

# The Rising Threat in Central Asia

The threat from Islamic extremism is growing, and leaders appear increasingly worried.

Something's stirring in Central Asia. Nearly a year ago, we wrote an article about the threat of Islamist radicalism in the region. Central Asia has long been vulnerable to such destabilizing movements, in part because of events that have unfolded over several years. In Afghanistan, the U.S. has effectively given up on trying to rid the country of jihadists and is now looking for a way to leave without sacrificing any more blood or treasure. In Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Islamic State fighters are returning home, experienced, motivated and facing uncertain futures. But a number of more recent developments have forced us to take a harder look at the region and examine whether it's now reaching a turning point.

The most recent event that caught our eye was a riot on May 19 in a Tajik prison where Islamic State militants are being held. According to the Ministry of Justice, the rebellion, which killed three guards and 29 prisoners, started late Sunday in the city of Vahdat, located 10 kilometers from the capital. The ministry claims that the riot was organized by 35 Islamic State fighters, including Behruz Gulmurod, a former military leader for IS and the son of the former commander of the Tajik special forces.

Similar incidents have happened before. In November 2018, 21 prisoners and two officers were killed in a prison riot in the northern city of Khujand. The Islamic State took responsibility for that incident as well, but thus far, the group hasn't carried out attacks in Tajikistan outside of prisons - but it might be only a matter of time before it does. Last week, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon called on the international community to increase efforts to fight IS in Afghanistan, noting that members of the group have been transferred to Afghanistan for a specific purpose. Having gained combat experience in Syria and Iraq, they can now use that experience to help destabilize the region.

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According to Tajikistan's border guard, there are roughly 16,000 militants (including some from the Islamic State) in northern Afghanistan near the Tajik border, 6,000 of whom are foreign fighters. But the reliability of these figures and the general level of the terrorist threat in this part of the world is still unclear. Tajikistan has every reason to play up the threat, hoping to win support for any counterterrorism operations it might launch in the future. The country has relatively few resources at its disposal, and it needs to encourage outside actors – whether Russia or the United States or even China – to help keep Islamic extremist threats at bay. Russia and China, in particular, may have an interest in helping Tajikistan, as they themselves may become the next target for extremist groups that gain a foothold in Central Asia. Indeed, the destabilization of Tajikistan would affect many nearby countries that are much larger than Tajikistan and therefore more attractive targets. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia and China could all see a flood of Tajik refugees as well as a larger IS presence on their own soil. Even if the figures are accurate, the militants may be scattered,

making it difficult for them to coordinate, plan attacks and grow into anything resembling what IS managed to establish in Syria and Iraq.

But there is a ring of truth in Rahmon's comments. If the militants are able to establish a more permanent presence in the region, the threat to Central Asian countries will increase. Many of these fighters are looking for the kinds of power vacuums that Islamic extremists have taken advantage of in the past. Central Asia's brittle, post-Soviet republics are a tempting target, and Rahmon knows it.

Indeed, Rahmon isn't the only significant figure to call attention to this issue. On Tuesday, the director of Russia's Federal Security Services said there were about 5,000 Islamic militants who had fought in Syria now in northern Afghanistan. And last week, a senior Russian general warned of the worsening security situation in Central Asia. He said the number of Islamic State militants in Afghanistan has tripled since 2016, when they numbered roughly 1,900, and that the situation could reach crisis levels by next year. The overall number is fairly small, but the speed at which it's growing and the experience of the newest recruits should not be underestimated.

Uzbekistan, one of Central Asia's most powerful and politically dynamic countries, is also worried about the situation in Afghanistan. On May 14, Uzbekistan held snap drills in Surkhandarya region, near the Afghan border, and military units there were put on the highest level of combat readiness. Uzbekistan, the region's most populous country, is in the midst of a major political transition and is also hoping to attract foreign investment. To do so, it has considered loosening government control by, for example, easing internet censorship and offering cautious support to religious education institutions to give observant Muslims an alternative to the religious ideology offered by the Islamic State.

None of the recent developments suggest that Central Asia has reached a breaking point. And it's important not to treat Central Asian countries as a monolith - a country like Uzbekistan has more resources at its disposal to hold back extremist groups than a country like Tajikistan, which needs all the help it can get from not just Russia but even regional heavyweights like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Moreover, this is one issue that ironically may boost cooperation among Central Asian states, just as it did in the Middle East, where the rise of the Islamic State forced countries like the U.S. and Iran, or Israel and Saudi Arabia to work together - even if temporarily.

Still, the threat is growing, and Central Asian countries are worried that a peace deal between the U.S. and the Taliban could only make things worse. China also must keep a watchful eye on these developments, as Central Asia is a linchpin in its Belt and Road Initiative. For China, jailing and brainwashing Uighurs is one way to make sure its borders are well protected. In the meantime, the Islamic jihadists in Central Asia are gathering strength and biding their time.

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