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CONCEPTS OF ISLAM AND ITS POLITICIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract:

Islam has been fundamental to the life of Central Asia for more than a millennium. The Central Asian region has, in its turn, played an invaluable role in Islamic history. Many Muslim scholars, spiritual leaders, and dynasties originated from this region and contributed much to the development of Islamic sciences, culture, and civilization. The last three decades have been marked by the resurgence of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia after the long seventy-year destruction and suppression of religious institutions, educational venues, and Islamic consciousness by the Soviet regime. Inasmuch as this religious resurgence is having a considerable impact on the personal and social lives of Central Asian Muslims, the issue of political Islam has become one of the most debated and controversial in political and academic circles, as well as in the expert community
and in the media. Although it seems implausible to deny the threat of radical political Islam in Central Asia, we cannot ignore the fact that this threat can be employed and exacerbated by some power-holding groups to their own advantage. So, it is necessary to analyze political Islam and the Islamic resurgence in Central Asia in general in a more nuanced fashion. It seems often that "insurgent Islamism" or "creeping radicalism" have become catch-all expressions for conventional threats and fears in Central Asia. Security-obsessed assessments turn out to be not only stereotyped, but also misleading, since they prevent us from understanding the region's real problems

Keywords: Central Asia, Soviet regime, Central Asian Muslims, Uzbekistan, political Islam, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek, terrorist, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, political Islam.

INTRODUCTION. The five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, face an ongoing terrorist threat from their nationals who have travelled abroad to join groups affiliated to both the Islamic State (IS). In 2019, IS continued to inspire its supporters and sympathisers, including self-radicalised individuals and various home-grown sleeper cells, to mount attacks in and beyond the region. Meanwhile, IS affiliated Central Asian groups remain active in Syria and Afghanistan and have strengthened their online presence by diversifying their propaganda tactics. In the Syrian conflict zone, where countries have grappled with myriad challenges, including how to deal with the wives and children of detained or deceased IS fighters seeking to return home, Central Asian states have proactively initiated a series of large-scale repatriations of their citizens.

THE MAIN SCIENTIFIC PART. Political Islam: an overview of the notion Disagreement persists as to whether political Islam is an exclusively modern political phenomenon or is indebted to long-standing Islamic religious commitments. In actual fact, both in theory and in practice, Islam has proven resistant to secularization. Furthermore, as Jocelyne Cesari notes, modernization did not lead to the privatization of religion in a Muslim context, but instead has led to the politicization of Islam. However, this is not because Islam does not separate religion and politics, as classic orientalist discourse argues (which, by the way, is historically false), but because Islamic tradition got integrated into modern nation-state building a er the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Simply put, political Islam embraces a political approach to Islam. Conventionally, political Islam is de ned as "a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives." On the one hand, a number of analysts emphasize the oppositional character of political Islam, which implies that political Islam is a religiously based political opposition to the state, or else they "attempt to link

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religion and politics by way of resisting the government". On the other hand, political Islam is conceptualized more broadly as a "nationalization of Islamic institutions and personnel under state ministries," or as the "usage of Islamic references in political competition by both state actors and opponents." It is noteworthy that the goals of political Islam, above all Islamizing domestic legislation, have been co-opted by some political regimes, for example in Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, Malaysia or Indonesia. On the whole, political Islam is a complex phenomenon and should not be seen as a single movement or ideology. Islamist trends can range from left-leaning protest movements to ultraconservative ones aiming to have social control over morality. Also, political Islamist groups and trends vary in their attitudes towards existing political regimes, ranging from quietism and obedience to a desire to be a rival participant in politics and, in extreme cases, to engaging in militant violence. While some political Islamist groups are willing to work within "un-Islamic" political systems, some propagate radicalism. To sum up, "political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam an authoritative status in political life" (G. Denoeux. 2002).

An overview of political Islam is needed to indicate the one-sided and pejorative understandings of political Islam being spread in Central Asia. As John Esposito underlines, the West has a wrong and harmful tendency to treat "political Islam as a global threat similar to the way that Communism was perceived." A similar, and even more essentialist approach, is observable in post-Soviet countries, particularly in the most authoritarian Central Asian countries, an approach that emerged the tragic advent of political Islam in Uzbekistan.

In an atmosphere of severe political, economic, and social crises, coupled with an ideological and ideational vacuum caused by the collapse of the official ideology, many Central Asian Muslims began to perceive Islam as the only alternative to communism and other political systems or ideologies. "Early political Islam" emerged in some parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan under these circumstances at the beginning of 1990s. These societies were "culturally Muslim" but had been deprived of a formal Islamic education system and Islamic intellectual life for seventy years. However, political Islam, being either a popular (and not elitist) movement or an ideology, needs to have more or less solid intellectual and societal underpinnings. For example, in Turkey, Milli Gorus and its affiliated groups, and many other conservative Muslim groups; the numerous o shoots of the Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brotherhoods; the Pakistani group Jama'at-i Islami, and many others, have all moulded Muslim public opinion in their countries for decades. On the contrary, post-Soviet Central Asia was post-atheistic. Furthermore, Central Asian Muslims' very own lifeworlds could be characterized a er the seven-decades of Sovietism as "amnesiac". Lost knowledge, a result of "70-long-Soviet-years," plays an important role in people's reflections on Islam or, more precisely, the "Muslimness" of society. It would thus be more accurate to name the phenomenon of the "advent" of political Islam in Central Asia in the early 1990s as early political Islam. Early political Islam can be conceptualized as a response to the legitimation crisis of the incumbent regimes. e deteriorating economic situation, corruption, the different speeds of regional development, and the small number of representatives from the Fergana region in the upper echelons of power, could induce some groups of believers to raise their voices against these injustices by appealing to Islamist slogans. However, it appears that many people followed the Islamist appeal out of emotion even without knowing the basic postulates of Islam. In general, early political Islam was driven by the euphoria that emerged a er the collapse of the Soviet system. Specifically, Muslim activists. and organizations were heavily influenced by the atmosphere of politicization during the late Soviet years and the first years of independence. Even the Islamic concept of dawat (mission) "does not necessarily embrace the propaganda of Islam or Islamic values (...) the concept was used to convey an even more political message". We cannot overlook the impact of the power struggle between competing regional clans (clan politics). Noteworthy is the fact that the Fergana region in Uzbekistan became a stronghold also for the secular oppositional Unity party. Although a combination of factors ignited political Islam within the dominant oppositional discourse in the Fergana regions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, we argue that the main reason it emerged was the political crisis, or, at least, the incumbent regime's lack of legitimation, which can be conceptualized as a "weakness of state." But the oppositional political Islam of the 1990s was geographically very limited. So, arguments about a sweeping political Islam or a creeping Islamic revolution, even applied to the local level in the Fergana region, are highly speculative.

Since it was routed from Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State (IS) has enhanced its presence to other parts of the world, including Asia and Africa, by attracting new recruits and exporting its ideology and

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tactics as it seeks to transition from a pseudostate to waging a global insurgency on several fronts (Claire Parker. 2019). In these efforts, IS' core leadership has shifted emphasis towards establishing clandestine sleeper cells and inspiring attacks in regions where it has not been previously active, including Central Asia. IS-claimed attacks in Central Asia in recent years have mostly involved self-radicalised individuals and terrorist sleeper cells conducting unsophisticated attacks, such as ramming vehicles into crowds in public spaces and stabbings[1]. In 2019, pro-IS networks in the region demonstrated a growing capacity to execute high-impact attacks, mainly on hard targets such as military installations. On November 6, 2019, a group of masked militants, at least five of whom were armed with automatic rifles, attacked a border outpost in Tajikistan's western Rudaki district, along its border with Uzbekistan. The attack left at least 17 people dead, including 15 militants, a border guard and a police officer. Subsequent reports indicated a further five security officers were killed. Tajik authorities said an IS cell comprising nine men, 11 women, and 13 children (aged between 4 and 15 years), were involved, including two brothers. Police have thus far detained at least five suspects. 500 Media reports also indicated one of the attackers previously served as a soldier at the outpost, and likely had inside knowledge of the facility and its surroundings. The attackers may have targeted the security checkpoint to seize weapons, in order to stage future attacks on other prominent targets in Tajikistan.

According to reports, several of the perpetrators had also lived in the same neighborhood in the northern city of Istarawshan, which highlights IS' exploitation of kinship and social ties among its followers to instigate them to violence. Instances of kinship-based terrorism have spiked around the world as well as in Tajikistan. Previously in July 2018, individuals from common family and friendship circles, participated in an IS-inspired attack on foreign cyclists in the country's Danghara district. In May 2019, a group of IS-linked prisoners, armed with knives, also stabbed to death three prison guards and five inmates during a riot at a high-security prison in the Vahdat district of Tajikistan. Other prisoners were taken hostage, while the jail's medical facilities were also fired upon during the mêlée. Security officials said 24 members of an IS-linked cell were killed and a further 25 arrested in a subsequent reprisal operation, which restored order. IS claimed the attack via its online *Al-Naba* publication, characterising the attackers as "soldiers of the caliphate". By claiming such attacks, which demonstrate the group's apparent potency in infiltrating high security facilities such as prisons, IS seeks to reap publicity and recruitment advantages. Overall, however, Islamist terrorist groups have a limited foothold within most parts of Central Asia, despite seeking to increase their ideological and operational presence[2]. Yet as IS struggles to maintain its relevance in the post-caliphate era, it could seek to instigate more attacks on both soft and hard targets in the region.

While Islamist networks have a limited presence domestically, the region is a significant contributor of foreign fighters to the Middle East theatre. Estimates indicate between 2,000-5,000 Central Asians have migrated to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq over the last decade, the majority being Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek nationals[3]. Many have since been killed in battle, while some have relocated to other conflict zones, or returned to their home countries. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the authorities arrested two Kyrgyz citizens who attempted to enter the country along its border in the south-western Batken region in May 2021. Both had reportedly participated in armed conflict in Syria. State border guards also found Kalashnikov bullets in their possession during the arrests.

In Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) remains resilient, despite suffering a series of setbacks following intense fighting with the Afghan military, the U.S. led coalition forces, and the Taliban, including in its major stronghold in eastern Nangarhār province (Seldin Jeff. 2019). The group's resilience is due partly to its ability to forge alliances with other local and regional militant networks.

[1] Before 2018, IS did not claim any attacks in Central Asia, given the region was not a high priority for the group's central leadership. Instead, IS' propaganda efforts in the region were primarily focused on recruiting Central Asian fighters to bolster its ranks in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict theatre, where its networks faced an onslaught from coalition forces. The recent IS-inspired attacks in Central Asia have been confined to Tajikistan. Socio-economic issues and a fragile security environment in the country have provided fertile ground for extremist groups in their outreach efforts. Hundreds of Tajik nationals are also known to have travelled to join IS in the Middle East theatre.

[2] Since the early 2000s, Central Asian countries designated countering terrorism and extremism as one of their top security priorities in response to earlier Islamist inspired episodes of violence, and adopted a 'zero-tolerance approach' in their military, security and law-enforcement responses against the threat. These efforts have significantly curbed the infiltration of terrorist groups in the region.

[3] Studies suggest between 80 to 90 percent of the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek nationals who travelled to the Middle East to join IS were radicalised and recruited while working as foreign labourers in Russia. See section on Diaspora Radicalisation by IS.

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Vol. 17, December,2022
ISSN: 2749-361X

DISCUSSION. In this regard, reports indicate that Sayvaly Shafiev (a.k.a. Muʿāwiyah or Jalolobodi), a Tajik national, has emerged in 2019 as leader of the main Central Asian unit of 200 fighters within the ISK umbrella. Shafiev is also believed to be a member of the ISK executive council, or *shura,* and is known to have recruited other Tajik fighters for ISK as well as taking part in online fundraising activities (United Nations Security Council. 2019).

IS also continues to radicalize and conduct recruitment operations among the Central Asian diaspora migrant communities abroad, including in Russia, where an estimated 5 million Central Asians reside, many as migrant workers, as well as in Turkey and parts of Western Europe. In March 2019, a Swedish court sentenced D Dāwiḏ Idrisson, a 46-year old Uzbek national who had been living legally in Sweden since 2008, to seven years in prison for plotting to carry out a bomb attack in Stockholm, after being radicalized by IS propaganda on online social networks. Investigations revealed that Idrisson had joined an IS-channel on Telegram and gained access to bomb-making manuals. Another Uzbek, Bakhtiyor Umarov, was also convicted in the same case, of financing IS activities and received a six-month jail sentence, although he was cleared of charges of plotting an attack. Separately on 11 February 2019, a court in Russia also jailed Bakhtiyor Mahmudov and Zafarjon Rahmatov, both Tajik citizens, for 15 years, for plotting to blow up a train and a shopping mall in Moscow. The cell reportedly operated under the instructions of Tojiddin Nazarov (Abu Osama Noraki), a leader of IS' Tajik unit in Syria. In comparison to the recent past, however, such incidents are on the decline. Between 2016-2017 there was an unprecedented surge in terrorist attacks perpetrated by Central Asians across several major cities in Europe, Asia and North America, including Bishkek, Istanbul, Stockholm, Saint Petersburg, and New York. These attacks mostly involved self-radicalised diaspora members and Central Asian IS operatives formerly based in Syria. Given that many in the Central Asian diaspora feel a sense of marginalisation, social exclusion, and alienation in their host countries, terrorist groups have exploited these vulnerabilities to radicalise some individuals through their online propaganda.

Al-Qāʿidah linked Central Asian groups in Syria and Afghanistan Although Central Asian militant groups aligned with al-Qāʿidah have not carried out an attack in the region since a suicide car bomb attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan in August 2016, they remain operationally more capable than their IS-linked counterparts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In Syria, two Central Asian units – Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB) – have been fighting under the umbrella of the al-Qāʿidah linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)[4]. In early 2019, HTS seized control of Idlib, a province located in northwest Syria, in a series of dramatic advances and established the prototype of a caliphate over an estimated three million people. While more recently, HTS has come under severe military pressure from the Assad regime and its ally Russia in Syria, both KTJ and KIB have played a prominent role in defending HTS' positions in Idlib, as well as in provinces such as Hama and Latakia. KTJ is reported to have up to 500 fighters, comprising mainly ethnic Uzbeks (United Nations Security Council. 2019). While part of the HTS jihadist alliance, the group publicly renewed its oath of allegiance to Al-Qāʿidah in January 2019[5]. In anticipation of a possible government offensive into Idlib, HTS has also developed several highly-trained 'commando' units within jihadist factions fighting under its hierarchy, including within KTJ and KIB. For this purpose, it has hired Malhama Tactical, a private jihadist mercenary group currently led by a Russian-born militant, "Ali Shishani".

Leadership Transition in Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) On 12 April 2019, KTJ announced the resignation of its founding leader, Sirojiddin Mukhtarov, a Kyrgyzstan national also known as "Abu Saloh". While the group said in a statement that Abu Saloh had relinquished the position on his own accord to successor "ʿAbd Al-ʿazīz", his resignation has left many observers puzzled, given that it is a rare phenomenon amongst jihadist networks. One explanation mooted is Abu Saloh's wish to escape impending surgical airstrikes by Russia on KTJ's sanctuaries in Idlib, as a precursor to his ultimately going into hiding. Abu Saloh has been on Russia's most wanted list of terrorists since the 2017 Saint Petersburg Metro bombing, which he allegedly orchestrated. Despite his resignation, Abu Saloh remains a hard-line supporter of Al-Qāʿidah and the most influential Central Asian jihadist ideologue, particularly in the online domain. Given that he was largely credited as the mastermind behind several high

[4] With up to 15,000 fighters in its ranks, HTS is now the most powerful jihadist coalition in Syria and has perhaps the largest concentration of armed jihadists ever assembled in one place. Like IS, HTS seeks to topple the Syrian regime and establish an Islamic state.

[5] This highlights that militant units within HTS maintain some degree of independence, likely due to ideological affinity or tactical considerations. It also reveals that despite the al Nusra Front, HTS' predecessor, announcing it has cut off ties with al-Qāʿidah, personal and ideological ties between the two groups persist.

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profile and sophisticated attacks previously attributed to the group, it is unclear how the leadership transition will impact its operational capabilities and priorities going forward.

KTJ's Shifting Propaganda Tactics since December 2018, KTJ's followers have created several Instagram pages, and gradually increased their propaganda activities on social media. This is believed to be the group's first foray onto Instagram - it previously, produced and disseminated audio and video propaganda on its YouTube Al-channels and blogging site, written in Uzbek. By shifting onto Instagram, KTJ may be attempting to reach out to a more youthful demographic, including teenagers, as it seeks to expand its recruitment operations, particularly given Instagram is the most popular social-media platform among Central Asian youth. KTJ has also shifted much of its propaganda efforts onto encrypted messaging tools, including Telegram, making it more challenging for security agencies monitoring their activities. *Katibat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB) - Anti-Kurdish Narrative* following the death of its founder, Akmal Dzhurabaev, in 2017, Ubaydullo Muradolu ugli, a Tajik national also known as "Abū Yūsuf Muhojir", assumed leadership of KIB, another Al-Qāʿidah affiliated Central Asian group whose main operations are in Syria. The group's military commander, "Saʿīd Abu Ayyūb", has also appeared in a number of online propaganda videos, although very little is known about him. KIB also maintains a division of nearly 50 fighters inside Afghanistan, where it fights alongside the Taliban against Afghan security forces. Both of KIB's Syrian and Afghan branches pledged allegiance to the Taliban, a move likely designed to accord itself more legitimacy to attract more Central Asian recruits. On 18 October 2019, KIB leader Abū Yūsuf Muhojir also released a statement on the group's Telegram channel, praising Turkey's recent operation against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, which he described as liberating Syrian Sunni Muslims from "Kurdish occupation and oppression". The comments represent an apparent shift in stance, given that the group's previous propaganda mainly targeted the Assad regime, Iran and Russia, which have conducted several offensives against jihadist insurgent groups in Syria. In stoking anti- Kurdish sentiments, KIB likely considers the buffer zones created by Turkey, subsequent to its brief incursion into Syria in October 2019, a potential safe haven for the group, particularly in the event Idlib falls to the Syrian regime and the HTS alliance collapses.

Other AQ-linked groups Aside from KIB, other Al-Qāʿidah linked Central Asian groups based in Afghanistan, including the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), also operate under the banner of the Taliban and rely on it for sanctuary, protection, training and strategic oversight. In early 2019, Central Asian fighters from KIB, IJU and the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) actively participated in the Taliban's annual spring offensive against government forces. Meanwhile the IMU has splintered, following the Taliban's decision to execute the group's leader in 2015 as punishment for declaring its affiliation to IS, and its fighters are now believed to be dispersed around Afghanistan. The Jamaat Ansarullah, which is headed by Asliddin Davlatov, is reported to have up to 30 militants, mainly comprising Tajiks. On 27 April 2019, Afghan security forces also killed three JA fighters and wounded four others in Badakhshān Province, where the group has its base of operations.

THE RESULT. Anti-Terror Operations In 2019, Central Asian states have scaled up their responses against terrorist and extremist activities. There have been dozens of arrests of terrorists and several attacks have also been disrupted. In May 2019, prison authorities in Kyrgyzstan revealed that the number of convictions in the country for terrorism and extremist activities increased five-fold from 100 to 550, while the number of prisoners held in closed correctional facilities went up three times in the past seven years. In Tajikistan, two terrorist plots were disrupted, and 97 terrorist suspects arrested by security forces between January and July 2019. Governments have also taken steps to counter extremist activity online. In Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) identified and blocked nearly 4,700 websites with extremist content since early 2019, while in July, Uzbek authorities banned over 40 websites, Facebook pages, YouTube and the Telegram channels in the Uzbek language deemed to carry extremist content. *Central Asian Approach to IS Returnees* Since the start of 2019, three Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan – have separately brought back a total of 899 nationals, including 595 Kazakhs, 220 Uzbeks and 84 Tajiks from the Iraq-Syria conflict zone. Most returnees were women and children. In the case of Tajikistan, the state only repatriated children (Abdirasulova Aziza and Kabak Dmitry. 2019). Further, the authorities in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have publicly committed to bringing back the remaining groups of 171 Uzbek and 575 Tajik citizens still residing in Syria. However, Turkey's October 2019 offensives in northern Syria against Kurdish-led forces have complicated these plans. Kyrgyz officials have also been in discussions with their Iraqi counterparts to possibly evacuate 55 women and 78 minors. For its part, the Turkmenistan government has previously denied media reports of the presence of 360 Turkmens in the Syria conflict.

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ISSN: 2749-361X

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have adopted similar approaches in dealing with their returnee nationals. Each has framed these efforts, mainly involving women and child returnees, as a "humanitarian rescue operation". In its public messaging, the governments have highlighted the plight of women and children left in limbo in overcrowded makeshift camps and detention facilities in Syria[6]. After being repatriated by the authorities, the returnees were put through a short 'adaptation' process, received medical treatment and psychological therapy, legal and material support, and religious counseling. They were subsequently reintegrated into their respective communities.

In contrast, repatriated adult males largely faced immediate arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. Some women returnees, regarded as a security threat, were also convicted. For instance, in Kazakhstan, 55 repatriated adult returnees, including 12 women, were sentenced to imprisonment. Although repatriated women were not imprisoned in Uzbekistan, court restrictions have been placed on their freedom of movement for up to five years, depending on their roles and lengths of stay in Syria. In all three countries, the process of re-socialization is expected to last for years under close monitoring by local authorities and law enforcement[7].

CONCLUSION. Instabilities in the Iraq-Syria and Afghanistan conflict theatres continue to provide conditions which IS and AQ-linked groups can exploit. Central Asian militancy will continue to evolve in tandem with the agendas of IS, Al-Qāʿidah, and the Taliban. In this regard, it is unlikely that Central Asian militant groups will divert their activities from the core conflict zones to their home countries in the near future. In their propaganda outreach, Al-Qāʿidah linked Central Asian groups in Syria have repeatedly called on their supporters and sympathisers to travel to the conflict zone and raise funds for militant activities there. These activities are likely to continue, though on a smaller scale going forward. Further, if a dissolution of HTS' jihadist alliance materialises, under the overwhelming political and military pressure exerted by Turkey, Syria and Russia, some hard-line factions could also regroup under Al-Qāʿidah's global banner and start launching attacks beyond the Syrian conflict zone. It could also trigger a broader movement of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) across Syria and the surrounding regions. While ISK in Afghanistan has attracted fighters from Central Asia, its activities remain centred on ensuring its survival, following its recent operational setbacks. However, with IS Central calling for revenge attacks for the lost caliphate, it could still seek to inspire more attacks in the Central Asian region, involving self-radicalised individuals, family networks and sleeper cells. The recurrent prison uprisings in Tajikistan have also highlighted that radicalisation within the penitentiary system is a growing concern for the authorities. The incidents put the efficacy of the country's prison security under the spotlight, highlighting the need for effective de-radicalisation programmes in prisons. Both IS and Al-Qāʿidah linked groups will likely also continue to attempt to exploit vulnerabilities within the Central Asian diasporas abroad. Central Asian governments will need to develop long-term strategies to address the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment among their diaspora and migrant communities abroad. This should include cross-border collaboration with countries hosting significant Central Asian diasporas. Moreover, with militant groups appearing to expand their outreach efforts online, state responses need to go beyond banning various websites to incorporate effective counter-narratives against online extremist propaganda.

[6] The involvement of women and children in jihadist networks has an inter-generational impact. Women who adhere to IS ideology may seek to radicalise their children or others. Child recruits ensure a militant group's long-term operational and ideological viability, given they are the potential fighters and leaders of tomorrow.

[7] Although, in these three countries, public sentiment is welcoming of children, there is some reported skepticism towards women returnees. Stigmatizing attitudes towards women may leave them vulnerable to re-radicalization. As such, the states need to work closely with various local community and religious institutions to enhance reintegration efforts directed at women returnees.

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