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Is Central Asia Ready to Face ISIS?

Central Asian governments, which often conflate extremism and dissent, are unprepared for the risk they face.

By Uran Botobekov
July 08, 2016

The military and technical capacities of the Islamic State have been weakened by series of defeats on the battlefield. As a result, some fighters who fought on the side of the so-called Caliphate have begun to return clandestinely to Central Asia. Following the liberation of Fallujah and Manbij in Iraq and Aleppo in Syria, the number of extremists returning to their home countries is increasing. With the return of these now-veterans fighters, the threat of terrorist attacks has increased, causing deep concerns among the ruling regimes in Central Asia.

On June 17, the National Security Committee (GKNB) of the Kyrgyz Republic reported that three people who had fought in Syria and returned were detained in the Batken region. The GKNB said they'd returned with an intention to create an underground ISIS cell to carry out a series of attacks. According to Stalbek Rakhmanov, the head of Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, more than 500 citizens of Kyrgyzstan are fighting in Iraq and Syria, and more than 30 have been killed in combat. Moreover, 28 criminal cases have been instituted concerning 44 returned fighters. The potential for returned fighters to commit terrorist acts in Kyrgyzstan is becoming a real concern for officials in Bishkek.

Neighboring Kazakhstan has also seen intensified activity connected to extremists, possibly with connections to ISIS. According to a message from the chairman of the Committee on National Security of Kazakhstan, Vladimir Zhumakanov, while authorities were detaining six Salafists,

one blew himself up. Earlier, Minister of Foreign Affairs Erlan Idrissov linked the early June attacks in the city of Aktobe—in which 18 attackers, three military officials and five civilians were killed—with the Islamic State. According to his statement, the attackers were acting upon a call issued by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a senior ISIS leader and spokesperson. ISIS has not claimed responsibility for the Aktobe attack. According to information from the security services of Kazakhstan, around 400 Kazakhs are involved in armed conflicts in the Middle East. Authorities say 15 have returned to Kazakhstan and pose a threat to the nation’s security.

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The president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, during his meeting with residents of Badakhshan, expressed his concern over the involvement of youth in combat activities in Syria and Iraq on the side of the Islamic State. According to a statement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1,300 Tajik citizens are taking part in hostilities abroad. To date, 147 have returned from Syria and Iraq; 50 of them have been granted amnesty for surrendering voluntarily to the authorities. Two men, Dilafruz Kholov and Izzatullo Fuzailov, were sentenced by the district court of Dushanbe for 10 years in prison for preparing attacks in the country. Tajik authorities say they intended to kill the president.

Jihadists returning from Syria may still maintain linkages with ISIS and are potentially ready to resume the fight. However, Tajik authorities use the threat of Islamic radicalism for repression of the domestic opposition. Tajik authorities have accused the leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) of having connections with ISIS. Last year, the Supreme Court banned the party, and recently its notable leaders were sentenced to long prison terms after a closed-door trial.

Not much information exists in relation to citizens of Uzbekistan who have fought alongside ISIS and returned to their homeland. More than 1,500 Uzbeks in Afghanistan and Syria, who are fighting on the side of such terrorist groups as Jamaat Imam Bukhari, Tawhid wal-Jihad, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), are very aware that if they return to their home country they will inevitably face death. The authoritarian regime of President Islam Karimov rigidly represses members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and arrested 160 people last November under the pretext of combating ISIS. According to information from local human right activists, in 2015 around 12,800 people were in Uzbek prisons after being convicted of religious extremism and allegedly for “having connection” with ISIS and Hizb ut-Tahrir. By grossly violating the rights of ordinary Muslims and harshly repressing religious freedom, the government of Uzbekistan provides ground for radicalization. Those who did not find justice in government institutions may look to join ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, or the IMU.

Due to Turkmenistan’s closed nature, no accurate information is available regarding the number of jihadists returned from Syria. According to data provided by International Crises Group (ICG), 400 Turkmen are fighting alongside ISIS.

ISIS fighters have already started returning to Central Asia from Syria and Iraq. This movement reflects the fact that the Islamic State is experiencing challenging times. According to the statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook, as a result of military operations by the

international coalition led by the United States, ISIS has lost 47 percent of its territory in Iraq and 20 percent of its territory in Syria. According to Daniel Glaser, the U.S. Treasury Department's assistant secretary for terrorist financing, U.S. air strikes directed at oil fields, oil processing enterprises, and tankers cut oil production by one-third, and total revenue of the ISIS oil business decreased by 50 percent. As a result, a powerful blow was dealt against Islamic States' financial underpinning as well.

After suffering battlefield defeats, losing territory and income, it seems that ISIS has begun to change its tactics. Recent attacks—some inspired and others organized by ISIS—underscore this possible shift in tactics. A year ago the so-called caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in a video message urged all Muslims to immigrate to the Caliphate and fight against the enemy of Islam. “We have established [the] Caliphate. You should come to our place,” he said.

Yet following its considerable military and financial losses, ISIS has attempted to shift the theater of war outside of its immediate territory. Today ISIS less frequently moves its new members to Iraq and Syria and tries to keep them in their home countries. Such a tactic is used in relation to newly recruited members residing in the Muslim countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus region of the Russian Federation. ISIS does not urge them to come to Raqqa, but recommends that they should stay in their home countries and continue jihad against “kafirs” at home.

Al-Baghdadi is very well aware that the coalition forces led by the United States will destroy the nucleus of the Islamic State and the Caliphate, as it is, will collapse. If he stays alive, al-Baghdadi will have to follow Osama bin Laden's example: flee and lead a wide terrorist network clandestinely.

With this path in mind, ISIS leaders are interested in establishing sleeper cells across the world so that they can organize terrorist attacks and resume jihad even after defeat in Syria. Islamic State's strategic aim following the fall is to preserve control over 34 extremist groups, such as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, Boko Haram, Katibat al-Imam Bukhari, Wilayat Qawqaz (Caucasus) and IDU, who swore their allegiance personally to al-Baghdadi. Along with carrying out military actions, ISIS is currently engaged in establishing relationships between these Islamic groups, which are active in Europe, West and North Africa, and the Middle East, as well as Central and Southeast Asia.

Islamic State's media wing, Al-Furqan, disseminated an audio message from spokesperson al-Adnani with a call to carry out attacks on military and civilian assets in the United State and Europe during Ramadan. In the last month—the holy month of Ramadan for Muslims—extremists with varying degrees of linkage to ISIS carried out attacks in Orlando, Aktobe, Istanbul, Dhaka, Baghdad, and Medina resulting hundreds of civilian deaths (nearly 300 in the July 3 Baghdad attack alone).

Many of these attacks were organized by diffuse cells, groups acting after getting the signal from ISIS leaders—such as the call to carry out attacks during Ramadan. ISIS intends to inspire its supporters toward bloodshed. First, this gives them an opportunity to use propagandist damage

to compensate for lost territory and military defeats. Second, this consolidates various extremist groups around the Caliphate. Third, it helps to activate returned ISIS fighters, re-linking them to the core organization and using them to recruit local networks in their home countries.

The states of Central Asia face a massive challenge and seem unprepared to deal with the threat of Islamic radicalism at the same time groups like ISIS are shifting to a more diffuse strategy. Attempts by authorities in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to combat religious and extremist organizations will not be fruitful endeavors if there is no fundamental change in domestic policy, which implies socioeconomic transformations and reforms in law enforcement agencies. Existing poverty, increasing socioeconomic crises, expanding authoritarianism, and appalling corruption in the government structures of Central Asia stymie efforts to accurately and thoroughly assess the threat posed by jihadism. Clear and coordinated preventative measures are needed to preserve public and political stability in the region.