

Jihad in Central Asia and Russia: Foreign Fighters, the ISIS, Chechens, Katibat-i-Imam Bukhari, Al Nusra Front and the Prospect of Nuclear Terrorism

Musa Khan Jalalzai

(Writer, journalist and, a research contributor in Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS) Greece, and London. He has been contributing articles and research papers in Global Security Review USA, Journal of European and American Intelligence Studies, Daily Times, The Nation, Telegraph, Times of London, Daily Outlook Afghanistan, The New Nation Bangladesh, New Yorker, and Journal (Fautline) of the Institute for Conflict Management Delhi India since 1994. His intellectual experience is up to 30 years extensive research in political analysis, Pakistan, Afghanistan, terrorism, Taliban, the ISIS, nuclear and biological terrorism, and intelligence analysis. His skills cover counterterrorism, the EU and UK law enforcement analysis, and intelligence and security crisis in Asia and Europe. From 1992-1994, he worked as a research scholar in Pakistan's Institute of National Affairs (PINA), and authored two book on the war in Persian Gulf in 1993. He has been helping the UK law firms, and courts in demonstrating fear of persecution of asylum seeker by expert opinion reports since 2009. He completed MA in English Literatures, Diploma in Geospatial Intelligence, University of Maryland Washington DC. He can speak, and write English, Pashto, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Dari, and Saraiki languages. His all books are available at amazon.com, amazon.co.uk, and Google)

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In Central Asia, the focus of Jihadists groups has been the Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Russian Federation. But it is unclear how many Central Asian fighters will ultimately seek to return to their countries of origin, and if they do, whether any of them will remain committed to ISIS. Before the rise of ISIS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was the main Central Asian extremist organization in the field. Its base of operations is in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Central Asian fighters linked to ISIS headquarters in Syria also participated in acts of terrorism in other countries. The ISIS has previously restrained from getting involved in attacks in Central Asia as the group's leadership emphasised that attacking this region was not the highest priority. In July 2018, five Tajik men killed four foreign cyclists in a car-ramming attack, accompanied by an on-foot gun and knife assault in the Khatlon province of Tajikistan. The presence of Daesh in Iraq and Afghanistan, and participation of Central Asian jihadists in it prompted consternation in the region. In Syria, the radical Islamic militants from Central Asia established terrorist organisations of their own. These terrorists have Salafi-Wahhabi inclinations and are among the backers of al-Qaeda, al-Nusra Front, and Daesh group. In his Diplomat analysis (20 September 2016), Uran Botobekov, documented videos and extrajudicial killing in Iraq and Syria:

“Recently, Central Asians saw on YouTube a terrible video of a teenager, Babur Israilov from Jalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan, on his way to becoming a suicide bomber. In the video, Babur cries before being sent to his death in an armoured car laden with explosives in Fua, Syria. One of the fighters gathered around encourages him, saying in Uzbek that Satan intervenes at crucial moments to confuse a Muslim’s mind, so he should think only of Allah. Further in the video sentimental Arabic music plays, the armoured personnel carrier moves, and, at the fatal moment, the bomb explodes. According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Babur Israilov was a member of an extremist group of Uzbeks–Imam Bukhari Jamaat–which fights alongside Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Just like the father of the British boy JoJo, resident of Suzak district in the Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan Tahir Rahitov saw his son Babur via video. According to Tahir, his wife died in 1995 and the boy was raised by his grandmother. In November 2013 Babur left for Russia in search of work. In March 2014 he arrived in Syria via Turkey, joined Imam Bukhari Jamaat, and fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra against the government of Bashar al-Assad”.

The four Central Asian States (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) security agencies and government have adopted several law and order measures to effectively fight against radicalization, but some states failed to intercept the infiltration of the ISIS militants from Afghanistan into the region. The power structures, social institutions and local authorities of the Central Asian states are unable to work with radical Islamic groups. Analyst Uran Botobekov has also warned that presence of Central Asian minors in Daesh ranks might possibly cause huge fatalities when they translate their ideologies into violent actions:

“According to the special services of Kyrgyzstan, about 140 minors have been taken from Kyrgyzstan to training camps in Iraq and Syria. The vast majority of children are under the age of 14, with an estimated 85 children under the age of 10. Authorities have not reported how many children have come to the Islamic State from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to human rights organizations more than 600 children from Central Asia are in ISIS-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria. Most children were brought into the conflict zone by their parents. According to various estimates, there are 4,000 Central Asians fighting with various groups in Iraq and Syria. Estimates of the number of children from the former republics of the Soviet Union vary, and no one can pinpoint the exact number”.

Aside from an Islamic State-linked attack on foreign cyclists, Tajikistan had largely been spared from significant attacks by both international terrorist organizations and radicalized individuals. The ISIS recruitment of Tajikistanis relies heavily on the glorification of celebrity jihadist commanders. Despite this, ISIS recruitment in Tajikistan is perhaps the least organized of all the Central Asian states as Tajikistanis fighting for ISIS maintain no dedicated official media outlet or spokesman. The Tajikistani government restricted religious freedom to an exceptional degree. All but 500 to 1,000 ethnic Uzbekistanis were also fighting in Syria during 2015, with a majority of them believed to be from southern Kyrgyzstan. However, more than 400 to 500 Islamist fighters with ties to Uzbekistan participated in the battlefields of Syria and Iraq.

After March 2015, Uzbekistan changed its tactics and started to actively downplay the threat ISIS internally poses to the country and to show that ISIS was subverting true Islam. Tajikistanis fighting for ISIL repeatedly threatened to return and wage jihad in Tajikistan, but they failed. In January 2015, members of an IMU cell planned to attack a police station were arrested in Tajikistan. Monitoring of the Central Asian Salafi-jihadi groups activities showed that since 2018, al Qaeda-linked Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB) stepped up its participation in the terror attacks against the Afghan Armed Forces. This Uzbek terrorist group has a high level of trust among the leaders al Qaeda and Taliban and has become a link in their strategic ties. Analyst, Mr. Uran Botobekov has noted the group has established two important branches to maintain its army:

“It is known that KIB has two branches. The group’s main fighting force of more than 500 militants, led by leader Abu Yusuf Muhojir today is based in the Syrian province Idlib. Despite the fact that KIB positions itself as an “independent” faction it is closely connected with Ahrar al Sham who has had al Qaeda operatives embedded in its own ranks. The KIB’s second branch is concentrated in Afghanistan, which positions itself as an integral part of the Taliban. Even the emblem and the name of the KIB branch are closely associated with the Taliban. It is known that the Taliban refers to itself as “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and has the website under the same name. With the Taliban’s consent KIB leaders gave their branch the name “Katibat Imam al Bukhari of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. After pledging an oath of allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar, KIB became a reinforcing factor of the strategic ties of the Taliban and al Qaeda. It should be noted that the US State Department designated KIB to the list of global terrorist organizations on March 22, 2018”.

The establishment of the ISIS networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan raised several question including the failure of Tajik law enforcement agencies to intercept infiltration of ISIS fighter into the country. The Islamic State is now recruiting young people into its ranks, and supports them financially. In view of this development, Tajikistan introduced new legislation in 2015 allowing authorities to pardon citizens who voluntarily return home and express regret that they joined militant groups abroad, but, notwithstanding this legislation, people of all walks of life are joining Daesh consecutively. On 06 November 2019, BBC reported terror attack of the ISIS fighters on Checkpost of Tajik border with Uzbekistan, and killed 17 people. Analyst Damon Mehl in his paper (Damon Mehl, CTC Sentinel, November 2018, Volume-11, Issue-10) noted some aspects of the development of ISIS networks in Tajikistan:

“Jamaat Ansarullah, an Afghanistan-based Tajikistani terrorist group, was formed in 2010 with likely fewer than 100 members and has since received support from the IMU, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda. The group’s stated mission is to bring an ‘Islamic’ government to Tajikistan. Beginning with its foundation, Jamaat Ansarullah sporadically published videos and disseminated messages through its website, which has been inactive since 2016. The group’s leader Amriddin Tabarov was killed in Afghanistan in December 2015 and Tabarov’s son-in-law Mavlavif Salmon was appointed as the new leader by the end of 2016. In 2014, Jamaat Ansarullah sent some of its members to fight in Syria with Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda-aligned group now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. At a point in 2014 or 2015, some Jamaat Ansarullah members ended up fighting alongside the Islamic State. The Islamic State subsequently began financially supporting Ansarullah according to Afghanistan expert Antonio Giustozzi, citing a Jamaat Ansarullah commander. This support reportedly caused fissures between Jamaat Ansarullah and al-Qaeda, and by 2015, Ansarullah received 50 percent of its financial backing from the Islamic State. In October 2014, a Jamaat Ansarullah member going by the name Mansur stated on the group’s website that Jamaat Ansarullah considered the Islamic State a jihadi organization, but had paused its decision on whether to accept the Islamic State’s claim of being the caliphate”.

In 2010, Jamaat Ansarullah extremist group was formed in Afghanistan, with possibly 100 members and trained by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to fight the Tajik forces effectively. The group’s leader Amriddin Tabarov was killed in Afghanistan in December 2015 and Tabarov’s son-in-law Mavlavif Salmon was appointed as the new leader by the end of 2016. Analyst Damon Mehl in his paper (Damon Mehl, CTC Sentinel, November 2018, Volume-11, Issue-10) has documented the activities of Daesh in Tajikistan, and a Tajik language audio, in which the Islamic State member Abu Usama Noraki threatened Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon:

“In early August 2018, a week following the attack on the cyclists, a nine-minute, Tajik-language audio message from Islamic State member Abu Usama Noraki threatened Tajikistan president Emomali Rahmon. Abu Usama Noraki is very probably synonymous with a Syria-based Islamic State member whom Tajik authorities identified as 31-year-old Tojiddin Nazarov in March 2018.

Tajik authorities stated Abu Usama was from Norak, located in Khatlon province southeast of Dushanbe, and called him the “Islamic State’s most dangerous recruiter among Tajiks.” According to the same Tajik authorities, Abu Usama Noraki joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2014, previously worked with the IMU, and was radicalized when he was a migrant laborer working in Russia. Noraki is a prominent Islamic State spokesperson to a Tajik-language audience and since at least 2015 has frequently disseminated audio speeches through an Islamic State-affiliated, Tajik-language Zello channel that now has approximately 15,000 subscribers. Noraki’s early August 2018 message regarding the Tajikistan President was likewise disseminated via Zello and social media sites. Noraki stated Rahmon was acting against Islam and that Islamic State Mujahideen would soon move to Tajikistan and overthrow the government. Noraki claimed the killing of foreigners, an obvious reference to the July 29, 2018, attack, was the “first bell” for future jihad and attacks in Tajikistan. Noraki also called on Tajik government officials to join Islamic State ranks and praised a certain Shaykh Abu Malik for providing the Islamic State with Tajik military insight. Shaykh Abu Malik is the nom de guerre of the former commander of Tajikistan’s OMON (Special Purpose Police Unit) Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov who defected to the Islamic State in 2015, was appointed Islamic State War Minister in 2016, and may have been killed in 2017”.

Chechen fighters have also established networks across Russian Federation and want to retrieve sophisticated weapons. The group in Afghanistan receive military training to strengthen its army for the future war against Russia. Pakistan have also trained Chechen commanders years ago, while during their jihad against Russia, some reports confirmed the participation of over 1000 Pakistani jihadists and retired military officers in fighting alongside their fighters. Analyst and researcher, Mr. Christian Bleuer noted the presence of Chechen leadership in Afghanistan:

“Extremist members of Chechnya’s rebel movement adhere to ideas tied to jihad and the creation of an Islamist state. Afghan and foreign officials say as many as 7,000 Chechens and other foreign fighters could be operating in the country, loosely allied with the Taliban and other militant groups. Local reporting by Pajhwok News, sourced to the Logar governor’s spokesman, was slightly different, naming the targets as “Taliban Commanders Mullah Saber, Mullah Sabawon and Mullah Bashir,” but also noting the presence of Chechens—in this case, three Chechen women who were allegedly killed. Khaama Press also reported the incident, noting that “[f]oreign insurgents fighting the Afghan forces is not new as scores of militants from Chechnya and other countries are routinely reported killed during the fight with the Afghan forces,” with the caveat that “[t]he anti-government armed militant groups have not commented regarding the report so far.”

With the presence of Jihadist Groups and the ISIS in Central Asia, the use of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out, the fact is that the ISIS found these weapons in Syria and Iraq. If they used these weapons, reaction of Central Asia States and Russian would be violent, and they might attack the US and NATO installations inside Afghanistan. Researchers and analysts Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press in their paper have warned that if state transferred nuclear or biological weapons to jihadist groups and ISIS in Central Asia, this will change the whole picture of war in Afghanistan:

“The concern that a state might transfer nuclear weapons to terrorists, however, is among the greatest of these worries, and to many analysts it is the most compelling justification for costly actions—including the use of military force—aimed at preventing proliferation. Despite the issue’s importance, the danger of deliberate nuclear weapons transfer to terrorist’s remains understudied. Scholars have scrutinized many other proliferation concerns more extensively. Analysts have investigated the deductive and empirical bases for claims that new nuclear states would be deterrable; the likelihood that Iran, in particular, would behave rationally and avoid using nuclear weapons recklessly; and the risks of proliferation cascades, “loose nukes,” and nuclear-armed states using their weapons as a shield for aggression or blackmail. To the extent

that analysts have debated the possibility of covert state sponsorship of nuclear terrorism, however, the arguments have consisted mostly of competing deductive logics—with little empirical analysis. This article assesses the risk that states would give nuclear weapons to terrorists”.

The prospect of nuclear terrorism in Central Asia and might possibly in Russia, is crystal clear as the ISIS groups, and US army are making thing worse. There are possibilities that terrorists can acquire nuclear material or a complete warhead to use it in Central Asia, or possibly in Russia. The risk of a complete nuclear device falling into the hands of terrorists will cause consternation in the region. Over the past several years, the prospect of a terrorist group armed with a nuclear weapon has frequently been cited as a genuine and overriding threat to the security of Central Asia and Russia.

If terrorist groups such as ISIS or Lashkar-e-Toeba determine to go nuclear, what will be the security preparations in Central Asia to intercept these groups? These and other Pakistan based groups can attempt to manufacture the fissile material needed to fuel a nuclear weapon—either highly enriched uranium or plutonium, and then use it. Moreover, there are possibilities that Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia based extremist and jihadist groups can purchase fissile material in black market or steal it from a military or civilian facility and then use that material to construct an improvised nuclear device. The US tensions with Russia receded and nuclear strategy came to seem like a relic of a bygone era. Yet today, with Russia rising again as a military power, the grim logic of nuclear statecraft is returning. In his nuclear risk analysis, Simon Saradzhyan (Russia Matters, Simon Saradzhyan, (August 06, 2019) argued that there are possibility of nuclear war between Russia and the United States:

“Is the risk of a nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia now higher than at the height of the Cold War? Yes, it is, according to an article former U.S. Energy Secretary Ernie Moniz and former U.S. Sen. Sam Nunn have penned for Foreign Affairs. “Not since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis has the risk of a U.S.-Russian confrontation involving the use of nuclear weapons been as high as it is today,” the co-chairs of the Nuclear Threat Initiative warn in their commentary published on Aug. 6, 2019. To back their claim, the two American statesmen describe an imaginary scenario in which Russian air defense systems shoot down a NATO aircraft that has accidentally veered into Russian airspace during a wargame in Russia’s Kaliningrad exclave in 2020”.

All but, 15 years ago, Graham Allison (September/October 2004) noted the possibility of nuclear terrorism in Russia by Chechen terrorists. Chechen have had a long-standing interest in acquiring nuclear weapons and material to use in their campaign against Russia. He is of the opinion that Chechen had access to nuclear materials, and their experts were able to make nuclear explosive devices:

“To date, the only confirmed case of attempted nuclear terrorism occurred in Russia on November 23, 1995, when Chechen separatists put a crude bomb containing 70 pounds of a mixture of cesium-137 and dynamite in Moscow’s Ismailovsky Park. The rebels decided not to detonate this “dirty bomb,” but instead informed a national television station to its location. This demonstration of the Chechen insurgents’ capability to commit ruthless terror underscored their long-standing interest in all things nuclear. As early as 1992, Chechnya’s first rebel president, Dzhokhar Dudayev, began planning for nuclear terrorism, including a specific initiative to hijack a Russian nuclear submarine from the Pacific Fleet in the Far East. The plan called for seven Slavic-looking Chechens to seize a submarine from the naval base near Vladivostok, attach explosive devices to the nuclear reactor section and to one of the nuclear-tipped missiles on board, and then demand withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. After the plot was discovered, Russian authorities disparaged it, and yet it is ominous to note that the former chief

of staff of the Chechen rebel army, Islam Khasukhanov, had once served as second-in-command of a Pacific Fleet nuclear submarine”.

The ISIS found dangerous weapons in Syria and Iraq and killed thousands innocent women and children. In Central Asia and Russian Federation, there are several extremist and terrorist groups that seek nuclear weapons to use it against local security forces. Chechen extremist groups have also consistently expressed the desire to obtain, build, and utilize unconventional devices against selected targets, and have innovated by incorporating hazardous materials into their ordnance. The war in Syria and Iraq has significantly altered modern terrorism, with radical Islamic militants from Central Asia being no exception. The terrorists’ method for recruiting forces is almost the same in most of the countries in the Central Asia.

While the majority of ISIS recruits originate in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and Western Europe. Central Asia is the third largest source of foreign fighters in Syria. More than 4,000 Central Asian fighters are believed to have joined armed groups fighting in Syria, with an estimated 2,500 arriving there in 2014 and early 2015 alone. Russian President Vladimir Putin once stated that as many as 7,000 fighters from Russia and Central Asia have joined the ranks of the Islamic State.

The Takfiri groups of al-Nusra Front and the so-called Islamic Jihad Union are also employing nationals from Central Asia. In some countries, the process of employment is done through indigenous people. Efforts of terrorists to get access to nuclear materials and technologies appear to be increasing at the same time as there is a race for developing nuclear power projects in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. This might create fertile soil for the rise of nuclear terrorism on a global scale. There is evidence that terrorist groups have tried to acquire the material needed to construct a crude nuclear explosive device, or a dirty bomb. Terrorists use biological agents because they are often difficult to detect. In 2016, after the two ISIS brothers involved in the Brussels bombings, Khalid and Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, were killed and captured, authorities discovered they had been secretly watching a Belgian nuclear scientist who worked at the Tihange Nuclear Power Station.

Nuclear terrorism remains a constant threat to global peace. Access of terrorist organizations to nuclear material is a bigger threat to civilian population. Terrorist groups can gain access to highly enriched uranium or plutonium, because they have the potential to create and detonate an improvised nuclear device. Since the ISIS has already retrieved nuclear materials from Mosul city of Iraq, we can assert that terrorist groups like ISIS and Katibat Imam Bukhari, and Chechen extremist groups can make access to biological and nuclear weapons with the help of local experts. Nuclear facilities also often store large amounts of radioactive material, spent fuel, and other nuclear waste products that terrorists could use in a dirty bomb. Without access to such fissile materials, extremist and radicalized groups can turn their attention toward building a simple radiological device. The most difficult part of making a nuclear bomb is acquiring the nuclear material, but some Muslim and non-Muslim state might facilitate the ISIS, Lashkar-e-Toiba, Chechen extremist groups and Afghanistan and Pakistan based groups to attack nuclear installations in Russia and Central Asia.

Information on how to manipulate nuclear material to produce an explosive device—an improvised nuclear device, which would produce a nuclear explosion and a mushroom cloud, or a radiation-dispersal device, which would spread dangerous radioactive material over a substantial area—is now available widely. Daesh (ISIS) seized control of the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014. Pakistan has also been heavily dependent on outside supply for many key direct- and dual-use goods for its nuclear programs. It maintains smuggling networks and entities willing to break supplier country laws to obtain these goods. Many of these illegal imports have been detected and stopped. These illegal procurements have led to investigations and prosecutions in the supplier states, leading to revelations of important details about Pakistan’s complex to make nuclear

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explosive materials and nuclear weapons. According to some reports that weapons-grade and weapons-usable nuclear materials have been stolen by terrorist groups from some states. Once a crude weapon is in a country, terrorists would transport it in a vehicle to city and then detonate it in a crowded area.

Musa Khan Jalalzai is a writer, journalist and, a research contributor in Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS) Greece, and London. He has been contributing articles and research papers in Global Security Review USA, Journal of European and American Intelligence Studies, Daily Times, The Nation, Telegraph, Times of London, Daily Outlook Afghanistan, The New Nation Bangladesh, New Yorker, and Journal (Fautline) of the Institute for Conflict Management Delhi India since 1994. His intellectual experience is up to 30 years extensive research in political analysis, Pakistan, Afghanistan, terrorism, Taliban, the ISIS, nuclear and biological terrorism, and intelligence analysis. His skills cover counterterrorism, the EU and UK law enforcement analysis, and intelligence and security crisis in Asia and Europe. From 1992-1994, he worked as a research scholar in Pakistan's Institute of National Affairs (PINA), and authored two book on the war in Persian Gulf in 1993. He has been helping the UK law firms, and courts in demonstrating fear of persecution of asylum seeker by expert opinion reports since 2009. He completed MA in English Literatures, Diploma in Geospatial Intelligence, University of Maryland Washington DC. He can speak, and write English, Pashto, Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Dari, and Saraiki languages. His all books are available at amazon.com, amazon.co.uk, and Google.