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The Taliban's Overtures into Central Asia: A Study

By

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Prominent concerns regarding the revival of the Islamist doctrines within the heart of Central Asia have existed since the independence of the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, from Soviet authority in the 1990s. The reasons for these concerns have been manifold. The region borders the two crucial countries of the global radical Islamic movement: Iran and Afghanistan. Although of different and often antagonistic persuasions, these two countries became the centre of Islamic radicalism in the 1990s. Further, shortly after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Tajikistan was embroiled in a civil war that was between the former communist elite and an opposition force containing strong Islamic groups. This conflict led the four other regional states to outlaw most opposition parties and movements in their countries, halting the development of political opposition.ⁱ

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The history of the conception, the emergence, and the gradual development of religious fundamentalism and terrorism in Central Asia is beyond the purview of this paper, as it is not only vast, but also involves minute intricacies and an in - depth discussion of the same. This paper wishes to focus on the relatively recent contacts between the newly resurgent Taliban and the Central Asian terrorist groups and its impact on the region.

As Pakistan continues large-scale military operations against the Taliban militants in the northwest of its own territory, and the United States mobilises its armed presence in Afghanistan, in a recent observation the former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakievⁱⁱ warned of the encroachment of Taliban militants in Central Asia. After noting the "seriousness" of the situation in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, Bakiev asked, "If the conflict against the Taliban further deepens in Afghanistan, then toward which direction would they escape? God save us, but they would [move] toward Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan."ⁱⁱⁱ

But the former Kyrgyz president is not alone among Central Asian leaders in pointing to growing security threats allegedly coming from the south. Uzbekistan has started digging trenches alongside its borders with Kyrgyzstan, with the stated aim of preventing religious extremists from penetrating its territory. Uzbekistan has repeatedly claimed that any militant infiltrating into Uzbek territory would cross its border through Tajikistan. But while Tajikistan has vehemently rejected the possibility of the Taliban ever seeking safe haven on its territory, a legacy of Tajiks' support for Afghanistan's ethnic-Tajik *mujahideen* fueled public fears of a Taliban infiltration.^{iv} Meanwhile, the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has conferred on the creation of a rapid-reaction force to counter the threat of militants entering the region from Afghanistan.^v

Analysts now state that long-defunct groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are regaining force in the impoverished region where ethnic tensions have long simmered under the surface. "They (militants) are preparing the ground for a long, sustained military campaign in Central Asia," said Ahmed Rashid, a leading Pakistan-based expert on Afghanistan and Central Asia.^{vi} "There is now a real threat because the Islamist surge is combined with an economic and political crisis."^{vii}

Security analysts say militants, who had long left Central Asia to fight alongside the Taliban, are seeping back into the region to take advantage of its fragile state. A growing sense of frustration with the lack of basic freedoms has given political undertones to the rise of Islamism in a region which still has no influential opposition parties even after two decades of independence from Soviet rule.

Acknowledging these risks, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has urged for more engagement with Central Asia. "If Afghanistan becomes a safe haven for terrorists they could easily spread through Central Asia to Russia. Of course Afghanistan is not an island. There is no solution just within its borders."^{viii} The initial alarm bells rang in Central Asia last year when Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz troops fought gangs they described as terrorist - near about the time when the security situation in northern Afghanistan deteriorated sharply.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir is another group accused of terror activities in Central Asia.^{ix} It says it has tens of thousands of members in the region but stresses its methods are entirely peaceful. "It is the Central Asian regimes that continue terrorising their people," said Taji Mustafa, its representative in London. "Since the declaration of the West's so-called 'war on terror', Central Asian governments

have used it as a convenient umbrella to pursue arrest and torture their political opponents."^x

Central Asia specialists believe that home-grown fundamentalism has been on the rise for some years, spurred by the latest economic crisis which has left millions of migrant workers without jobs. "The financial crisis and the return of labour migrants sparked predictions of unrest, intensifying the concern that radical Islamists had been making inroads into the labour diaspora," the International Crisis Group said in a report. "Insecurity is growing, in part domestically generated, in part because of proximity to Afghanistan; infrastructure is collapsing, weak economies are slipping still further."^{xi}

Zamir Kabulov, Russia's outgoing envoy to Afghanistan stated that the West should focus on curbing Taliban attempts to spread their influence in northern Afghanistan where the country borders Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. NATO-led forces are concerned with the Taliban's tightening grip on northern Afghanistan that could disrupt supply lines. Diplomats say extremist groups, inspired by the Taliban's success in north Afghanistan, are regaining strength, tasked by the Taliban with disturbing stability in broader Central Asia.

The threat of terrorism in Central Asia has traditionally been associated with activities of Islamist movements in the region. Radical Islamic groups, as mentioned above, have been a major challenge to secularism that still persists in various forms in these countries.^{xii} Although such conflicts are commonly assumed to be between Islam and secularism, whereas, the real dispute lies within Islam. The traditional, tolerant, and moderate faith to which the overwhelming majority of Central Asia's Muslims adhere to conflicts with a more radical doctrine that is followed religiously by small groups. Thus, the

Central Asian elites have fervently battled what they interpret as the onslaught of an alien and inherently violent brand of Islam, epitomised by the Taliban regime that has controlled most of Afghanistan since the mid-1990s.^{xiii} However, of late, the international community seems to be witnessing an attempt by the Taliban to make overtures into Central Asia, thus making the already volatile geographical area a cauldron of Islamic terrorism.^{xiv}

It may thus be stated, that in order to counter the infiltration of terrorist groups such as the Taliban into Central Asia, as well as the gradual resurgence of home – grown terrorism in the form of the IMU and other groups, a determined effort is required on the part of not only the NATO, but also the forces of the respective Central Asian countries. It is only when the link and the supply lines of these terrorist groups are severed, can there be an attempt to dismantle them forever. Ariel bombing and other tactics to kill individual terrorists as well as groups may assist in gaining temporary success, but there is also the danger of creating new martyrs for these groups to emulate. Cutting off supplies, food, and other necessary resources would however in the long run ensure the complete annihilation of terrorism from Central Asia and its neighbouring countries.

ⁱ Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, "Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 2002, Washington, D.C., pp. 193-206.

ⁱⁱ On April 6, 2010, a demonstration in Talas by opposition leaders protested against government corruption and increased living expenses. The protests turned violent and spread nationwide. There were conflicting reports of Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongatiyev having been killed during this event. On 7 April 2010, protesters controlled the internal security headquarters and a state TV channel in the capital, Bishkek. Reports by Kyrgyzstan government officials indicate that

at least 75 people have been killed and 458 hospitalised in bloody clashes with police in the capital. Prime Minister Daniar Usenov has accused Russia of supporting these protests; meanwhile Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has denied this. Opposition members are also calling for the closing of the US controlled Manas Air Base. On April 15 2010 Bakiyev left the country and flew to neighbouring Kazakhstan, along with his wife and two children. The country's provisional leaders announced that Bakiyev signed a formal letter of resignation prior to his departure.

ⁱⁱⁱ Farangis Najibullah, Threat of Taliban Incursion Raised in Central Asia – Again, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, February 26, 2010, at http://www.rferl.org/content/Threat_Of_Taliban_Incursion_Raised_In_Central_Asia_Again/1752944.html , accessed electronically on February 26, 2010.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Maria Golovnina, *Analysis-Radical Islam casts shadow over Central Asia*, Thomson Reuters Foundation, 09 Feb 2010, at <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE61802G.htm> , accessed electronically on February 9, 2010.

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} For a detailed history of the rise of Islamist groups in Central Asia, refer to: Edward Schatz, "Islamism and anti-Americanism in Central Asia," *Current History*, Vol. 101, No. 657, October 2002, Philadelphia, pp. 337 – 343; Pauline Jones Luong, "The Middle Easternization of Central Asia," *Current History*, Vol. 102, No. 666, October 2003, Philadelphia, pp.333 – 340; Eric McGlinchey, "Autocrats, Islamists, and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia," *Current History*, Vol. 104, No. 684, October 2005, Philadelphia, pp. 336 - 342.

^x Maria Golovnina, *op. cit.*

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Convergence of Counterterrorism Policies: A Case Study of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 32, No. 10, October 2009, Philadelphia, pp. 893 – 908.

^{xiii} For a wider discussion on political Islam, see Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Tauris, London, 1994; John L. Esposito, *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 1997.

^{xiv} For a study of the history of Central Asia since independence refer to: Shireen T. Hunter, *Central Asia since Independence*, The Washington Papers, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC., 1996.