

# Pathways to Violent Extremism

EVIDENCE FROM TAJIK  
RECRUITS TO ISLAMIC STATE

BY EDWARD LEMON



Over the past few years, Central Asians have attracted international attention for their involvement in Islamic terrorist groups. Attacks in New York, St. Petersburg, Istanbul, and Stockholm have all been linked to Central Asian citizens. In May 2015, the head of Tajikistan's paramilitary police (OMON) dramatically defected to the Islamic State. At these moments, Central Asia received rare attention from mainstream news agencies. Coverage from outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic*, and *Business Insider* painted the region as a “growing source of terrorism” and “fertile ground” for recruitment.

### Central Asia as a “Hotbed of Extremism”?

This latest concern over militancy in Central Asia is nothing new. During the Soviet period, many Sovietologists viewed Central Asia as the USSR's soft underbelly by virtue of its recalcitrant Muslim population. After the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, the doyen of Sovietological commentators on Central Asia, Alexandre Bennigsen, wrote in his 1983 book, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, that “the Muslim community is prepared for the inevitable showdown with its Russian rulers.” Since Central Asian republics became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991, observers have continued

to frame Central Asia as a potential source of chaos and considered ways to calm local tensions.

But, with the exception of Tajikistan's bloody civil war between 1992 and 1997, the region has seen limited political violence. A search for Central Asian states within the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an open-source database that provides information about terrorism events around the world, yields 269 results. The dataset is problematic. Despite its purported focus on nonstate actors, it includes incidents such as the Andijan massacre in 2005, when Uzbek troops attacked protestors, and the 2014 violence in Khorog, Tajikistan, which pitted local commanders against the

“Trekking and climbing in Fann Mountains 2013” photo by Oleg Brovko, licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0.



central government. Almost half of the entries for Central Asia (126 in total) took place during the Tajik civil war. While the GTD covers incidents dating back to 1970, there are no entries for the Soviet period. The GTD includes deaths that occurred during the May 1992 protests in Dushanbe, but not those during the February 1990 clashes between the Communist government and organized criminal groups. Setting these issues aside, Central Asia, home to 1 percent of the world's population, accounts for only 0.001 percent of entries in the attacks recorded in the GTD.

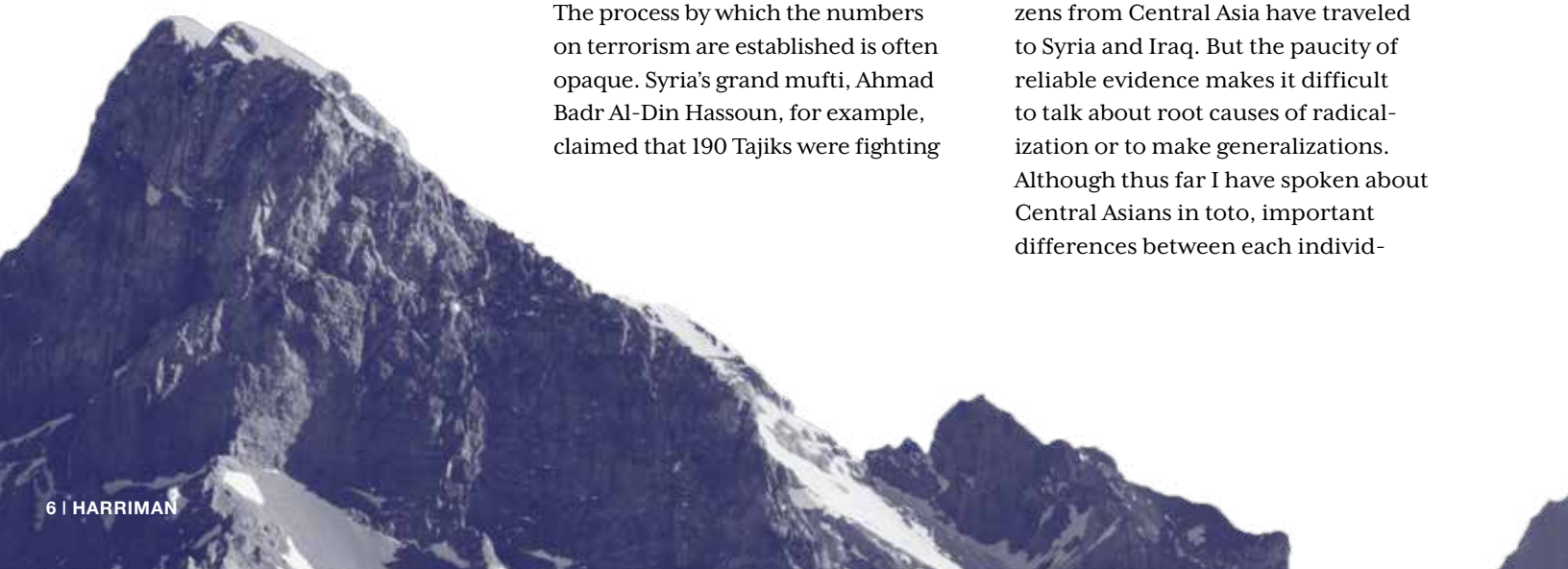
Even if Central Asia itself has not seen many attacks, this does not

exclude the region from becoming an exporter of terrorists, with citizens going to fight in foreign conflicts or immigrants like New York attacker Saifullo Saipov radicalizing in Western countries. Mapping the precise number of Central Asians who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq is difficult. Many spend time in Russia before flying to Turkey and crossing into Syria or Iraq, making efforts to track them across these multiple jurisdictions challenging. The authoritarian governments in the region are not known for producing accurate statistics. Central Asian regimes are caught between the desire to instrumentalize the terrorist threat in order to crack down on other groups, as we have seen in Tajikistan, or to downplay the terrorism issue, which has been the case in Uzbekistan. The process by which the numbers on terrorism are established is often opaque. Syria's grand mufti, Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun, for example, claimed that 190 Tajiks were fighting

in Syria by October 2013. Despite its dubious origins, this figure quickly became widely circulated, including by the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, the leading think tank focusing on foreign fighters. But, even if we rely on the figures available, the involvement of some 2,000 to 4,000 Central Asians in the conflict in Syria and Iraq is still rather marginal, with recruits making up just 0.0001 percent of the region's population. The unnewsworthy story of terrorist groups in Central Asia is one of widespread popular ambivalence toward extremist messaging.

### **What Do We Know about Radicalization in Central Asia?**

We do know that a few thousand citizens from Central Asia have traveled to Syria and Iraq. But the paucity of reliable evidence makes it difficult to talk about root causes of radicalization or to make generalizations. Although thus far I have spoken about Central Asians in toto, important differences between each individ-





ual country exist. Political systems vary across the region, from Uzbekistan's closed state under Karimov to Kazakhstan's modernizing "soft authoritarianism" and Kyrgyzstan's chaotic pluralism. Whereas most Tajiks seem to have been recruited while working as labor migrants in Russia, Emil Nasritdinov's research on Kyrgyzstan, published by the United Nations Development Programme in 2018, suggests that Kyrgyz migrants have been more resilient to radicalization. Most Tajiks seem to have joined ISIS in Raqqa and Mosul, but more Uzbeks have joined several groups linked to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) around Aleppo. These different contexts and pathways matter.

My research on the subject has mostly focused on Tajikistan, the region's poorest and most migration-dependent country. I have been collecting data since the first reports of Tajik citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq. Again, finding reliable sources is problematic. Government accounts need to be treated with a degree of skepti-

cism. Parents' testimonies about their children invariably describe them as "good" boys or girls, but this could be a result of them not being close to their children or not wanting to be blamed. Testimonies of returnees have generally conformed to the government narratives, framing themselves as having been "tricked" into joining ISIS and undermining their own agency in making that decision. By triangulating sources, I have managed to find basic biographical data on 236 recruits and more detailed profiles of more than forty fighters.

My tentative findings, published in the *RUSI Journal* in 2015, run counter to the government of Tajikistan's narrative that blames youthful naïveté, unemployment, and strong religious beliefs for driving its citizens to violent extremist groups. Each individual Tajik's pathway to violent extremism is different and catchall explanations of recruitment do not apply. Nonetheless, it is possible to make some general observations.

Far from being young and naïve, as the government claims, the aver-

age age of fighters from Tajikistan is twenty-eight years old, with over half of the fighters between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-nine. Almost all the fighters have at least a high school diploma; some have attended university. For example, Nasim Nabotov, the young Tajik who made news when he was killed in Syria in 2015, studied economics at Russia's prestigious Moscow State University before dropping out to fight with the Islamic State.

Being a strict Muslim, Central Asian governments tend to argue, makes individuals more susceptible to radical Islamic ideas. Societal Islamization is equated with political radicalization. The Tajik government,

(Above, far left) Sher-Dor Madrasa in Samarkand; (middle and right) Dushanbe's Central Mosque (Hoji Yaqub Mosque). All photos by Edward Lemon.



Celebrating Eid-al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, in Vanj, Tajikistan (2013).

for instance, has claimed that 80 percent of those who have joined ISIS are Salafis, followers of a fundamentalist Islamic movement. In response to this perceived threat, the government has introduced restrictive religious laws, such as forcing bearded men to shave and women to remove their hijabs. An assertively secular system, Central Asian governments argue, is the best way to guarantee stability and prevent radicalization. But evidence suggests that very few recruits could be considered pious before they were recruited. Fewer still have any formal religious education. After a video of Islamic State fighter Akhtam Olimov appeared online in September 2014, his family was in shock. Neighbors commented that he was never particularly pious when growing up. “He never wore a

beard” before he went to Russia, his mother told Radio Ozodi in September 2014. Muhammad al-Tojiki, born Alan Chekhranov, also did not practice Islam until he migrated to Russia. With the exception of six of the earliest recruits, who were all studying at madrassas in Syria at the time of the start of the conflict in 2011, I have found no evidence for reports that other recruits had any formal religious training.

Conversely, those with formal religious education have been involved in countering recruitment. On a warm July evening in Moscow in 2014, I sat down with a group of young Tajiks living on the outskirts of the city. Over the fast-breaking *iftar* meal, conversation turned to the Islamic State, which had just declared its “caliphate.” “We real Muslims are disgusted that they are using our terms—caliphate, jihad, *umma*—and blackening the name of our peaceful religion,” one young participant from Gharm, in the east of Tajikistan, stated. My host *qori* Abdulrahmon, who studied in a madrasa in Pakistan until 2010, related a story about his friend:

Sadriddin came to Russia from a mountain village in the Rasht Valley for the first time in 2013, when he was nineteen years old. He worked as a porter (*araba kash*) in a bazaar in the Moscow region. He was approached in the gym one day by a Tajik man who invited him to a meeting. There he was told about the importance of jihad and was connected to Russian speakers in Raqqa. Soon we noticed he had changed. He spoke of the killing of Muslims in Syria and called for the death of nonbelievers (*kufr*). So I invited him to dinner and we staged an intervention. I invited other religious individuals who knew the Quran and hadith, and we explained to him the true meaning of Islam. Eventually, he realized his mistake and came back to proper Islam.

Such community-led informal counterextremism is not uncommon among Tajik migrant communities in Russia. During my fieldwork in Moscow in 2014 and 2015, I heard three similar stories.

If ideology does not drive young Tajiks to join extremist groups, what

does? Again, it differs from case to case. But many of the cases for which we have sufficient evidence mirror Olivier Roy's observations about Muslim migrants and converts in Europe. Roy argued in *Foreign Policy* that we are seeing "not the radicalization of Islam, but the Islamization of radicalism." In the *Guardian*, he described the "typical radical" as "a young, second-generation immigrant or convert, very often involved in episodes of petty crime, with practically no religious education, but having a rapid and recent trajectory of conversion/reconversion."

Evidence from Tajikistan reflects this description. Many Tajiks migrate to Russia, leaving their authoritarian system and close-knit communities behind. They come from a society where the government has closely monitored and restricted religious practices for the past hundred years, to migrant communities where religion in its different guises is discussed more openly. According to a 2014 brief published by the Central Eurasia–Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) initiative, almost none of the Tajiks who embrace Islam as a way to negotiate the difficulties of migrant life in Russia gravitate to violence. But a small minority of disillusioned migrants do. In April 2015, I sat down to tea with a group of young Tajik construction workers in their converted container homes. At the time, they were in the process of building a new overpass for the 2018 World Cup near Moscow's Spartak stadium. They recounted to me how recruiters from the North Caucasus had come around their encampment calling people to Islam. One young man, whom they called Nasim, was drawn to the group:

He arrived in Moscow back in 2013. He was a smart guy, spoke good Russian, and wanted to find a good job. But he couldn't. So he ended up in construction. In 2014, he went home and married a girl from his village. But he soon came back. The marriage was not good. He became angrier and more bitter. When the recruiters came, he found their promises attractive. He never prayed before or talked about religion, but now he talked about jihad. One day he disappeared. The next thing we heard, he was in Syria.

The allure of adventure and brotherhood in a violent extremist organization appeals to many young Tajiks like Nasim, who have experienced personal failures and become disillusioned with their lives. Central Asian states are not "exporting" terrorists, and migration itself is not a causal variable in recruitment. Radicalization is a dynamic, nonlinear process. It is transnational; cumulative experiences while living in Central Asia and as migrants in other countries have shaped the pathways by which a small minority of Central Asians have been recruited to violent extremist organizations.

### Perspective Is Needed

A threat of political violence, albeit limited, does exist within Central Asia. A few thousand Central Asians have joined terrorist groups and been involved in attacks outside the region. Despite the challenges to conducting

research on and limitations of our understanding of radicalization, it is the topic of attempting to explain radicalization that draws the most attention from journalists, policy makers, and civil society. As someone who studies extremism in Central Asia, I have been drawn into these debates and asked to comment on what drives citizens to join violent extremist groups. But this is not my main research focus. Instead, my research primarily focuses on government-led counterextremism, mapping the ways in which Central Asian governments have used the specter of Islamic extremism to repress observant citizens and opposition groups. Although conducting research on this topic is challenging in itself, sources are more abundant. Instead of focusing on the 0.0001 percent who have joined terrorist groups and carried out attacks, a more interesting question is why the other 99.9999 percent have remained quiescent, despite widespread poverty, corruption, and authoritarian governance. The absence of extremism—rather than its limited presence—is a far more pertinent puzzle. ■

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