al-Imam Bukhari maintains its structure, it is officially part of Jabhat al-Nusra. To capture Jisr al-Shughour, they formed an Alliance called Jaish al-Fatah, made up of Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham – a group supported by Turkey to fight in Syria against Al Assad's regime<sup>48</sup>, and Tawhid wal Jihad. In addition, they all have a link to the Khorasan group, a small group of senior elite fighters from Al Qaeda.

The members of Imam Bukhari Jamaat and of Tawhid wal Jihad are mainly of Uzbek ethnic origin, which does not mean that they come from Uzbekistan but that they could come from any one of the countries in the area as the Uzbeks have spread throughout Central and Southern Asia without regard for border lines. In fact, this is one of the reasons that goes towards explaining why this group is so numerous: Uzbeks comprise the largest ethnic group in Central Asia and northern Afghanistan<sup>49</sup>. The second reason is down to the fact that Uzbeks have traditionally been more religious, more practicing and, therefore, more predisposed to *jihad*. The third reason, Uzbeks are a people that tend to take an interest in the social, economic and political issues of their surroundings and many of them have found in Islam and jihadism a way to channel their discontent with their respective governments<sup>50</sup>. Finally, some Uzbeks have joined the ranks of al-Nusra or IS because, according to a Kyrgyz official named Talant Razzakov, previously they had joined other “Salafi and Wahhabi organizations” in Saudi Arabia where approximately 100,000 Uzbeks live and where it has become popular to join these types of groups<sup>51</sup>.

It goes without saying that the figures for Central Asian fighters in Syria or for militants/sympathisers of these groups in Central Asia are not reliable given the opaque nature of these types of clandestine groups. The most conservative estimates offered by

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in Syria, and puts him on a par with the Kadyrovites – a derogatory term used to describe Chechens loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov, the pro-Moscow Chechen leader, and the Kharijites – a term used by some Muslim clerics to refer to members of IS. According to Khalid al-Shishani, the Kharijites are worse than the infidels and the apostates, the worst of all creatures; neither the Kurds nor those loyal to Al Assad have caused 1% of the damage that those Kharijites have caused to jihad. See PARASZCZUK, Joanna: “Anti-IS Chechen Militants: We Don't Like Kurds But We're Glad When Anyone Kills IS”, *RFE/RL*, 28 January 2015, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/anti-islamic-state-chechen-militants-cheer-kurds-in-kobani/26818140.html>, consulted 26 January 2016.

48 BANCO, E.: “Turkey May Have Found Syrian Horse to Back in Ahrar al Sham, But US Disagrees”, *International Business Times*, 30 April 2015, under [www.ibtimes.com/turkey-may-have-found-syrian-horse-back-ahrar-al-sham-us-disagrees-1903065](http://www.ibtimes.com/turkey-may-have-found-syrian-horse-back-ahrar-al-sham-us-disagrees-1903065), consulted 1 May 2015.

49 Tajiks is another of the important ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

50 BLACK, M.: “Uzbekistan's Gift to Radical Islam”, *Open Democracy*, 17 May 2005, under [https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions\\_government/article\\_2512.jsp](https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/article_2512.jsp), consulted 30 April 2015. See also WEINBERG, L. y PEDAHZUR, A. *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*. London: Routledge 2003.

51 See PARASZCZUK, J.: “Kyrgyz Official Blames Minority Uzbeks for Syria Presence”, *RFE/RL*, 17 March 2015, under [www.rferl.org/content/isis-kyrgyzstan-kyrgyz-uzbeks-syria-fighters-islamic-state/26905648.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/isis-kyrgyzstan-kyrgyz-uzbeks-syria-fighters-islamic-state/26905648.html), consulted 2 May 2015.

certain research institutes give a total of around 1300 fighters from Central Asia – 250 from Kazakhstan, 100 from Kyrgyzstan, 190 from Tajikistan, 360 from Turkmenistan and 500 from Uzbekistan, making up only a small proportion of the 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria. Bolder estimates raise this figure considerably. Focusing on their geographical origin, the International Crisis Group (ICG) states that:

*“In northern Kyrgyzstan, twenty former residents from just one medium-sized town are reported to have travelled to Turkey in 2013 with the intention of going on to Syria; there could be at least 300 unreported cases nationwide. In Kazakhstan, some 150 people made headlines when a video showing them in Syria appeared on YouTube in October 2013. IS supporters tend to come from the west and south of the country, but not exclusively. In Tajikistan, recruitment is nationwide but appears strongest in Sughd and Khatlon provinces; at least twenty people left for Syria from just one village in September 2014.”*<sup>52</sup>

Other sources state that of the 220 Kyrgyz citizens fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, 130 come from Osh province in the south of the country. Of qualitative, not quantitative, importance is the case of Nurlam Motuev, a famous politician in the country who publicly explained why he supports IS and why he would go to Syria to fight<sup>53</sup>. A similar impact was caused by the desertion of Gulmorad Halimov, a commander in the Ministry of the Interior’s Special Forces in Tajikistan, who fled the country in May 2015 to join IS in Syria.

This manner of very publicly joining the group has given IS great publicity in Central Asia, although the Central Asian regimes have also been quick to play the card offered them by the various desertions of youngsters – mainly Tajiks – who, after joining IS, have deserted their ranks. This is the case of Abdusami, Farrukh Sharifov and Marjona Alanazarova, a 27-year-old young lady who fled as she was going to be used as a female suicide bomber<sup>54</sup>.

Indeed, the issue of radical Islam and jihadism is a serious problem in Tajikistan. Despite the existence of other Muslim groups that advocate for understanding with other religions, such as the movement started by Fethullah Gülen, or that call for the defence of Islamic values in the political arena, like the illegalised Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, it has not been possible to prevent IS from becoming highly attractive to, particularly, young

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<sup>52</sup> “Syria Calling...” *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> PARASZCZUK, J.: “‘I Support IS And Would Fight in Syria,’ Says Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Coal King’”, *RFE/RL*, 25 March 2015, under [www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state--kyrgyzstan-motuev-coal-king/26919887.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state--kyrgyzstan-motuev-coal-king/26919887.html), consulted 2 May 2015.

<sup>54</sup> See PARASZCZUK, J.: “‘IS Will Make Me A Suicide Bomber If You Don’t Bring Me Home’”, *RFE/RL*, 4 October 2015, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-tajikistan-woman-suicide-bomber-bring-me-home/27286167.html>, consulted 2 May 2015.

people, to the extent that Tajikistan's Minister of the Interior, Ramazon Rakhimzoda, stated that 200 young Tajiks had already left Russia by March 2015<sup>55</sup>.

Muhammad Umar Safi, governor of the Afghan Province of Kunduz stated that:

*“About 70 ISIL [IS] members have been presently observed in the Dashti Archi and Chahar Dara districts of Kunduz Province [...] The militants also intend to step up activity in Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan, and Faryab provinces in the north. Earlier reports came in about ISIL militants turning up in the [southern] Zabul and Helmand provinces, as well as Ghazni Province.”*<sup>56</sup>.

According to the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), IS forces have mobilised from the south through to the north of Afghanistan, appearing in 2015 in Almar district (Faryab province), and, according to senator Gulmuhammad Rasuli, natives of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been seen among them<sup>57</sup>. This last detail could put paid to Turkmenistan's traditional neutrality as it could force it to get involved in the fight against the Taliban or against IS, having to take sides with one of the international players active in the area.

Among the Central Asian members fighting on the side of IS in the previously mentioned *jamaats* are: Abu Saloh Hafizahulloh, who fights under the IBJ flag; Abu Hafs al-Uzbeki and Abu Sa'ad al-Uzbeki, members of IBJ who appear in a propaganda video entitled “Join the Ranks”; Abdul Aziz al Uzbeki, who, together with Abu Dujana al Tunisi stormed a massive gathering of sympathisers of the Dajjal Army (Mahdi Army) in Sadr City (Baghdad), where 395 “apostates” – as they are called by IS – were killed or injured; the previously mentioned Gulmurod Halimov; Nusrat Nazarov, previously known as Abu Kholidi Kulobi, a 38 year old Tajik from the village of Charmagon in Kulob district; and, finally, the case of Farrukh Sharifov from Khujand (north Tajikistan) who publicly showed repentance for having fought on the side of IS and who has, since then, been giving speeches to dissuade young people from going to Syria<sup>58</sup>.

But what is IS's *modus operandi* in Central Asia? They recruit new members in mosques and other prayer halls. As part of their strategy, personal contact is very important, as

55 See “Interior Minister Claims ‘200 Tajik Labor Migrants Left Russia To Fight In Syria’”, *RFE/RL*, 4 March 2015, under <http://www.russianinsight.com/interior-minister-claims-200-tajik-labor-migrants-left-russia-to-fight-in-syria-3>, consulted 20 January 2016.

56 BAHROM, N.: “Tajikistan: Islamic State Militants Seen near Border with Afghanistan”, *Eurasia Review*, 13 February 2015, under [www.eurasiareview.com/13022015-tajikistan-islamic-state-militants-seen-near-border-afghanistan](http://www.eurasiareview.com/13022015-tajikistan-islamic-state-militants-seen-near-border-afghanistan), consulted 2 May 2015.

57 ANNAYEV, D.: “Islamic State Raises Flag on Turkmen-Afghan Border”, *Eurasia Review*, 5 February 2015, under [www.eurasiareview.com/05022015-islamic-state-raises-flag-turkmen-afghan-border](http://www.eurasiareview.com/05022015-islamic-state-raises-flag-turkmen-afghan-border), consulted 2 May 2015.

58 See BORISOV, Akbar: “Ex-Soviet Central Asia raises alarm over IS recruitment”, *Agence France-Presse AFP*, 15 May 2015, under <https://www.yahoo.com/news/ex-soviet-central-asia-raises-alarm-over-recruitment-052100409.html?ref=gs>, consulted 30 May 2015.

is clandestinity, the secrecy with which they carry out their acts; secrecy is so important that on occasions, people who have shared the prayer hall with these people have not noticed the work they have been carrying out. IS' "scouts" or recruiters also use new technologies and move with ease around internet fora, chatrooms and social networks. They are also masters of propaganda using videos, photomontages and magazines. An example is the video of the training camp run by Uzbeks in Aleppo province<sup>59</sup>. Another example of video manipulation is the video that shows a boy shooting at two purported Russian spies whose names were Mamayev Jambulat Yesenajovich and Ashimov Sergey Nikolayavich, but who were actually Kazakh citizens recruited by Russian intelligence<sup>60</sup>.

IS is highly conscious of the power of images and tends to appear in videos with one finger extended, a symbol of the oneness of Allah, Muhammad's central message. In the background, there is an expression of the *shahada*, the Muslim profession of faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah".

IS propaganda often shows children in training camps. These videos achieve a double aim: that of training new and more radicalised members, and that of showing other adults that they can travel to Syria with their entire family – including children – as they are attempting to build a new socio-political model – the caliphate. In any event, it would appear to be beyond doubt that there are Central Asians fighting principally in Syria but also in Iraq.

### *The role of the Central Asian authorities*

There don't appear to be any magic solutions to the problem of Islamism. No country has any solutions. Some governments have had more success than others at reducing their vulnerabilities and for that reason have suffered fewer terrorist attacks. In any case, it is clear that this is a difficult, complicated and long-term task<sup>61</sup>. In addition, this problem cannot be dealt with from one single perspective but rather needs to have an integrated approach<sup>62</sup>. It

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59 See ROGGIO, *op. cit.*

60 MALM, S.: "ISIS release new footage claiming to show a child executing two Russian 'spies' by shooting them in the back of the head", *Daily Mail online*, 13 January 2015, under [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2908498/ISIS-release-new-footage-claiming-child-executing-two-Russian-spies-shooting-head-just-staged-fake.html#ixzz3ZOQbmRnl](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2908498/ISIS-release-new-footage-claiming-child-executing-two-Russian-spies-shooting-head-just-staged-fake.html#ixzz3ZOQbmRnl), consulted 2 May 2015.

61 SPALEK, B. (Ed.). *Counter-Terrorism: Community-Based Approaches to Preventing Terror Crime*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

62 MOGHADAM, A.: "The roots of suicide terrorism: a multi-causal approach", in PEDAHZUR A. (Ed.). *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom*, New York: Routledge, 2006. See also POST, J. M.; RUBY, K. G. and SHAW, E. D. "The Radical Group in Context: I. An Integrated Framework for the Analysis of Group Risk for Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, nº 25, vol. 2, 2002.

cannot be an individual fight, by one individual country, but rather has to be a global fight<sup>63</sup>; national solutions will always be partial solutions<sup>64</sup>.

As David Long states, “explanations based on one single factor ignore the fact that terrorist behaviour is an interaction between an individual psychology and an external environment”<sup>65</sup>. Other investigators are of similar opinions, such as Paul Wilkinson<sup>66</sup> and Assaf Moghadam<sup>67</sup>. Likewise, Martha Crenshaw made a distinction between three levels of causes of terrorism: situational variables, such as political, economic or general social conditions, the strategy of the terrorist organisation and the “problem of individual participation”<sup>68</sup>. The perspective offered by the socio-psychological framework to examine the dynamics of terrorist behaviour offers a more complete explanation than a perspective that focuses only on economic conditions<sup>69</sup>.

These secular states have been very proactive in nipping in the bud any type of outbreak of radical Islamism since they gained their independence<sup>70</sup>, and even more so since the 9/11 attacks as in these attacks they found something in common with the huge American superpower – at that point the undisputed hegemon on the international scene. This in practice meant a rapprochement between the USA and these republics as the USA needed them to deploy in Afghanistan the military operative of “Operation Infinite Justice”, then renamed “Enduring Freedom”, which was later transformed into the NATO ISAF mission and then into the NATO-led Resolute Support mission.

63 See RABBIE, J. M.: “A Behavioral Interaction Model: Toward a Social-Psychological Framework for Studying Terrorism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, n° 3, vol. 4, 1991.

64 See “Central Asia: Islamist mobilisation and regional security”, *International Crisis Group*, Central Asia Report, 1 March 2001, under <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/central-asia/Central%20Asia%20Islamist%20Mobilisation%20and%20Regional%20Security.pdf>.

65 LONG, D. E. *The Anatomy of Terrorism*, New York: Free Press, 1990, p. 16.

66 See WILKINSON, P. *Political Terrorism*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974.

67 MOGHADAM, A. *The Roots of Terrorism*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005.

68 CRENSHAW, M. “The Causes of Terrorism”, *Comparative Politics*, n° 13, vol 4, 1981, p. 380. Translation by author.

69 PIAZZA, J. A.: “Rooted in Poverty? Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, n° 18, vol. 1, 2006. See also VICTOROFF, J.: “The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, n° 49, vol. 1, 2005. VON HIPPEL, K.: “The Roots of Terrorism: Probing the Myths”, *The Political Quarterly*, n° 73, vol. 51, 2002. Finally, ROSS, J. I.: “Beyond the Conceptualization of Terrorism: A Psychological-Structural Model of the Causes of this Activity”, in SUMMERS, C. y MARKUSEN, E. *Collective Violence: Harmful Behavior in Groups and Governments*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.

70 “Central Asia: Islam and the State”, *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report, 10 July 2003, under <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/central-asia/059%20Central%20Asia%20Islam%20and%20the%20State>.

Summarising greatly, it could be said that the factor that structures the entire region is Islam and that the different regimes try to keep it under control and stop it from being used to channel the discontent felt by the population. For this reason, they have a Muslim Board of Central Asia, one in each country, build official mosques with official sanctuaries, Islamic institutes and universities, etc. The governments have created an official Islam and any attempt to move away from the official discourse is shut down by the government authorities as religious life is supervised. In some countries, the use of the *hijab* is banned in public or in some public buildings, having a long beard is banned, and some Islamic groups have been illegalised for being too extremist<sup>71</sup>. However, as will be highlighted later on, subjecting religion to such fierce persecution can be counterproductive<sup>72</sup>.

The Central Asian states have approved new anti-terrorist laws. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan<sup>73</sup> have made it illegal for a private citizen to go and fight in a foreign country – obviously with an eye on those nationals who have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join IS. Uzbekistan persecutes “terrorist training” independently of whether it takes place within or without its borders<sup>74</sup>. The parliament of Kyrgyzstan adopted amendments to the country’s Criminal Code to punish participation in conflicts, military operations or terrorist or extremist training in a foreign country<sup>75</sup>. Turkmenistan, proud of its policy of neutrality, seems to be the only country that, up until now, has been an exception to this trend, with the exception of its 2003 anti-terrorist law; the country prefers to uphold this strategy of neutrality as opposed to rolling out a policy of fierce belligerence against jihadism, but this doesn’t stop them from being extremely concerned about controlling their borders with Iraq and Afghanistan, as underlined in the U.S. Department of State’s Report in 2014:

*“The State Border Service (SBS) continued to operate frontier garrisons on its borders with Iran and Afghanistan and managed eight radiation portal monitors along its borders, which were donated by the Department of Energy through its Second Line of Defense program. The State Migration Service maintains a terro-*

71 “Kyrgyzstan Silences Popular Imam with Extremism Charges”, *Eurasianet*, 17 February 2015, under <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72116>, consulted 3 May 2015.

72 “Uzbek Group in Afghanistan Pledge Allegiance to Islamic State”, *RFE/RL*, 30 March 2015, under <http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbek-group-in-afghanistan-behead-afghan-soldier/26928658.html>, consulted 25 April 2015. See also, “New Hudjum Campaign Hits Eastern Uzbekistan”, *Khilafah News*, 2 May 2015, under <http://www.khilafah.com/new-hudjum-campaign-hits-eastern-uzbekistan>, consulted 3 May 2015.

73 URAZOVA, D.: “Nazarbayev signs new Criminal Code”, *Tengri News*, 20 July 2014, under [http://en.tengrinews.kz/laws\\_initiatives/Nazarbayev-signs-new-Criminal-Code-254593](http://en.tengrinews.kz/laws_initiatives/Nazarbayev-signs-new-Criminal-Code-254593), consulted 3 May 2015.

74 “Uzbekistan introduces criminal liability for failure to report about terrorism acts”, *UZ Daily*, 21 January 2014, under <http://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-26380.htm>, consulted 3 May 2015.

75 “Kyrgyzstan bans Islamic State”, *24 News*, 26 March 2015, under <http://www.eng.24.kg/bigtiraj/175069-news24.html>, consulted 26 December 2015.

*rist screening watch-list and possesses biometric screening capabilities at ports of entry.”<sup>76</sup>*

In this way, IS is persecuted by all the instruments of the rule of law – police, judges, armed forces – although with limited success. Surprisingly, Kyrgyzstan requested help from the EU to stop the advance of IS, just like Turkmenistan did with Russia and Uzbekistan<sup>77</sup>.

The fight against terrorism is also carried out by cutting off their sources of financing, following recommendations by the UN after the 9/11 attacks. The five Central Asian countries belong to the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (EAG), a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body<sup>78</sup>. Despite the fact that terrorist groups take advantage of “loopholes” in state legislation to obtain new sources of financing, the reality is that these measures are delivering good results: “[...] the campaign in Afghanistan, by focusing on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, is believed to have disabled some of the IMU’s major financial sources. It might also have restricted the IMU’s opportunities to participate in drugs and arms smuggling”<sup>79</sup>.

Religious authorities are also a key player in this situation. They should unreservedly condemn the actions of groups like IS and make it very clear if these groups are manipulating Islam as they see fit, if they are using and abusing the name of the religion of millions of people across the world and monopolising concepts such as “caliphate” and “Islamic state”. For example, the Ulema Council of the Islamic Centre of Tajikistan warned Tajiks not to join IS. Sayfullo Safarov, deputy director of the Tajik Strategic Research Centre, stated: “People involved in terrorism and extremism in the name of Islam have nothing in common with us”<sup>80</sup>. In addition to this, the Ulema Council also published a fatwa stating that Tajiks who join extremist organisations and fight in foreign wars are committing a grave sin against Islam<sup>81</sup>. In Kyrgyzstan,

76 See “Country Reports on Terrorism 2013”, *US Department of State*, 2014.

77 PARASZCZUK, J.: “Kyrgyzstan Wants EU Military Help to Guard against IS Threat”, *RFE/RL*, 24 March 2015, under [www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-islamist-extremism-isis-threat-military-aid/26918614.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-islamist-extremism-isis-threat-military-aid/26918614.html), consulted 3 May 2015. See also BARAN, Z.; STARR, S. F. y CORNELL, S. E. “Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU”, *Silk Road Paper*, 2006, under [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), consulted 30 April 2015.

78 See “Country Reports on Terrorism 2013...” *op. cit.*

79 UNODC Global Programme against Money Laundering [GPML]. (2002): “Money Laundering and Related Issues in Uzbekistan”, *Central Asia Briefing*, under <https://www.imolin.org/pdf/imolin/Uzbekpro.pdf>, p. 1.

80 See BAHROM, N.: “Tajikistan: Fatwa Denounces ‘Jihadism’ Abroad”, *Eurasia Review*, 7 October 2014, under [www.eurasiareview.com/07102014-tajikistan-fatwa-denounces-jihadism-abroad](http://www.eurasiareview.com/07102014-tajikistan-fatwa-denounces-jihadism-abroad), consulted 3 May 2015. Traducción del autor.

81 *Ibidem.*

the State Committee for National Security is working with the Ministry of Education and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims to launch a campaign that will reach all villages and small towns to inform the public of the dangers of fighting with IS<sup>82</sup>. In any event, “poorly educated imams [are struggling] to compete with the Islamic State’s glamourisation of jihad”<sup>83</sup>.

It is necessary to evaluate whether the policies implemented by the governments are effective or counterproductive. For example, in Tajikistan, there has been an attempt made to eliminate all foreign cultural influences, especial Arabic ones. Men cannot have a beard and women may not wear a *hijab*, any music that is not traditional Tajik music is banned, and there is a list of approved subjects that can be addressed during sermons at mosques on Fridays – to the exclusion of all other subjects. These measures have not been popular among citizens and are causing more rejection and protest than receptiveness. Add to this the fact that the only confessional party in the whole of Central Asia, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, has been made illegal, meaning that this political cause and the persecution of everything Islamic that could escape the control of the government, falls directly outside the law.

In addition to this, there have been international attempts to fight IS’s recruitment process in those countries, in most cases military measures, such as the joint exercises as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (OCS) and its Anti-Terrorist Centre (RATS) headquartered in Taskent, or under the umbrella of the OSCE or NATO’s PfP.

## CONCLUSIONS

The expression that best summarises the effect that IS has on some Muslims is the word “calling”; its power of attraction is huge. This group offers a breath of fresh air to those looking for new horizons for their life. The neophytes who fall into their snare don’t go to fight for them purely out of economic reasons but rather, and above all, because of the force of attraction that this utopia exerts, the clear aim of building a caliphate – *Khalifat* – just like back in the days of the early Islam (7<sup>th</sup> century) of Muhammed and his four orthodox caliphs.

What are the underlying causes, the motivations behind these, essentially, young people wanting to go and fight together with IS?<sup>84</sup>. The social background, economic situation or level of education of those who have joined IS are not uniform, as shown

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82 “Kyrgyzstan bans Islamic State...”, *op. cit.*

83 See “Syria Calling...”, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

84 BJØRGO, T. (Ed.). *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, reality and ways forward*, London/New York: Routledge, 2005.

by the fact that there are people from different social classes<sup>85</sup>. In any case, there is a dream, a utopia that, according to Bruce Thornton, Westerners have difficulty understanding because Western civilisation has lost its principles and is in the midst of a crisis<sup>86</sup>, in contrast with Russia:

*“But there’s another important reason Russia’s much more extensive crimes against Islam are given a pass: the jihadists know the Russians are not susceptible to the therapeutic blackmail used against a self-loathing West. Russia uses brutal force to promote and defend its interests and doesn’t give a damn what the rest of the world thinks”<sup>87</sup>.*

It is not just a question of youth unemployment, of unfavourable outlooks for a sector of the Central Asian population, low quality jobs or situations of virtual slavery in other countries. Capitalism, consumerism, a free market economy, hyper-individualism and an almost complete lack of moral values beyond some subjective ethics, are frontal assaults against societies that greatly appreciate all social encounters. In addition, the transition from Soviet Union to independent states was done “without anaesthetic”.

These young men have been offered a way of life based on MTV – scantily-clad girls, guys who make easy money through illegal races, bets or drugs, contempt of anything that involves effort or sacrifice, rejection of any glimmer of spirituality or religiousness; some have bought into this way of life but these false paradises have caused considerable rejection in other social sectors. This has caused them to look for something more “authentic”, the “truth”, “happiness”... and in IS and its messages they have found a bright spot on the horizon towards which they can angle their lives and, without doubt, “they are people affected by the rapid social changes”<sup>88</sup>. Some young Central Asians have, however, abandoned their fight with IS and, upon returning to their countries of origin, have told of their disenchantment with the group.

Central Asians in IS make up a small group in two senses of the word: small - around 4000<sup>89</sup> - compared to the total number of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, and small in respect to the total number of inhabitants – around 65 million – of Central Asia. This means that the general causes – social, economic, environmental – are indeed necessary conditions but do not go far enough to explain why somebody

85 FRIEDLAND, N.: “Becoming a Terrorist: Social and Individual Antecedents”, in HOWARD, L. (Ed.). *Terrorism: Roots, Impact, Responses*, New York: Praeger, 1992.

86 BAWER, B. *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within*, New York: Random House, 2006.

87 THORNTON, B. S.: “Jihadists see West’s tragic flaw in blinkered tolerance”, *The Sage and the Sword*, 12 November 2006, under <http://victorhanson.com/wordpress/?p=5530>, consulted 30 March 2015.

88 See “Syria Calling...” *op. cit.*, p. 4.

89 Some authors consider the figure to be closer to 7000. See ALEXANDROVA, Lyudmila: “Is Islamic State’s threat to Central Asian countries real?” *TASS Russian News Agency*, 18 November 2015, under <http://tass.ru/en/opinions/837576>, consulted 20 January 2016.

would get involved in the *jihad* in Syria. Some families have not even been able to explain this when questioned on it<sup>90</sup>.

So aside from this, why are Central Asians now joining the *jihad* in Syria in droves? Why did they not do so in Afghanistan or Iraq during the last decade, or in Chechnya in the 90s? The simplest answer to both questions is that Syria is a successful case of *jihad* and that attracts these people; IS has made important advancements, has won important battles. Moreover, even if IS doesn't end up winning the war in Syria, they have already done a "great" job as they have trained thousands of young people on the battlefield and these young people will now go back to their countries with practical combat training or will go to fight the global *jihad* in other theatres of war, just as happened with the "Afghan Arabs" against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. In the current case, the well-trained "Syrian Central Asians" could travel to any part of Europe, and especially to Russia, disguised among the masses of Central Asian immigrants without raising suspicion<sup>91</sup>.

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90 See HODGE, Nathan: "In Tajikistan, U.S.-Trained Commander Turns to Islamic State", *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 January 2016, under <http://www.wsj.com/articles/in-tajikistan-u-s-trained-commander-turns-to-islamic-state-1451870368>, consulted 20 January 2016. See also TURSUNZODA, Mehrangez: "Tajik Families in Shock as Sons Die for Islamic State", *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 28 August 2015, under <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajik-families-shock-sons-die-islamic-state>, consulted 26 January 2016.

91 See TUROVSKY, Daniil: "How Moscow's migrant workers became fighters for the Islamic State", *Quartz*, 1 May 2015, under <http://qz.com/395874/how-moscows-migrant-workers-became-fighters-for-the-islamic-state>, consulted 15 June 2015.

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