http://strategicstudyindia.blogspot.com/2015/02/shadow-boxing-with-islamic-state-in.html

# Shadow Boxing With the Islamic State in Central Asia

BY REID STANDISH

FEBRUARY 6

When it comes to the Islamic State's potential threat to Central Asia, no one quite seems to be able to tell the difference between reality and speculation.

On Monday, Uzbekistan's domestic intelligence agency announced that it had intercepted communications indicating that the militants were planning to carry out terrorist attacks in the country in the spring. The same day, Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry said it had uncovered 83 cases of recruiters trying to bring fighters to Syria.

Fighters returning from Syria have not carried out any attacks in Central Asia and apart from such statements from state security organs, there is little reliable information to be had on the inroads the Islamic State has made in the region. The question of how many Central Asian citizens have joined up with the Islamic State or have professed jihadist sympathies has now become a volatile political issue. Hyping the threat could provide justification for the region's strongmen to further consolidate power. At the same time, terror experts agree that Central Asia has become a recruitment hub for the militant group.

"The estimates and figures from Central Asian governments are all highly politicized and speculative," says John Heathershaw, a Central Asia expert at the University of Exeter. "The simple truth is that no one has an accurate figure."

In October 2014, Rafal Rohozinski, a terrorism expert and CEO of SecDev, a Canadian think tank, told a conference in Kazakhstan that approximately 4,000 Central Asians are fighting with the Islamic State. The figure was picked up and widely circulated in the Russian and Central Asian media. That estimate, according to Rohozinski, was based on an extensive reading of jihadist chat forums and social media.

Shortly thereafter, Central Asian leaders began speaking of the Islamic State in dire terms. In December 2014, Uzbek President Islam Karimov asked Vladimir Putin for assistance in combating the threat of extremism in the region. A week later, Emomalii Rahmon, the president of Tajikistan, referred to the Islamic State as "the plague of the new century and a global threat" in an address to his country.

There is an element of truth to that claim, but calling the group a "plague" may be overstating things. A January report, the culmination of over a year of research and interviews across Central Asia, Russia, and Turkey, by the International Crisis Group, for example, found that between 2,000 to 4,000 Central Asians have traveled to Syria to wage jihad in the past three years. "The range reflects the fact that government and security agencies in Central Asia are not able to keep track of who is going to Syria," said Deirdre Tynan, the International Crisis Group's project director for Central Asia. "Nothing is exact, but 2,000 fighters is a more realistic figure for the region."

The amount of Central Asians returning from Syria remains unknown, but the prospect of fighters returning continues to trouble local governments.The amount of Central Asians returning from Syria remains unknown, but the prospect of fighters returning continues to trouble local governments. Following the release of a video by the Islamic State which allegedly showed a young Kazakh boy executing two men accused of being Russian spies was released on Jan. 13, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the president of Kazakhstan, announced that he would allocate more funding to securing the country's borders.

Further hampering efforts to collect accurate data, millions of Central Asians travel each year to Russia and Turkey as migrant workers. "How do you tell the difference between someone who is going to Turkey for work or to go to Syria for jihad?" Tynan said.

According to estimates from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London, Uzbeks — both citizens of Uzbekistan and ethnic Uzbeks from other countries — comprise the largest group of Central Asian foreign fighters currently in Syria.

Indeed, radical Islamism has long posed an all-defined threat to the region's authoritarian regimes. "The Islamic State represents a romantic call to justice for many who have become disenchanted with the corruption and authoritarianism of Central Asia's leaders," Tynan said.

One doesn't have to look far to see why the call of radical Islamism might be appealing to the region's residents. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are governed by authoritarian rulers. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are notoriously corrupt, weak states. Tajikistan's five-year civil war in the 1990s left more than 50,000 people dead. Kyrgyzstan experienced popular revolutions in revolutions in 2005 and 2010, each of which resulted in regime change but failed to alter the

country's corrupt and fractured political system. In 2010, violence in southern Kyrgyzstan broke out between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks, which left 420 dead — mostly Uzbeks — and 80,000 displaced. Kazakhstan has vast reserves of oil and gas, but the political system is autocratic, and the country's rural population faces widespread poverty.

When that discontent has been channeled toward radical Islamism, Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's authoritarian leader, has tended to respond violently. Following a series of car bombings in 1999 that left 16 dead and 120 wounded in Tashkent, the capital, Karimov blamed — with little proof — the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a militant Islamist group that aimed to overthrow the government of Uzbekistan and establish a caliphate in Central Asia. Karimov used the incident to eliminate political opposition and consolidate his rule.

When Uzbek security forces in 2005 fired into a crowd of protesters, the demonstrators were branded by the government as affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamic Sunni group banned in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as a terrorist organization. Hizb ut-Tahrir has denied that label but still advocates for its goal of establishing a caliphate.

Some of the old players in Central Asia's Islamist scene are now joining up with the Islamic State. "Central Asia's historical terrorist groups are either losing members or swearing allegiance to the Islamic State," says Esen Usubaliev, the director of Prudent Solutions, a think tank in Kyrgyzstan, and a consultant with the Kyrgyz government.

The most prominent example is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in October.

With this new threat of radical Islam looming over Uzbekistan and Central Asia, observers are concerned that Karimov and other leaders will exploit the specter of the Islamic State to justify another crackdown on dissent. "We are probably looking at security responses that will breach human rights," Tynan said. "As a result, the communities most likely to be sympathetic with the extremist message are likely to be pushed even more in that direction."

"There needs to be room for the expression of ideas, otherwise movements go underground and can turn to violence," said Shahram Akbarzadeh, a professor of Middle East and Central Asia Studies at Deakin University.

Or, as Tynan puts it: "The biggest threat to Central Asia is Central Asia itself."