

REVEALING ISIS' GRAND STRATEGY:

MERGERS, ACQUISITIONS AND THE HOSTILE TAKEOVER OF THE TALIBAN

Zhyldyz Oskonbaeva

(RIEAS Senior Advisor & Eurasian Liaison)

Daniel Little

(RIEAS Senior Advisor)

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At first the concept of ISIS as a corporate entity appears strange, even unsettling yet a number of recent events lends itself to this analogy. While no one takes issue with ISIS' success in Syria and Iraq, their Grand Strategy has until now been treated as a conceptual construct rather than a practical roadmap. Not only is this Grand Strategy a realizable one, it is further along than imagined. This article ties together a two-month old video with events as fresh as last week, even yesterday (July 24th) morning to complete what has eluded many for some time - namely where all of this leads.

Despite what we think of a Caliphate led by ISIS, there is a continuous swath of terror from Africa extending eastwards into China. During March this year, Boko Haram in Africa pledged allegiance to ISIS.¹ Later in May, ISIS members in Somalia have been courting al-Shabaab.² Further east, Chinese authorities report that members of minority Uighur population are supporting ISIS in the Middle East and will eventually return home to propagate domestic terrorism.³

¹ CNN, 7 Mar 2015, "Boko Haram Purportedly Pledges Allegiance to ISIS" CNN.com, available at url: www.cnn.com/2015/03/07/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-isis/, [accessed July 24, 2015]

² CNN, 22 May 2015, "In video, Somali ISIS members court al-Shabaab" CNN.com, available at url: www.cnn.com/2015/05/22/world/somalia-isis-al-shabaab-video/, [accessed July 24, 2015]

³ The Independent, 11 Mar 2015, "Chinese Uighurs 'join ISIS overseas and return to take part in terror plots' officials claim", <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/chinese-uighurs->

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Regarding the areas in between such as Saharan Africa, the Caucasus, Iran and Central Asia, mainstream thinking places their allegiance elsewhere, particularly Al-Qaeda. While the experts and media pundits lead us to believe that ISIS and Al-Qaeda are at odds with one another,⁴ there is evidence to the contrary. Nothing could be further from the truth. Moving west to-east across the Caliphate, ISIS affiliation alternates in *Yes-No-Yes* fashion while Al-Qaeda's east-to-west quest starts with the Taliban in Afghanistan and ends exactly the same way with Al-Qaeda in the Magreb in Northern Africa. How can global terror function this way much less be a coincidence?

A video from two months ago changed all this. In the world of terrorism, anyone who is someone makes a grand entrance to alert the world stage of their arrival. Usually a singular figure in native or paramilitary attire with finger raised declares their representation of divine judgment and retribution here on earth. Allegedly shot in Syria, the video is dated late May to early June.⁵ While it went viral for a few weeks, the world moved on. What makes this video all the more remarkable is not only the subject and what was said but the implications of what he represents which are two things: Announcing an official ISIS presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia but also the completion of a continuous terror network from Africa to China in terms of armed, militarized units instead of strewn about solitary cells.

The name of the subject in the May/June video identified himself as Gulmorod Halimov. What we know was that he commanded OMON (*Otryad Mobilny Osobogo*

[join-isis-overseas-and-return-to-take-part-in-terror-plots-officials-claim-10099674.html](http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2015/04/29-terrorism-in-africa-byman) ,
[accessed July 24, 2015]

⁴ Brookings Institute, 29 Apr 2015, "Comparing al-Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets" Prepared testimony before the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the House Committee on Homeland Security, available at:

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2015/04/29-terrorism-in-africa-byman>
[Accessed July 24, 2015]; The National Interest, 24 Feb 2015, "ISIS vs. Al-Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War", available at url: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadism%E2%80%99s-global-civil-war-12304> , [accessed at July 24, 2015]

⁵ Fergana News Agency, May 2015. "Begstvo komandira tadhikskogo OMONa v IGIL: mneniya ekspertov" (Tajik OMON's commander defected to ISIS: expert opinions), (Original article is published in Russian language) available at url: <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8565> , [accessed July 19, 2015]

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Naznacheniya- Special Purpose Mobile Detachment), a Special Forces unit within Tajikistan's Ministry of Interior. Whenever things get far out of hand, the President of any Central Asian country (from the former Soviet Union) calls OMON to kill terrorist units committing crimes and insurrections as they occur.⁶ The fact that he is from Tajikistan is key. By looking at a map of Northern Afghanistan, the porous borders leading through Tajikistan splinters into all directions: Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley northwards towards Russia, eastwards towards China and westwards circling the Caspian Sea north through Russia and Iran in the South. With regards to trade, few commodities command our attention more than heroin, weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

Halimov made his name fighting along this very border. During the 'Pamir Crisis' in 2012 he led the operation into the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region; one that successfully suppressed the insurgency.⁷ During that operation, nine citizens of Afghanistan were detained. Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security (GKNB) released a statement that investigations were under way to see "whether the citizens of Afghanistan" involved in the violence were connected with the Taliban, al-Qaeda or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.⁸ In the eyes of Tajik Authorities it was their greatest success, one that propelled Halimov's career to even greater heights.

In the video, Halimov explained that he served in the Presidential detail between 1992-1997, received Spetnaz (Russian Special Forces) training in 1997-1998 and even trained with the U.S.; first in Louisiana in 2003 and later at a camp organized by the defunct Blackwater in 2008. Biographic information aside, Halimov explained that he joined ISIS in protest against Tajik policy,⁹ one embodied by the very President he once protected. In the video, Halimov promised that he and his "brothers will return with weapons" to Central Asia. Before we delve into the events of this morning and last week, we need to explore ISIS' presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia to understand Halimov's significance.

⁶ *ibid* (v)

⁷ BBC News/ Asia, July 2012, "Tajikistan clashes: 'Many dead' in Gorno-Badakhshan", available at url: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18965366> , [accessed July 19, 2015]

⁸ *ibid* (vii)

⁹ Central Asia News, CATV News. 2015 "Tajikistan News", Video available at url: https://youtu.be/MaUyp6-sn_8 , [accessed July 19, 2015]

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Until now the Caucasus and Central Asia were presumed the domain of Al-Qaeda affiliated cells and Shia loyal to Iran. ISIS now controls two militarized units in these regions: *Khorosan* and *Mawarannahr*. In typical military fashion they have defined boundaries as well as a specific mission to mutually support one another. It is the rise of Halimov that completes this puzzle.

Khorasan links ISIS-occupied Syria and Iraq with Mawarannahr. In summer of 2014 ISIS published its own geopolitical map outlining Khorasan as a region, which includes parts of Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Northern Afghanistan. ¹⁰Named during the Sasanian Dynasty (3d century BC)¹¹, it borders along the north from the Amu Darya (Oxus River - *Ancient Greek: Ὠξός Ὄξος*) westward to the Caspian Sea and along the south from the central Iranian deserts eastward to the mountains of central Afghanistan.

Led by Halimov, Mawarannahr is Arabic for Transoxiana (also Transoxania), a region defined by the conquest of Alexander the Great (4th century BC). Geographically it is the historical region of Turkistan in Central Asia east of the Amu Darya (Oxus River) bordering Khorasan and west of the Syr Darya (Jaxartes River), which roughly corresponds to present-day Uzbekistan as well as parts of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.¹² Names Khorasan and Mawarannahr are precisely chosen by these units in order to have ideological outlining, since both regions were once part of a Caliphate until Turkic and Seljuk tribes took it over.

The New York Times quoted an unnamed American intelligence source that a Kuwaiti named Mushin al-Fadhli formed Khorasan. Since taken out by air strike, Al-Fadhli was one of Bin Laden's closest advisors but fled Afghanistan for Iran where he continued the flow of money, weapons and fighters to Syria and Iraq. According to the United Nations, Al-Fadhli once fought against the Russian government in

¹⁰ Dzhanibekov Nurtas, February 2015, "Islamskoye gosudarstvo» - otsenka riskov dlya Tsentral'noy Azi" (ISIS-the risk assessment for Central Asia), (original article is published in Russian Language) available at url: <http://ia-centr.ru/expert/20267/>, [accessed July 19, 2015]

¹¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Historical Region, Asia. "Khorasan" Published online, available at url: <http://www.britannica.com/place/Khorasan-historical-region-Asia>, [accessed July 19, 2015]

¹² Encyclopedia Britannica, Historical Region, Asia. "Transoxania" Published online, available at url: <http://www.britannica.com/place/Transoxania>, [accessed July 19, 2015]

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Chechnya.¹³ It is fair to say that Al- Fahdli's connections in Chechnya are strongest link between Central Asian Mawarannahr and Khorasan. Chechen recruits are the once that provided Halimov with two things when he arrived – Russian translation and knowledge of the drug trade linking the Caucasus with Europe.

Concerning Mawarannahr, Halimov knows the terrain of the Afghan-Tajik border, the people who operate on both sides and the elite hierarchy long rumored to benefit from illicit trafficking. Simply put, Halimov is seizing the hub of the world's heroin trade on behalf of ISIS. By taking over the Taliban's toll gates along the 'heroin route,' Khorasan and Mawarannahr would be self-funding, controlling not only the region but the neighboring political elites all along its routes. Where corruption is rife, ISIS flourishes. The level of drug trafficking is such that it cannot possibly escape the notice of the region's political elites.

Back in Iraq, ISIS already controls the manufacturing of precursors necessary to transform opium into heroin. Coincidentally, these same sulfuric and phosphorous acids produced in Iraq's Al-Anbar province (Akashat Phosphate Mine and the Al-Qaim manufacturing plant)¹⁴ can also be used to manufacture sarin, a nerve agent used by Iraq against Iran in 1980.¹⁵

Just like any startup venture, seizing terrain and illicit operations requires working capital. Central Asian religious scholar Kadyr Malikov disclosed that an undisclosed source recently revealed that ISIS allocated \$70 million to Mawarannahr. This points to the prospect of ISIS militants returning from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq home to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.¹⁶ To be clear, ISIS is not using Halimov to bring ISIS to Central Asia – it has been there all along.

¹³ Mark Mazzetti, September 2014, "A terror cell that avoided spotlight" Published at The New York Times, available at url:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/khorasan-a-terror-cell-that-avoided-the-spotlight.html? r=0> , [accessed July 19, 2015]

¹⁴ FATE, February 2015, "Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)" Published on the web-site of FATE, available at url: <http://www.fatf-gafi.org> , [accessed July 21, 2015]

¹⁵ Royal Society of Chemistry. Phosphorus. Available at url: http://www.rsc.org/chemistryworld/podcast/Interactive_Periodic_Table_Transcripts/Phosphorus.asp , [accessed July 21, 2015]

¹⁶ Regnum News Agency, January 2015, "Kirgizskiy ekspert: IGIL vydalilo \$70 mln na organizatsiyu teraktov v Ferganskoy doline" (Kyrgyz Expert: ISIS had allocated \$70 million to

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Kyrgyzstan is one of the possible countries used as a means to go to ISIS-held Syria. Over the years, fake Kyrgyz passports were found on different well-known criminals during their detention in different parts of Eurasia¹⁷. Even citizens of Afghanistan were arrested in Kazakhstan with fake Kyrgyz passports while en route to Germany.¹⁸ This past week, an ISIS operation was thwarted in Kyrgyzstan. The National Security Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic issued a statement that an agency carried out an operation against an ISIS-affiliated group were about to carry out an attack on the Russian air base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan, as well as large gatherings during the celebration of Ramadan Eid. A total of four were killed and seven were detained.¹⁹ Based on the confession of a detained terrorist, a former member of Kyrgyz Parliament was implicated with supplying them with weapons and money.²⁰ Rumors swirling amongst journalists is that former Parliamentarian Maksat Kunakunov is the one sitting in a special interrogation cell in the basement of the National Security building. While not known for ideology, he is nonetheless implicated for association with organized crime.

Yesterday morning (July 24), law enforcement authorities in Tajikistan raided an ISIS-affiliated cell in order to prevent a series of planned terrorist attacks. According

organize terror attacks in Fergana Valley), (original article published in Russian language) available at url: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1886622.html> , [accessed July 19, 2015

¹⁷ Gezitter.org. March 2015, "Kto vydal kyrgyzskiy pasport ubitomu v Turtsii tadjikskomu oppozitsioneru?" (Who issued a Kyrgyz passport to a member of Tajik opposition assassinated in Turkey?). (Original article is published in Russian language) available at url: http://www.gezitter.org/society/38073_kto_vydal_kyrgyzskiy_pasport_ubitomu_v_turtsii_tadjikskomu_oppozitsioneru/, [accessed July 19, 2015].

¹⁸ Radio Azattyk, May 2012, "Zaderzhany afgantsy s poddel'nymi pasportami KR" (Citizens of Afghanistan are arrested with fake passports of Kyrgyzstan), (Original article is published in Russian language), available at url: http://rus.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan_astana_passport_afghanistan/24590294.html , [accessed July 19, 2015]

¹⁹ News of GKNB, July, 2015 "GKNB provedena spetsoperatsiya po zaderzhaniyu boyevikov mezhdunarodnoy terroristicheskoy organizatsii «Islamskoye gosudarstvo» (National Security Committee conducted a special operation to arrest militants of the international terrorist organization "Islamic State")

²⁰ News Radio Azattyk, July, 2015. "Zaderzhan eks-deputat Zhogorku Kenesha - za svyazi s likvidirovannymi boyevikami IGIL" (Former member of Jogorku Kenesh is detained in connection to ISIS) (original of the article published in Russian Language) available at url: http://rus.azattyk.org/archive/ky_News_in_Russian_ru/20150720/4795/4795.html?id=27137642 , [accessed July 21, 2015]

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to Ministry of Interior source, detainees admitted the fact that they were receiving instructions from Syria on targets of the planned attacks.²¹

The reason that the majority of the Taliban is not in cooperation with ISIS is that it stands to eventually get what it strove decades for –unencumbered Sharia Law and self-determination absent of foreign troops. Al-Qaeda was the reason the foreign troops came in the first place. Since Central and Northern Afghanistan falls within Khorosan’s territory, the Taliban is not only watching these events closely, they are massing their armed presence there. According to Afghan intelligence the northern Afghan region of Badakhshan bordering Tajikistan remains the Taliban but that is starting to change. In addition, the report notes the appearance of ISIS in Badakhshan, as well as the border areas shared with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.²² To lose Badakhshan is to lose control of the drug trade, the weapons they pay for and the bargaining power they hold against Kabul’s elite.

The reason that Al-Qaeda will merge with ISIS is because the latter accomplishes more with armed, militarized branches that are self-funded. We actually see and understand the Caliphate now. This requires a global reassessment of options available amongst various nation states – strange bedfellows or not. With regards to the Taliban however, the very impetus for their existence has now become the boomeranging entity that will consume them. After decades of fighting, they will

²¹ Iran Russian Radio, July 2015, “V Tadjikistane predotvrashchena seriya teraktov, gotovivshikhsya storonnikami IGIL” (Tajikistan has prevented series of terroristic attacks planned by ISIS’s affiliates). Published at the website of Iran Russian Radio. Available at url: <http://russian.irib.ir/news/sng/item/256794-в-таджикистане-предотвращена-серия-терактов-готовившихся-сторонниками-игил>, [accessed July 24, 2015]

²² BBC Russian Service, Anora Sarkorova, June 2015, “Ugroza Rossii i Kitayu vznikla na granitse Tadjikistana” (Threat to Russia and China had emerged at the border of Tajikistan), (Original article published in Russian Language) available at url: http://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/06/150618_tajikistan_afghanistan_border?ocid=socialflow_twitter, [accessed July 19, 2015]

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have the society they fought for only to have it dictated to them by foreigners like Gulmorod Halimov.