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Bayram Balci, Didier Chaudet

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Jihadism in Central Asia: A Credible Threat After the Western Withdrawal From Afghanistan?

Bayram Balci (CERI), Didier Chaudet (CERI, IFEAC)
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Article

The states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are closely watching the political situation in Afghanistan, a neighbor with whom three of them share a border. This situation concerns them very deeply.

Central Asian governments view with alarm and pessimism the withdrawal by the end of 2014 of most of the Western troops that have been present in Afghanistan since a NATO-led security mission began in 2001. Kabul's neighbors expect the already-unstable situation in Afghanistan to deteriorate and threaten their own security and stability. They fear that a radical Islamist regime in Afghanistan will emerge from a Taliban military victory—a scenario that many Central Asian leaders and analysts believe is inevitable and will spill over across Afghanistan's northern border.¹

Such concerns have sometimes been expressed openly in recent years, for example by Tokon Mamytov, the chairman of Kyrgyzstan's Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security, who feared an incursion from Afghanistan into his homeland even in 2013 or 2014. Observers who live far away from the Afghan regional environment, or who have forgotten recent history, may see such reactions with cynicism. But for those who remember the impact that the 1979–1989 Soviet war in Afghanistan had on radical Islamist and jihadist movements in the Arab world and Southeast Asia, regional concerns are no laughing matter.

How likely is Central Asia to become a hotbed of radical Islamic ideologies on the eve of the planned Western withdrawal from Afghanistan? A simplistic answer—that there is no real threat or, on the contrary, that Central Asian leaders will face hell on earth after 2014—is not appropriate. To say that Central Asian jihadism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan has no influence on the region's security after 2014 would be to ignore both geography and common knowledge about the main Central Asian jihadist groups. The threat from these groups is real, but it should not be seen as the only danger, or even the main one, facing Central Asian regimes.

Defining the Jihadist Threat

The term "jihadist threat" is used in this article with a distinct, specific meaning: a Salafist or radical Islamic approach that does not seek to conquer hearts and minds. Other Islamists with strong political organizations, such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), or Tunisia's Ennahda party, have adopted more pragmatic and moderate positions. Jihadists, however, seek to impose their ideas on others by force—first through terrorism and then, if possible, by seizing power and instituting a government crackdown on any vision that runs counter to their ideology.

Of course, with such an approach to governing, jihadists are never attractive to a large number of people, as they have no true socially oriented, grassroots strategy. These groups are in fact no more than small cells or, as they consider themselves, a "vanguard." The fact that jihadists are always relatively few in

numbers may explain why scholars and security professionals do not take them seriously—until they manage to pull off a spectacular, large-scale attack.

The perfect example of the effects of limited numbers is al-Qaeda. For even this most well-known jihadist group, its small size means that the maximum effect it can achieve with an attack is when a state commits a major political error in response. Such mistakes include invading a country that had nothing to do with the attack, ratcheting up diplomatic tensions, or cracking down on a religious or ethnic minority.

As soon as a state commits one of these faux pas, the jihadists can use their extremist discourse to its maximum advantage and fuel the vicious cycle of attacks, crackdowns, and recruitment that is key to their existence. A final defining feature of jihadists is that their ideological radicalism, tendency to form small groups, and lack of interest in nonviolent political influence lead them to eschew traditional national loyalties.²

Central Asian Jihadist Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan

There are two significant jihadist groups originating in post-Soviet Central Asia: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU).³ The latter seceded from the former after the “emirate” of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar was toppled by the international security mission in 2001. That made the IMU the historical jihadist movement for post-Soviet Central Asia.

Beginnings

The IMU, Central Asia’s largest jihadist group, was born out of local issues. The movement’s predecessor, Adolat (Justice), appeared in the eastern Uzbek city of Namangan in the early 1990s as a reaction to the shock and local disorganization that resulted from the fall of the Soviet Union.

In the Fergana Valley, a region that forms the historical heart of Central Asia, the negative impact of the collapse of Communism was particularly strong on the “new poor”—industrial and construction workers and the employees of institutions and firms previously funded by the Soviet state—as well as the unemployed youth. At the same time, this region experienced the loss of a welfare state, the rise of criminal gangs and profiteers that the police was unable or unwilling to oppose, and the disappearance of any ideological goal.

Some of the disenfranchised youth, influenced by a brand of Salafism promoted in particular by young local mullahs like Tahir Yuldashev, organized themselves as an Islamist militia. Adolat was born. The group helped impose order, track down and punish criminals, and regulate prices in local markets.

By the end of 1991, it became apparent that this new force wanted to do more than promote justice. Adolat, which had clearly expressed its radical Islamist views, had ambitions that went beyond controlling the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. The group tried to impose its beliefs on the whole new state of Uzbekistan and to gain control through an insurrection, with the help of the country’s Islamist and non-Islamist opposition.

Faced with such a threat, the only reaction that the country’s post-Soviet regime could offer was repression. From the beginning of 1992, the Uzbek government organized a systematic crackdown against any type of opposition, even against the most legalist groups. Later, militias were sent to the Fergana Valley to destroy Adolat and any other vigilante groups not directly controlled by the state. For those that were not arrested or eliminated, exile was the only option.⁴

Exile

Uzbeks who were sympathetic to the views of Islamism in general and to the Uzbek jihadist movement in particular had no other choice but to go into exile, often with their families, living in the group’s training camps in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Going to these camps was a one-way ticket to greater radicalism, as they were as much a place for ideology as for military training.

During the 1990s, the Uzbek jihadist movement was more structured overseas than in Uzbekistan itself, under the double leadership of Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, the group’s ideologue and military chief, respectively. Yuldashev was the Uzbek jihadists’ emissary to various foreign countries, and he sought ties and support notably in Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. He lived in Peshawar from 1995 to 1998 and made contact with various Afghan Islamist groups, including the Taliban, and Arab jihadists, and was finally introduced to al-Qaeda’s founder, Osama bin Laden. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, a rapprochement between ideological forces was taking place that went beyond simple Islamic nationalism.⁴

The militants supposedly carried out some jihadist acts in Uzbekistan after being exiled at the beginning of the 1990s. But the rebels' capacity to recruit and develop inside the country was limited, as the regime in Tashkent decided to be uncompromising even with minor signs of opposition, to make it clear to all that regime change was not possible—at least, not by internal revolt.

The Uzbek jihadist movement therefore found it difficult to have a direct impact inside Uzbekistan, where it faced an uncompromising regime, but was able to find a safe haven elsewhere—first in Tajikistan, then in Afghanistan. These general circumstances made the group a de facto Central Asian jihadist movement, and it became known as the IMU from 1998 onward. By this time, although the majority of the group's fighters were Uzbek, the IMU also contained Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and even Uighurs.

The Uzbek secret service pursued these militants and other opposition members elsewhere in Central Asia, where they were waging a regional war against the jihadists. Uzbek intelligence services have organized kidnappings of Uzbek Islamists, for example in southern Kyrgyzstan, often without consulting the Kyrgyz authorities.

Between 1999 and 2005, no fewer than 8,000 people were arrested on suspicion of being Islamists. Only 1,500 were released after being arrested, and many of those who remained incarcerated died in custody from mistreatment or disease. This policy of detention applied not only to Islamists: from the beginning of the 2000s to 2012, at least ten opponents of the regime of President Islam Karimov were brought back to Uzbekistan and imprisoned, according to human rights activists.

Tajik Civil War

At the same time that Uzbek Islamist rebels were losing their fight against Tashkent, a civil war began between the Tajik government and an Islamist opposition. The Uzbek jihadists took part in the fight on the side of the Islamists but became disillusioned with their Tajik comrades-in-arms when the latter found a compromise with Dushanbe in 1997. While many Tajik fighters were Islamists in a very moderate, political way, repression had already made the Uzbeks more radical.

Tashkent rejected the 1997 peace agreement between Tajik Islamists and the Tajik government. That same year, the Uzbek army beefed up its presence on the country's border with Afghanistan, to show the Uzbek jihadists that no political process backed by military pressure would lead to an agreement with the ruling power. Yet some militants were inspired enough by the Tajik example and by the feeling that their cause was regionally successful to wish to force Tashkent with violence to negotiate a political settlement.⁵ Yuldashev seems to have been one such individual, or at least someone who was influenced by such ideas.

A Radical Approach

As a group, the Uzbek jihadists did not opt for a moderate approach. Namangani's ideological vision was not well developed, but he was vehemently against the regime in Tashkent and wanted nothing less than its destruction. His radical approach gained traction when he began to impose his leadership on ideologue Yuldashev at the end of the 1990s. Namangani's importance as a military figure made him a legend in the eyes of Central Asian fighters—an Islamist Che Guevara—and he was much more charismatic than Yuldashev. All this meant that Yuldashev became less influential in the organization. Hence, to some extent part of the IMU had an initial impulse toward appeasement and moderation, linked to the Tajik example, demonstrating that forcing a post-Soviet regime to share power was possible; but that impulse was soon quelled by the uncompromising policy of the Uzbek government, by Namangani's equally uncompromising attitude, and by the Taliban.

Moreover, the influence of the most extremist Taliban figures soon made itself felt. Even more marked was the presence of Afghan Arabs, who were often jihadists linked to al-Qaeda. The Taliban leadership encouraged the IMU in its "holy war" against the Uzbek regime. After all, it was the Taliban's Mullah Omar who allowed the Uzbek Islamists to launch attacks into Central Asia and use a military training camp in Afghanistan.

Links between the Uzbek Islamists and the Taliban were nothing new. Among the IMU fighters were Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Uighurs who had found refuge in the religious schools of Jamaat-i-Ulema, the Islamic movement that shaped the Taliban's ideology. In the 1990s, several hundred IMU militants attended these madrassas.⁶ This ideological influence was particularly important as the Central Asian jihadists had no means to finance themselves until the late 1990s. The assistance they received from Jamaat-i-Ulema was therefore essential. Some funding reportedly came from the Pakistani secret service, which was still elated about its victory in Afghanistan via the mujahideen against the Soviet Union.⁷

Another, more recent source of influence was more radical. Al-Qaeda and Arab jihadists had been developing links with the IMU since the end of the 1990s, particularly with Namangani, one of the most charismatic jihadist leaders in exile in Afghanistan at the time.⁸ But a fellow al-Qaeda militant and an important theorist of jihadism, Abu Musab al-Suri, was an even stronger influence on the IMU. He gave regular talks in Uzbek training camps before 2001, as he considered Central Asia one of the main fronts for the international jihadist fight and a natural battlefield for the Taliban's future emirate.⁹

Al-Suri's influence strengthened a tendency among IMU fighters to view themselves as part of a struggle that went beyond the borders of Uzbekistan and even Central Asia. The IMU saw its fight as a clash of civilizations not only with the "near enemy"—Karimov and the Central Asian republics—but also with the "far enemy"—the United States, Russia, Israel, and the Jews.

Given the IMU's growing role during the 1990s, one cannot help but suspect the group of a wave of attacks that took place in 1997 in Uzbekistan and a series of terrorist attacks on February 16, 1999, in Tashkent.¹⁰ The IMU may also have been implicated in attacks in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan between 1999 and 2001 that had been ordered from Afghanistan. By 2000, the movement had the ability to strike Central Asia while contributing 600 men to the Taliban's war against the Northern Alliance, a resistance force backed by states including Russia, India, and Iran. The IMU had thus become a group with a genuine strike force and proven professionalism.¹¹

Emergence of the Islamic Jihad Union

By the start of this century, the IMU was a force to be taken seriously. It was composed of professional fighters and had a shrewd military leader in Juma Namangani, who had embraced the extremist ideology of other jihadists and the Taliban regime of Mullah Omar. Namangani made sure that the IMU's attacks would nurture mutual accusations and tensions among the Central Asian nations, despite calls from Moscow and Washington for enhanced regional cooperation to better deal with the jihadist threat.

The U.S.-led military campaign against the Afghan Taliban in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, disrupted the situation permanently. Namangani and hundreds of other IMU fighters died in combat. Others lost hope and abandoned the movement. But the Uzbek jihadists' extremist links and the influence they gained in Afghanistan had a lasting impact on the part of the movement that did not give up the fight.

It is against this backdrop that the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) should be understood. This movement, born out of a schism in the IMU, emerged as an ideological leap forward. Indeed, after 2001, the IMU was insufficiently involved in the reconquest of Afghanistan. Of course, the group paid lip service to the international jihad. For example, during a speech in March 2007, Yuldashev, the movement's sole leader since the death of Namangani, claimed that the most important battlefields after 2001 were in Iraq and Afghanistan. And at least in his speeches, Yuldashev followed bin Laden's approach, based on the vision of a clash of civilizations against Jews and Christians, and thus went beyond the notion of a struggle solely against the Central Asian regimes. Ideologically, Yuldashev did not diminish the importance of the fight against Karimov and other post-Soviet leaders. But he saw it as part of a larger battle between al-Qaeda and other jihadist forces, on the one hand, and the West and its local dictatorial allies in the Muslim world, on the other.

Yet in practice, after 2001 and the shock of the U.S. campaign against the Taliban and international jihadism, the IMU was concerned less about ideology and more about survival. The movement could not entirely pursue its al-Qaeda philosophy against the "far enemy" as the group was too connected with local issues in tribal areas. Yuldashev chose to concentrate the IMU's efforts on Pakistan rather than Afghanistan because Islamabad opposed the presence of foreign fighters on its territory. The Uzbek jihadists who followed him became closely connected to Pakistan's northwestern region of South Waziristan and the local politics among the area's Pashtun tribes.

From 2002 to 2009, the IMU followed its protector, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, an umbrella organization for various jihadist/Pashtun radical Islamist movements opposing the legal government in Pakistan, to defend its local interests and its new safe haven. This policy did not mean moderation: Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan's ideology is a mix of anti-Western rhetoric and sectarian bigotry, and it uses uncompromising violence in its fight against democracy. But Yuldashev's decision to prioritize the protection of the IMU's safe haven in the Pakistani tribal areas imposed serious limits on the movement's radicalization, at least until his death in August 2009.

Links With al-Qaeda

The IJU, by comparison, chose a different path, reflecting the Uzbek jihadists' years of exile in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and the influence of al-Suri and other radicals. The split with the IMU was nonviolent, but while Yuldashev focused on local politics, the IJU has been faithful to al-Suri's desire to keep pressuring the Central Asian regimes, one of the main fronts of the international jihad. The IJU has also fully aligned itself ideologically with al-Qaeda and the most hawkish elements of the Taliban since its inception in 2002–2004.

The IJU's members focused in particular on the jihadist war for control of Afghanistan. Indeed, the IJU's protector in North Waziristan, the part of the Pakistani tribal areas where the militants lived, was the Haqqani network. Since the mid-1980s, this part of the Afghan Taliban has had close links with foreign jihadists who would become al-Qaeda.

Today, the IJU is the main supporter of extremists from outside Afghanistan, and its relationship with al-Qaeda is extremely strong. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the network, "sees himself in 'grandiose religious terms,' a product of his close contact with radicalized Arabs in his youth." He depends heavily on radicalized foreigners for manpower against a population that does not support him in southeastern Afghanistan, the Haqqani network's territory. He also relies on them as business partners for his economic activities, which include donations, extortions, and smuggling.

In sum, the IJU is composed of radicals influenced by the most extremist jihadist voices of the 2000s. That explains why since the beginning, the IJU has chosen tactics and rhetoric that mirrored those of al-Qaeda: suicide bombings and a transnational approach, despite the movement's particular interest in continuing to fight the Uzbek regime. The Uzbeks have been the best terrorist auxiliaries of the Haqqani network and have been responsible for several suicide bomb attacks in Afghanistan.

High-Profile Terrorist Attacks

Since 2008, the IJU, like al-Qaeda, has understood the need for publicity around terrorist attacks. The movement has released many videos promoting the individuals who carry out its suicide bombings, confirming that the IJU was behind them. The IJU claimed credit for the first suicide attacks in Central Asia in March and April 2004 and, with the bombings of the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Tashkent in July 2004, for the first successful attacks against the "far enemy" in the region.¹²

Whether or not the IJU was involved in the rebellion (or massacre) in the Uzbek city of Andijan in May 2005 is open to doubt, to say the least. But the group nevertheless claimed credit for it in May 2009 in a propaganda video in Arabic and Uzbek with Russian subtitles. The former head of the IMU's counterintelligence service, known only as Mosikhuranov, confirmed the IJU's involvement during an interview in April 2006.

The then Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov did not explicitly declare the IJU responsible, but claimed that the Russians had "fairly reliable information. What happened in Andijan was orchestrated from the territory of Afghanistan." This statement makes the IMU or the IJU culpable from a Russian point of view. Yet without access to more sources from Uzbekistan itself, it must be borne in mind that those who claim the IJU was responsible for the events in Andijan all have a political interest in talking of an Islamist plot. But such declarations—in Ivanov's case, made in an official context at the NATO-Russia Council—should not be entirely dismissed as ludicrous. After all, the IJU has been capable of spectacular terrorist acts before.

In fact, the IJU has been ambitious enough to plan at least one major attack outside South or Central Asia, even if it failed. In September 2007, one German of Turkish descent and two German converts to Islam were arrested for being part of a terrorist cell directly linked to the IJU. Their plan was to bomb the U.S. Air Force base in Ramstein in southwestern Germany, as well as U.S. and Uzbek diplomatic buildings. The terrorists' goal was twofold. First, they sought to force the closure of the Uzbek base of Termez, used by the German Army when it traveled to northern Afghanistan. Second, they wanted to make the Germans understand the cost of fighting in Afghanistan and remind Karimov that even though the Uzbek jihadists had to focus on the Afghan fight, they had not forgotten their main goal of regime change in Uzbekistan.

The threat was very serious. The three terrorists had access to 1,600 pounds of chemicals based on hydrogen peroxide. With such a product, they could have made bombs with a higher explosive power than those used in the terrorist bombings of Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005. The choice of hydrogen peroxide showed the cell's level of professionalism, as a complex procedure is required to convert the chemical into explosives. The three terrorists definitely acquired this expertise from training in an IJU camp in the Pakistani tribal areas.

The discovery of an IJU cell in the West revealed that the movement had been recruiting far from Central Asia, notably from within Germany's Turkish community, and had become a "Turkic" al-Qaeda.¹³ The IJU's membership is unquestionably small, but it is nevertheless real and very active. The group is still focused on Uzbekistan, and its primary fight is currently in Afghanistan, but it sees the latter struggle as part of a clash of civilizations—in the same way that al-Qaeda views its own operations there.

The IMU and IJU Converge

With the death of Tahir Yuldashev in 2009, the IMU's exclusive focus on local affairs in tribal areas disappeared, and the group chose to follow a path similar to that of the IJU. This shift was due to Abu Usman Adil, the IMU's leader from September 2009 until he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in April 2012. Usman Adil decided to make the IMU part of the fight on the Afghan battlefield against NATO forces.

That decision was linked to the IMU's wish to refocus on targeting the Central Asian regimes, as the IJU had done. The IMU's twin desires—to fight in Afghanistan for the Taliban and to be active against the region's regimes—are clearly connected, as the IMU and Central Asian jihadists in general often act in the name of the Taliban, mostly in northern Afghanistan. Taliban leaders particularly active there since 2010 are often IMU fighters with a double affiliation.

Like the IJU, the IMU has claimed responsibility for suicide bombings in Afghanistan, for example those in Parwan or Panjshir Provinces in 2011. The IMU distinguishes itself slightly from the IJU by having a stronger anti-Pakistani rhetoric. During a sermon in a mosque in Pakistan in September 2011, the IMU's main ideologue, Abu Dher Azzam, insisted that the movement would continue to stay active in the fight against Islamabad until the "brutal end of Pakistani security and secret services."

But in fact, there are no real differences between the positions of the IJU and the IMU toward Pakistan. With its Afghan fight, the IJU has also considered Islamabad an enemy. In October 2006, the IJU organized three terrorist attacks in Pakistan: two near the residence of Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani president at the time; and one failed attempt against the headquarters of the Pakistani intelligence services in Islamabad.

Targeting Pakistan makes sense for the IMU as well as for the IJU. Both groups seek not only to defend a safe haven in the country but also to fight for the recapture of Afghanistan as a whole. Only with the Taliban's total victory could the Central Asian jihadists ensure they have solid allies and a real safe haven from which to strike their home countries.

But with their hands full in Afghanistan, can these movements really target Central Asia? They already have, to some extent. In 2009 and 2010, Central Asian jihadists based in Afghanistan and Pakistan infiltrated Tajik territory. Of course, the tensions were not only fueled by outsiders: local Tajiks appear to have been stirred up by the local regime, using the IMU's banner and jihadist ideology as an expression of their revolt against the state.

Indeed, beyond the risk of external infiltration, there is clearly a small but real presence of local IMU cells, at least in northern Tajikistan. Militants targeted by the police on suspicion of being part of such cells have confirmed their involvement by using deadly force to resist arrest in January 2013. The conservative Tajik district of Istaravshan was the headquarters of a local jihadist cell that organized a suicide bombing in Khujand, the provincial capital of northern Tajikistan. If the Central Asian jihadists in Afghanistan and Pakistan are able to become more active in the area as of 2015, they will find natural allies among the local populations.

Professionalized Terrorist Forces—but With Major Weaknesses

Particularly worrisome for Afghan, Pakistani, and Central Asian officials is the fact that the IMU, the IJU, and other Central Asian jihadists are among the most professional terrorist forces in this part of the world today. These movements' integration into the Taliban in northern Afghanistan, including at the level of the leadership, is proof enough of their major role. Further evidence is provided by the IMU's responsibility for an attack on Karachi airport in June 2014. The IMU seems to have been the main force behind the attack, which was carried out by a hit squad working with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and probably with other jihadist local forces as well.

Central Asian jihadists have therefore demonstrated their professionalism, and their recent actions prove that they are a potent threat not just in Central Asia but also in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet the region's jihadist movements also have three major weaknesses that make them unable to destabilize Karimov or any other local leaders using only their own forces.

The first disadvantage that jihadists in Central Asia have is that, like jihadists elsewhere, they comprise only a small number of activists. The figures cited most frequently in the second half of the 2000s were 1,000–2,000 Uzbeks in Pakistan with ties to the IMU, the IJU, and other factions. As Uzbek jihadists have always attracted followers from elsewhere in Central Asia, there is a tendency to inflate that figure by up to 1,000. Syed Saleem Shahzad, an expert on terrorism in Pakistan, puts the number at 2,500.

The non-Uzbeks are even less numerous. There are no more than 200–300 Kazakh jihadists, for example, most of whom are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The number of Central Asians in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be reliably put at 2,000–3,000, even though there has been a high turnover since the fall of the Soviet Union. The figure of 10,000 jihadists, cited by some journalists following the thunderous declarations of certain jihadists and Taliban figures, does not correspond to any concrete data. With such numbers, the IMU and other jihadists may at best be a source of pressure, tensions, and terrorism, but not of forced political change.

The jihadists' second weakness is their inability to develop and organize themselves far from home. That has had a tremendous impact on recruitment: jihadist foot soldiers are decreasingly post-Soviet Central Asians and increasingly Afghans. Given this situation, despite the jihadists' rhetoric, it might be difficult for the IMU's Uzbek leadership to motivate their troops to fight against Tashkent.

The third disadvantage is a lack of centralization. The most important of the Central Asian jihadist groups, the IMU, is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan and seems to have local cells in post-Soviet Central Asia or the capacity to intervene there. That appears to be a sign that the group is less centralized than it used to be. This development may make the IMU more dangerous as a criminal and terrorist organization, but it will also make it less able, over time, to focus only on Central Asia. That problem will be compounded, as most of the IMU's foot soldiers are no longer Central Asians.

In sum, a number of points should be kept in mind about Uzbek and Central Asian jihadism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most importantly, these Islamists are a threat that should not be underestimated. The IMU and the IJU are composed of professional terrorists who have not forgotten their desire to destabilize Central Asia's regimes.

At the same time, this threat is severely limited by the fact that the movements involved have been forced to develop overseas. Central Asian jihadists have to prioritize other fights in Afghanistan and Pakistan to survive, support their allies, and prepare for a time when they will be able to launch successful attacks in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. The geographical distances involved and the groups' limited numbers make Central Asian jihadists unable to undertake any kind of regime change by themselves.

The Withdrawal of Western Troops From Afghanistan

All Central Asian countries have repeatedly expressed their concern about what might happen to Afghanistan after the NATO-led security mission leaves the country at the end of 2014. In December 2012, the Uzbek president was very explicit about the potential threat, and he invited the international community to launch a dialogue under UN auspices to resolve the problems that he expected to encounter after the withdrawal of the international coalition from Afghanistan.

The Kyrgyz authorities were equally direct, stating that all threats to their country's security would come from Afghanistan and from the chaos that would inevitably follow the withdrawal of Western troops. Tajikistan, which shares a long border with Afghanistan, frequently expresses its fears about the situation after 2014. Even Kazakhstan, which does not border Afghanistan, has raised some concerns.

Only Turkmenistan, the one Central Asian state that maintained regular relations with the Taliban before their fall in 2001, has been unconcerned by the withdrawal. But Turkmen might soon sound more alarmist, as Turkmen border guards were attacked, and three of them killed, at the Afghan-Turkmen frontier in February 2014. The Taliban have denied responsibility for this attack, but their arguments were unconvincing, to say the least.¹⁴

Central Asian jihadists are not a threat to be taken lightly. But their importance should not be blown out of proportion either. It is as much a mistake to underestimate them as it is to assign them a level of importance they cannot claim to have nowadays. To better assess the impact that Central Asian jihadists could have as of 2015, one needs to go beyond what is known about the jihadist groups themselves. More significant is the potential creation of a link between Central and South Asia that could be useful to the jihadists.

Drug Trafficking, Ethnic Links, and Porous Borders

The Central Asian countries have sound reasons to worry about the future of Afghanistan. Many of the tensions and security concerns these states have experienced since their independence from the Soviet Union have been linked to the Afghan conflict. The most credible jihadist threat in the region, the IMU, developed partly through its links with Afghanistan. But security issues in Central Asia are not only linked to jihadism.

Drug Trafficking

Afghanistan is the world's leading opium producer and exports its products in part through the Central Asian republics. Since 2001, the amount of opium and heroin produced in northern Afghanistan has grown considerably. Heroin production there reached 160 tons in 2004, representing a third of the global output of the drug. There are active heroin laboratories in Afghanistan's northern Kunduz province, a territory where the Taliban and the IMU have reemerged since 2009, and where they are believed to at least partly control the local heroin production.

The involvement of the IMU and the Taliban in drug production and trafficking in Kunduz is nothing new. Indeed, it is hard to see how the Central Asian jihadist movement could fund itself without such activities. By the late 1990s, drug trafficking had become enormously important for the IMU. From 1997 to 2001, the movement had gained a foothold in drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Central Asia, with the blessing of its Taliban allies.

During this period, Yuldashev grew particularly close to the Taliban's northern commander, Mullah Dadullah. Together, they developed transit routes through Central Asia for drugs destined for the Russian and European markets. A sizable amount of heroin was already being produced in Kunduz at the time. The money from this lucrative traffic helped pay corrupt officials, especially in Turkmenistan, to ensure that security forces would not hinder the transportation of narcotics. Of course, extremists could also take the routes used for heroin trafficking, even after 2001.

One may wonder whether drug trafficking is just a means to an end for the IMU, or whether the group would best be described as "narcoterrorists," engaged in trafficking as much as in jihadism. After all, the IMU's major military campaign in 1999 was carried out to protect this lucrative business. Officials observed at the time that for reasons that were initially inexplicable, Namangani had focused his attacks on Kyrgyzstan rather than moving on quickly to Uzbekistan, which was supposed to be his main target.

The reason for Namangani's tactics was to protect the channels for drug trafficking. In 1999, the Kyrgyz security services managed to seriously disrupt the transit of Afghan heroin through their territory. At that time, the jihadists controlled up to 70 percent of the traffic. When the Taliban banned poppy cultivation in 2000, the IMU alone had a stock of at least 240 tons of the product, which gives an idea of the group's role in drug trafficking before the fall of the Afghan "emirate." From this perspective, with the jihadists also operating as drug traffickers, the aim of their fight is not only political but also economic.

Nothing much has changed in the region. The Haqqani network—allies and protectors of the IMU and the IJU in Afghanistan and Pakistan—operate in the same way as before, organizing attacks on NATO and the regular Afghan forces. The stability of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, as well as the influence of organized crime networks in the region, is directly linked to drug trafficking from Afghanistan, which NATO has not been able to eradicate. This defeat may have a high cost for the area's future and makes it necessary to redefine the jihadist threat. The real challenge that post-Soviet Central Asia must deal with after 2014 is less ideological and religious than political. In particular, it relates to organized crime.

Drug trafficking is certainly an important tool that partly explains the strength of the IMU and of the Taliban. But it would be a mistake to perceive the threat of the drug trade only through the prism of Islamist radicalism. Indeed, trafficking can have an indirect impact that could be useful for jihadists but also any other political force wishing to destabilize the present order. Such trafficking strengthens local mafias and feeds corruption to an extent that could alter the way in which judiciaries, security forces, and political actors operate. In the longer term, that could lead citizens to question the very legitimacy of the state.

Tajikistan offers a clear example of the scale of such corruption. Between 2004 and 2009, heroin seizures in the country fell dramatically—from 10,569 pounds to 2,496 pounds—at a time when there was actually an increase in drug trafficking through Central Asia. Corrupt officials are known to have been implicated in most of this trafficking—reaping much more significant kickbacks than the benefits made by nonstate actors.

Drugs are indeed a tool for jihadists, but terrorist groups are only a small part of the problem coming out of Afghanistan. Central Asian regimes exaggerate the link between terrorism and drug trafficking in an effort to make Westerners forget the scale of corruption in their states.

Ethnic Links

Central Asian leaders and several experts believe that the departure of most Western troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 will result in the return of the Taliban to power. At the very least, the withdrawal of the NATO-led coalition will lead to the loss of pressure exerted by Western forces on the Central Asian jihadists who had sought refuge in Afghanistan. This, the governments of Central Asia fear, will enable the likes of the IMU and IJU to shift their efforts back to Central Asia and once again launch attacks against the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik regimes.

But could the jihadists make use of natural ethnic ties between northern Afghanistan and Central Asia—that is, between Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen Afghans, on the one hand, and their northern brethren, on the other? After all, Uzbek Afghans play an important role in the IMU. Could this “indigenization” of Central Asian jihadist groups be an advantage for their infiltration, or would it be a source of difficulties?

The Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens of Afghanistan are indeed close to their independent brothers in the north. But this linguistic, cultural, and even religious proximity should not overshadow the many differences that have arisen between these groups over the decades. Separated by geographic, economic, social, and ideological borders since the Russian and then the Soviet conquest, these communities have evolved in socially, culturally, and politically diverse ways. Since the end of the emirates and khanates of Central Asia in the nineteenth century, Russian and especially Soviet culture have alienated the Uzbek, Turkmen, and Tajik populations from their kin across the Amu Darya in Afghanistan.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 reestablished ties between the peoples of Afghanistan and Central Asia. But these relations were short-lived, were beset with conflict, and in no way contributed to a rapprochement among Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen forces. To the contrary, years of conflict exacerbated the divide between the two sides of the Amu Darya. And after twenty years of independence, the societies of Central Asia considered Afghan society utterly foreign. The elites as well as the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik people continued to have a negative if not hostile image of Afghanistan, which was fostered by the regimes in power, who constantly invoked the threat of Afghanization.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was certainly a religious resurgence in Central Asia, but it had more to do with establishing an identity than with any foreign influence—particularly from the south. Identifying oneself as Muslim was a way to distinguish oneself from the dominant Russian culture. Even that should be kept in perspective, however, as the search for a new identity was first and foremost connected to a particular period—the early 1990s—and did not stand in the way of genuine secularization, especially in the cities. So even the return of religious figures in the early days of independence did not lead to a spiritual rapprochement with the Central Asian populations’ southern brothers in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan offers a stark example of this lack of interest in ethnic ties with Afghanistan, except as a tool to protect the homeland. The most populous country in the region, with the greatest number of minorities, Uzbekistan never had a real policy of rapprochement with ethnic Uzbeks or Uzbek diaspora movements. Indeed, Karimov always mistrusted the nationalist or Islamic ideas of the Uzbeks of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Afghanistan.

Relations between Tashkent and the Afghan warlord Rashid Dostum could best be described as an alliance of convenience; Tashkent only approached this local potentate out of the need to defend itself from various Afghan threats, without any desire to change this short-term diplomatic tactic into an ethnic diplomatic strategy. In fact, Dostum traveled more often to Turkey than to Uzbekistan and did not feel any particular allegiance to his northern ethnic patrons.

Porous Borders

While ethnic ties might not offer Central Asian jihadists any support, it is reasonable to believe that infiltration is possible. The jihadists have already shown that they can return home through other countries, or at least create trouble at the border. The Turkmen-Afghan frontier is one such case. For now, Ashgabat seems to have found a solution to protect its border: 120 Afghan Turkmens, armed with submachine guns, patrol the border from the Afghan side.

The Turkmen government has also decided to involve itself in the Afghan peace process. Ashgabat offered its services to the Afghan High Peace Council as an honest broker between the Taliban and Kabul, volunteering to host talks between the two parties in Ashgabat and to let the Taliban open a consulate in Turkmenistan. This shows the true concern of a Central Asian country for Afghanistan's stability but also an understanding that the use of force to protect the border might not be enough to avoid an Afghan "contamination."

Another porous border between Afghanistan and Central Asia is that of Tajikistan. If faced with a full-fledged invasion from Afghanistan, the Tajik Army would be efficient—much more so than it used to be—and would receive Russian military support. But a cataclysmic spillover is unlikely; rather, events would follow historical precedents of infiltration.

The geography of the Tajik-Afghan border allows militants from Afghanistan to enter Tajikistan without difficulty. The Panj River, which forms the frontier, is easy to cross. It separates the former independent principality of Darvaz, on the Afghan side, from Tajikistan's Darvaz District, which is mostly Sunni (an exception in the Badakhshan region, which is mostly Shia Muslim from the Ismaili sect) and was a stronghold of the Islamist movement during the Tajik Civil War of 1992–1997. Even since 1997, the Darvaz District has been known for its high level of radical Islamist agitation.

More broadly, there have been examples of intrusion from Afghanistan into Central Asia that are not necessarily directly linked to the IMU or the IJU but that prove the porous nature of the borders between these post-Soviet republics and their southern neighbor. In March 2013, an Uzbek patrol opposed 30 Afghans who had entered Uzbek territory illegally with hostile intentions, attacking the patrol and attempting to seize its weapons. The patrol was able to push back the Afghans after killing four of them. Between January and March 2013 alone, 106 Afghans were detained after 22 failed attempts to enter Uzbekistan illegally.

It would be a mistake to talk about ethnic sympathies between Central Asians and Tajik or Uzbek Afghans that could be exploited by jihadists seeking to return home. However, there are two ties to Central Asian territories that could help the IMU and IJU: the impact of drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Central Asia and the post-Soviet space; and the porosity of the region's borders. These are two issues that have nothing to do with religion or ideology and everything to do with social, political, and security issues in the region.

Central Asian Islam and Exaggerated Official Rhetoric

A Moderate Form of Islam

The danger of Islamist contamination in Central Asian states seems less credible in light of these countries' religious policies and shifts in the balance of power between the various forms of Islam to which the region's societies adhere. Support for radical Islam, which never enjoyed the clear backing of the local populations, has experienced a dramatic decline overall, as witnessed by a gradual diminution of jihadist attacks since the beginning of 2000s. Even the nonjihadist fundamentalists of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamic political organization once quite popular in several Central Asian cities, are running out of steam. That is partly because of a crackdown on Islamic fundamentalism, and partly because local societies are uninterested in this movement, whose characteristics are more Marxist-Leninist than Islamist.

There are several reasons for this decline in radical and fundamentalist Islam. Some of these motives are directly linked to the individual nations concerned and their management of this religious phenomenon. A crackdown by the Central Asian regimes on Islamism contributed significantly to the movement's decline, although certain excesses sometimes fueled or radicalized its more moderate elements.

The Central Asian regimes, forced to assert their national legitimacy through their ethnic and religious identities, have themselves Islamized to a certain degree. Uzbekistan, the most populous and most Muslim country in the region, offers a good example of this phenomenon of voluntary "self-Islamization" to better combat radical Islam. The Islamization of Karimov's regime follows the same logic with which the government muzzled the nationalist opposition in the early 1990s by appropriating its nationalist ideas.¹⁵

The Uzbek regime has created new Islamic establishments all around the country to form Islamic elites tasked with developing a tolerant version of Islam compatible with the state's religious policy. That is not to say that Karimov has become an Islamist, but he manages the issue by encouraging the renewal of a certain type of state-sponsored Islam. The government has therefore rehabilitated the practices, symbols, and sites that are important to Islam and has inaugurated Islamic schools such as the Tashkent Islamic University and a number of small and medium-sized madrassas.

As a result, Karimov is perceived as being respectful of traditional Uzbek Islam, particularly Sufism. This wins him some popular support among those for whom being Uzbek means being Muslim, traditional, moderate, Sunni, apolitical, and deferential toward the country's deep-rooted tradition of brotherhood. To some extent, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have also instituted this voluntary Islamization from above to confront the rise of radical Islamism from below. In this way, they have promoted—with some success—a new national, broadly ethnic Islam.

At the same time, this religious policy has not kept the Central Asian regimes from cracking down on anything that might directly or indirectly resemble radical Islam. Yet overall, the approach of governments in the region has promoted a moderate Islam that largely satisfies the religious demands of much of the population. After twenty years of independence and Islamic cooperation with a number of Muslim countries, the states of Central Asia have undergone a largely moderate Islamization of their societies.

The progress of this phenomenon can be measured by the popularity of Islamic trends from Turkey. That country's Diyanet, an official body that oversees relations among Muslim institutions, the state, and society, has left its imprint on Central Asian Islam. Apart from Uzbekistan, which has very poor relations with Turkey, all the countries of the region have enjoyed the Diyanet's support and expertise in the creation of a national Islam in the service of the state and in harmony with the ruling political power. The activism of the Diyanet and a multitude of private movements has helped educate a new generation of religious elites capable of responding to the challenges of radical preachers.

Turkey is not the only source of inspiration for the Central Asian republics, but it has been the most active. Turkey's efforts have been the most effective as the country has benefited from the numerous affinities—particularly linguistic—between Turkish and Central Asian societies. The Turkish model for managing the religious question has made headway in Central Asia without governments always recognizing it.

The impact of the Turkish model has been acknowledged and even asserted by representatives of political Islam. In Tajikistan, the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party, the only party in Central Asia to embrace political Islam, explicitly states that it models itself on Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP). But once the AKP model, which may be seen as a compromise between Islam, democracy, economic prosperity, and a successful foreign policy, began to falter, the region's Islamic leaders ceased to mention it.

Disconnected From South Asian Influences

The weakness of trade and, consequently, human exchanges between Central and South Asia makes the risk of imported Islamic radicalization from South into Central Asia unlikely. Central Asians have a negative image of South Asia and of Afghan and Pakistani influences. To their way of thinking, marked as it is by European culture as a consequence of Russian and Soviet domination, the south is synonymous with barbarism, while they consider themselves more moderate and civilized. While religious relations between the two regions used to be intense, due to India's Mughal heritage, even the most moderate Islamic influences from the Indian subcontinent have been seen in a bad light since the end of the Soviet era.

A good example of this trend is the lukewarm reception extended to the Tablighi Jamaat Islamic religious movement, which has struggled to establish itself in Central Asia under the watchful eye of the authorities and the local population. Registered in Kyrgyzstan, tolerated in Kazakhstan, and banned in other republics, Tablighi Jamaat has had a hard time taking root in Central Asia precisely because it comes from the “retrograde,” suspect south. And yet it hardly advocates any radical discourse that is aggressive toward these nations, whose legitimacy—and whose ways of defining and enforcing a certain Islamic norm—it recognizes.

The societies of Central Asia seem relatively impermeable to any Islamic influence from the south, particularly its more radical aspects. So is it far-fetched to ask whether local Islamic movements that once sought refuge in Afghanistan might return to Central Asia? Not completely. But here too, there is an attitude of real dislocation or even alienation toward Central Asian jihadist militants operating on the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Exaggerated Official Rhetoric

It is difficult not to consider official Central Asian rhetoric about post-2014 Afghanistan and the country's impact on its neighborhood as somewhat exaggerated. The region's regimes strongly inflate, or at least overestimate, the Islamist threat for many reasons and political calculations, which fall under two categories: promoting national interests abroad and suppressing Islamist opposition at home.

First and foremost, throughout the region, alarmist discourse is designed to serve national interests by ensuring the cooperation and support of the West but also of Russia and China. The Central Asian governments seek such backing to promote their own development and that of the region and to increase their visibility on the regional and international scene.

U.S. military bases in Bishkek, Khanabad, and Karshi have been major sources of hard currency for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan, the base at Manas contributed \$200 million a year to Bishkek's government budget—no less than 3.3 percent of the total—and provided 700 jobs for the locals. The closure of the base in June 2014 was acceptable to Kyrgyzstan only because U.S. presence has made Russia, and to some extent China, eager to be more supportive toward Kyrgyzstan in terms of financial assistance and trade opportunities.¹⁶

In addition to their economic and financial interests, the countries of Central Asia that border Afghanistan have been able to benefit from their location and role as a transit area for personnel and military equipment. Without the Western-led intervention in Afghanistan, these small, isolated countries would never have enjoyed regular bilateral consultations with the United States, the EU, Russia, and China. The war in Afghanistan made it possible for the Central Asian states to emerge from their regional isolation. These young regimes continue to exploit the issue of Afghanistan, including the associated risks and security threats, to negotiate for the development aid and political support they need to establish their sovereignty and legitimacy on the world stage.

The second reason that Central Asian governments exaggerate the so-called Islamist threat is domestic. Regimes seek to maintain pressure on, and justify the repression of, any form of Islamist opposition that runs counter to the norms established by the official, state-imposed brand of Islam. This traditional, moderate form of Islam, which is best suited to the culture of the majority of the population, is imposed by force and rejects any other version or practice of the religion. All those, including religious authorities, who want to practice their religion more autonomously are discouraged from doing so. This tight social control spills over to all forms of opposition, including political opposition, and undermines all demands for political reform.

This suppression of domestic opposition should make any analyst question the very notion of “exaggeration” in this context. Western observers tend to take for granted that authoritarian regimes exaggerate threats on purpose. But is that really the case? Do authoritarian regimes have a good enough understanding of their societies and their own internal evolutions to have a true sense of what is going on?

Central Asian regimes operate by indiscriminately repressing any force that can destabilize the social and political order. Anyone who wants to practice Islam independently or link it to a particular political philosophy will be targeted as much as criminals or terrorists. That explains why the Kyrgyz and Uzbek authorities consider Tabligh Jamaat an extremist organization and a source of concern. This is a peculiar political choice given that the Central Asian regimes have adopted a policy toward opposition and religion that is similar to the approach pursued in the Arab world shortly after its independence from colonial rule. It is a policy based on the crushing of any type of opposition or independent thinking, with no distinction between moderates and extremists, and a desire to control religious expression.

Such an approach helped the IMU emerge in Central Asia, and it is responsible for the appearance of al-Qaeda in the Arab world and of other violent groups in Algeria and Egypt. It is fair to suppose that Arab and Central Asian authoritarian leaders did not wish for violent opposition to appear. Rather, the nature of these regimes and the way they work bring about bad policies. Authoritarian regimes refuse to give their citizens political rights, they choose indoctrination and fear over consultation, and they breed violence on their territories. By operating in that way, authoritarian regimes cannot truly understand developments in their own societies.

So even if Central Asian states manipulate the situation in an attempt to obtain the support and money of others, they do not exaggerate the threat. In a way, the situation is much more disconcerting: they are simply unable to perceive the threat. That makes the question marks over the future of Afghanistan—a safe haven for Central Asian radicals so close to home—genuinely threatening.

Conclusion

The gradual withdrawal of NATO-led forces from Afghanistan is currently the most widely debated political event in Central Asia. Governments, diplomats, and security analysts are constantly speculating about the consequences of the drawdown for Central Asian societies. It is simplistic to assert that the departure of Western troops will have no negative impact. Until Afghanistan is truly stabilized under a political actor

who is strong and willing enough to target and eliminate Central Asian jihadism and its allies, Kabul's problems will have an effect on the country's northern neighbors.

However, the idea that jihadist forces wishing to target the Central Asian regimes will sweep into the Fergana Valley on January 1, 2015, and turn it into a new tribal area or a new Afghanistan is sheer fantasy. The Taliban have been able to count on ethnic and tribal structures as well as on Pashtun nationalism, which made it possible for the movement to have a lasting impact.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union are indeed dangerous groups. But so far, they have not had the same impact on Central Asian nations as the Taliban. The IMU and the IJU are well trained and closely connected to transnational jihadism and al-Qaeda, and they have the professionalism required to strike in their post-Soviet homelands. But a massive spillover from Afghanistan and Pakistan that would destabilize the region's leaders is a pipe dream.

In fact, the impact of these groups will be as significant as the Central Asian regimes allow it to be. The jihadists that threaten them are doomed to remain small groups, as Central Asian societies are clearly unwilling to follow the militants' extremist political path.

The governments of the region have a great opportunity after 2014. The regimes must institute the necessary police and border-control operations to avoid incursions. At the same time, they must get serious about the other problems emanating from Afghanistan, including drug trafficking, and work within the framework of international bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to stabilize their southern neighbor. And they must resist the temptation to disproportionately assert the jihadist danger abroad. Above all, they must focus on developing domestic policies that take full account of the social and economic issues that could provide the jihadists with new recruits in the future.

Central Asian leaders need to learn from their own past mistakes, and from those of Arab authoritarian regimes, and adopt a reformist mind-set in the way they deal with political and religious affairs. It will probably take a generational change for this lesson to be truly understood. Repression of opposition and the promotion of local Islam have worked in the short term, but such tools might not be enough in the longer term.

Unfortunately, as the issue of Afghanistan is so close to home, Central Asian leaders might not have the luxury of time to change their ways. After 2014, the region's governments will need to decide whether to stay the course or to adopt a more reformist path. The latter choice could help safeguard Central Asia's stability while Afghanistan gradually rebuilds itself.

Didier Chaudet is a visiting research fellow at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS); a nonresident scholar at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI); and a research fellow at the Institute for Prospective and Security in Europe (IPSE). His area of specialty is Afghanistan's regional environment (Pakistan, post-Soviet Central Asia, Iran, and Xinjiang), with a particular focus on security and regional diplomacy.

¹ See recent triumphalist statements by Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahed, who said in January 2014 that he was "confident of victory" and that the Taliban were now "everywhere," even in the most remote parts of Afghanistan. He also reaffirmed that once they had returned to power, the Taliban would not institute a more moderate political and legal system. These statements will not offer much reassurance to Central Asian governments. And that isn't merely paranoia. The road toward total power for the Taliban will not be as easy as the group claims, but it must be remembered that those analysts who consider such a victory unlikely after 2014 are the same ones who had not predicted the rise to power of Mullah Omar's forces before Kabul was captured in 1996. See BBC News, "Afghanistan Taliban 'confident of victory' over Nato," January 16, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25765603>.

² This differentiates them from larger forces engaged in the battle for the hearts and minds of a given population and the approach of "defending" the people by taking up arms. See W. Charara and F. Domont, *Le Hezbollab, un mouvement islamo-nationaliste* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 110.

³ We reject the characterization of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) as a security threat in Central Asia or elsewhere. Its ideology is undoubtedly extreme, but it has never used violence and has rejected any tendency toward terrorism in the post-Soviet republics or elsewhere. Claims to the contrary are based on rumors. Hizb ut-Tahrir is viewed as a "sensational" group that is easy to study: extreme in its support for the clash of civilizations, with a website in English and members based in Paris and London. The movement is indeed easier to analyze than the IMU or IJU. But the mistake has often been made to confuse easy access and extremism with the idea that Hizb ut-Tahrir would be a real threat. To discount those misconceptions, see Didier Chaudet, "Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Islamist Threat to Central Asia?" *Journal of*

Muslim Minority Affairs, vol. 26, no. 1 (April 2006):113–125. Available at:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/cjmm/2006/00000026/00000001/art00010>.

⁴ This refers to Islamism focusing on one nation, with a strongly nationalist approach. This is the point of view of most nonviolent Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or Ennahda. It is also the usual choice of Islamist rebels against an authoritarian state, who focus on the “near enemy,” not the “far enemy.” This approach has been famously championed by al-Qaeda.

⁵ By 1997, the Taliban were clearly winning the Afghan civil war, and the Tajik Islamists were able to return home and share power with their former enemies. Tajikistan’s minister for Emergency situations at this time, Mirzo Ziyov, was a Tajik Islamist who had led Juma Namangani and other Uzbeks into battle in the past. It would make sense for IMU soldiers and leaders to think they could put enough pressure on the Karimov regime to obtain a similar agreement. See Lena Jonson, *Tajikistan and the New Central Asia* (London – New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 113.

⁶ See also Peter Sinnott, “Peeling the Waziristan Onion: Central Asians in Armed Islamists Movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol.7, no. 4 (2009): 41.

⁷ Of course, all Pakistani and foreign analysts are clear on the fact that, nowadays, there is no such support for the IMU. On the contrary, the Uzbek jihadists have become the best auxiliaries of Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas after 2001. The Pakistani army had to fight them on many occasions. See for example Bill Rogio, “IMU video shows attack in Pakistan’s ‘Tribal Areas,’” *Threat Matrix*, October 25, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/10/imu_video_shows_attack_in_paki.php.

⁸ Namangani’s influence was such that he, rather than an important al-Qaeda figure, was appointed leader of the foreign forces in northern Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. That decision created some recriminations in al-Qaeda’s ranks, which Namangani was wise enough to appease by associating an Iraqi fighter from the Arab jihadist organization as his deputy. See Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created. The Myth of the Taliban – Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 242.

⁹ For al-Suri, Central Asia was one of the most important fronts for jihad at the time, together with Yemen and North Africa. He saw the spread of the fight for jihadism in Afghanistan and Central Asia as one. See Abu Musab al-Suri, *The Muslims in Central Asia and the Coming Battle of Islam* (in Arabic) (Kabul: The al-Ghuraba Center for Islamic Studies, November 5, 1999), 20.

¹⁰ Catherine Poujol, *L’Islam en Asie Centrale. Vers une nouvelle donne* (Paris : Ellipses, 2001), 54–55.

¹¹ For these attacks on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, see for example Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia’s Second Chance* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), pp.281-282; W. Alejandro Sanchez, “A Central Asian Security Paradigm: Russia and Uzbekistan”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol.18, no.116–117 (2007); Vitaly V. Naumkin, “Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies – Working Papers Series* (Spring 2003): 44–48. Available at http://iseees.berkeley.edu/bps/publications/2003_06-naum.pdf.

¹² While the IJU was the only group that claimed responsibility for the attacks in March and April, the IMU and the IJU both maintained they were responsible for the July attacks. One explanation for such claims is that both groups work with cells that are organized not in a hierarchical manner but as a network. In such a situation, it is possible for a cell to work with two organizations, especially ones with no strong ideological difference and no antipathy toward each other. See Richard Weitz, “Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 27 (2004): 506.

¹³ The IJU is able to recruit from among Turkish-European, Turkish, Azeri, and Central Asian populations—all Turkic peoples that al-Qaeda was unable to recruit by itself.

¹⁴ They claimed that such an attack by them was impossible because it was against their policy. For a group that nearly went to war with Iran in the 1990s, that sheltered the IMU between 1999 and 2001, and that has protected the most threatening Sunni sectarian groups inside their “emirate,” this does not look very convincing. The Afghan Taliban are still strongly linked to the Pakistani Taliban, sectarian Sunni supremacists in Pakistan, the IMU, and the IJU. Al-Qaeda is protected by its allies from the Pakistani Taliban. These groups target Pakistan first and foremost but also oppose the Central Asian regimes and have no love of Iran. So to talk about peace-loving Taliban that respect their neighbors is at odds with

what is known about their actions and alliances. To read the Taliban's declaration on the death of the Turkmen border guards, see Ghanizada, "Afghan Taliban rejects killing Turkmenistan border guards," *Khaama Press*, March 2, 2014, <http://www.khaama.com/afghan-taliban-rejects-killing-turkmenistan-border-guards-2848>.

¹⁵ During the first years of Uzbekistan's independence, the most organized political opposition against Karimov came from the ERK (Freedom) and Birlik (Unity) parties, both nationalist and secular. Following a crackdown, both of these political parties were dissolved, and their leaders left the country.

¹⁶ According to a Kyrgyz analyst, Toktogul Kakchekeev, this loss is still acceptable for Bishkek thanks to Kyrgyzstan's participation in the Eurasian union—specifically, the \$1.2 billion that Moscow has promised to help the Kyrgyz nation enter the Russian-led club. See Joshua Kucera, "Manas: Farewell, Or Good Riddance?" *The Bug Pit*, June 8, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68461>.

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