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# Policy Report

The current state of  
participation of Central  
Asian nationals in the  
activities of terrorist  
organizations in  
Afghanistan

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## **The current state of participation of Central Asian nationals in the activities of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>**

The radical change in the situation in Afghanistan, brought about by the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021, raised the question of the further development of the jihadist terrorist movements in the region, as well as the participation of citizens of Central Asian countries. Experts' assessments, made immediately after the fall of Kabul, that Central Asia would be the target of direct coercive pressure from international groups, which would receive Taliban protection and funding, have not yet come true.

The reason was the change in the status of the Taliban from an insurgency into a state-building force. However, this does not mean that the Taliban itself is not undergoing complex processes related to its two development vectors - one focused on Afghan interests and the other focused on continuing the jihad.

Moreover, the Taliban itself is under challenging relations with other regional and international terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, Jamaat Ansarullah, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, etc. The Taliban is forced to cooperate or provide protection, whereas, it is in war with others such as ISKP and IMU. All this creates space for the development of processes in which citizens of the Central Asian countries can participate, especially since the threat of disseminating the ideas of radical Islam in the region continues to be relevant.

### **The Taliban's ambivalent relationship with Islamic terrorist groups**

One of the key factors in assessing the prospects of increased participation of citizens of Central Asian countries in terrorist groups based in Afghanistan is the factor of further ways of development of the Taliban movement. Throughout the history of Taliban development, it has been closely associated with numerous terrorist groups operating in Pakistan and Kashmir, Xinjiang, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.

After the formation of the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in 1996, when the Taliban controlled 95% of the Afghan territory, this public entity became an important part of the so-called «Islamic International», acting on the axis of «Afghanistan - Kosovo - Bosnia - Philippines - Chechnya». Within this axis, fighters were recruited, trained, and rotated.

Many foreign terrorists have found refuge in Afghanistan. In particular, the headquarters of the «Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan» (IMU) was in

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Kandahar, from where terrorist actions against the countries of Central Asia were planned.

Areas of Kabul, Vazir Akbar Khan, and Shahrinaw have become the home base of Chechen militants. They were home to 250 to 300 Chechen families who were fighting against the Northern Alliance in the provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, and near Mazar-i-Sharif. The number of Chechen fighters was estimated at 300-700.<sup>2</sup>

In 1997, the ideologues of the Uighur terrorist group Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) Hassan Mahsum and Abudukadir Yapuchan and their supporters took refuge in Afghanistan. Until 2001 ETIM was stationed in a fortified area in the Tora Bora Mountains. ETIM fighters were trained in camps near Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kunduz, Herat, Kandahar, Shibergan and Wardak. The Uighurs joined the «Chinese Battalion of the Turkestan Army», numbering up to 320 militants, as part of the Taliban armed forces.

The Taliban also had close relations with Arab terrorists and, above all, al-Qaeda, which actively supported the Taliban in its confrontation with the Northern Alliance. It was the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, organized by Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who had taken refuge in the Taliban, that led to the US military operation and the overthrow of the Taliban.

The Taliban continued to actively cooperate with international terrorist organizations between 2001 and 2021 when it led military operations against the forces of the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, as well as the US and its allies. However, after the return to power in August 2021 and the restoration of so called “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (IEA) the unambiguous line of the Taliban to close cooperation with international terrorist organizations became less obvious, this was due to the Taliban’s desire to gain official recognition from the international community as the new authorities of Afghanistan. Thus, a certain ambivalence has emerged in the Taliban’s strategic line, opening up opportunities to attract jihadists from Central Asia.

On the one hand, the Taliban has officially given security assurances to the international community and its neighbours. On the 15th of September 2021, Afghanistan’s foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi stated that the Taliban governing the country remained committed to not allowing militants to use their territory to launch attacks.<sup>3</sup> This was prompted by the Taliban’s desire to gain international recognition and access to foreign financial assistance and investment, which are essential for social and political stability in Afghanistan. On the other hand, since coming to power, the Taliban have not

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<sup>2</sup> Another Chechen trace, 07.23.2002. Izvestiya. <https://iz.ru/news/264795>

<sup>3</sup> Minister pledges Taliban govt won’t allow militant attacks by Kathy Gannob, September 15, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-cabinets-taliban-militant-groups-3652ae786079637a56a4edff5063fe5f>

broken off relations with those terrorist organizations with which they previously had partnerships.

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri continued to take refuge in Kabul until July 31, 2022, when he was eliminated by a US drone strike. In addition, Dr. Amin-ul-Haq, a major Al-Qaeda player in Afghanistan who was in charge of Osama Bin Laden's security in Tora Bora, returned to Afghanistan on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August to his native Nangarhar province after it fell to the Taliban. Dr. Amin became close to Osama Bin Laden in the 80s when he worked with Abdullah Azzam in Maktaba Akhidmat.<sup>4</sup> In October 2021, the son of Osama bin Laden Abdullah secretly visited Afghanistan and met with officials from the Taliban government.<sup>5</sup> According to Afghan opposition sources, al-Qaeda forces in the Indian subcontinent began to move freely in Afghanistan after the Taliban returned to power.

The Taliban opted to maintain ties with Al-Qaeda despite an agreement with the US concluded on 29 February 2020 in Doha (Qatar), under which they undertook not to allow any of its members, other individuals, or groups, including Al-Qaeda, to use Afghan territory to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.<sup>6</sup>

Nor have they severed ties with China's security-threatening Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Pakistan's Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). As the Taliban relies on Chinese investment and financial assistance to solve their economic problems, it removed Uyghur militants from an area near Afghanistan's border with China in September-October 2021.<sup>7</sup>

However, according to Afghan opposition sources, Taliban cooperation with Uighur terrorists continues. Haji Furkan, the leader of ETIM, was among the 16 terrorist group leaders who arrived in Kabul on 20 August 2022 and spent three days at the Haji Afzal residence of the Haqqani Network. There they met with Mr. Sirajuddin Haqqani, Head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Taliban authorities, and agreed with him to redeploy 50% of the personnel of their armed units to the northern regions of Afghanistan bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan within 6 months.<sup>8</sup>

As for the TTP, they were able to create shelters on the Afghan part of the border with Pakistan in the area of the «Durand line», most likely with the consent of the Afghan Taliban. The TTP has sworn allegiance to the current Taliban supreme leader Mullah Haybatullah Akhundzadeh. TTP militants take

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<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/bsarwary/status/1432254182468333568?lang=en>

<sup>5</sup> گزارش شورای امنیت سازمان ملل درباره سفر پسر بن لادن به افغانستان/  
<https://8am.media/un-security-council-report-on-bin-ladens-sons-visit-to-afghanistan/>

<sup>6</sup> Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America, February 29, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-uyghurs-china/31494226.html>

<sup>8</sup> طالبان ۱۶ عضو رهبری گروه‌های خارجی را در شمال شرق مستقر کردند  
<https://8am.media/the-taliban-deployed-16-members-of-the-leadership-of-foreign-groups-in-the-northeast/>

refuge in Afghan shelters after attacks on Pakistani soldiers and civilians. The presence of rear bases allows them to expand the geography of their terrorist activities in Pakistan. Now they operate not only in the Pashtun-populated province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but in the province of Baluchistan, in the region of Kulichak, where a subdivision of Zhob province was established in 2023.<sup>9</sup> Islamabad's attempts to broker a lasting ceasefire with the TTP through the Afghan Taliban had only a short-term effect. The leaders of the Afghan Taliban may be playing a double game, using the TTP to pressure Pakistan and stop its efforts to build engineering facilities along the «Durand Line», which is not recognized by Afghans. It must be said that all of this contradicts the 2021 promise to Islamabad that the Taliban government will not allow the TTP to use Afghan territory for operations against Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it is obvious that the Taliban is not completely breaking with jihadist ideas, as also indicated by the statement made by the Taliban leader Mullah Khaybutullah Akhundzadeh on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2023 at a meeting with the head of the movement's directorates responsible for human resources, in which he pointed out that «the Taliban soldiers must wear armour and be ready to extend the rule of sharia to the whole world». This was seen by many Afghan, Iranian, and Russian resources as a call for cross-border jihad.<sup>11</sup>

## Taliban and Central Asian terrorist groups

This regard raises the question of the extension of current and future Taliban support for terrorist groups aimed at recruiting Central Asian nationals and spreading jihad to the north. According to available data, the Taliban provide direct support to the Jamaat Ansarullah group and the Tehrik-e Taliban group of Tajikistan, which are mainly composed of Tajik citizens.

The first information reports about the existence of Jamaat Ansarullah appeared in September 2010, when the group claimed responsibility for an explosion in Khujand. In 2011, calls began to appear online on Ansarullah's behalf, including video messages in which members of the group called out Tajiks for jihad. After the ban on the activities of Jamaat Ansarullah in Tajikistan in May 2012, the group launched activity on the Internet to recruit young Tajiks for jihad in Syria, and social networks were filled with appeals on behalf of Ansarullah. On its official website, the group shared news about the

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<sup>9</sup> Pakistani Taliban move into new territories by Zia Ur Rehman, May 03, 2023. DW. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-taliban-move-into-new-territories/a-65503987>

<sup>10</sup> Taliban have reassured won't allow TTP to use Afghan land against Pakistan: Sheikh Rashid, August 23, 2021. DAWN. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1642195>

**11** دستور جدید رهبر طالبان؛ برای «جهاد برون مرزی» آماده شوید

دستور جدید رهبر طالبان برای جهاد برون--62/3951343-بخش-سایت-خوان/<https://donya-e-eqtasad.com/> ۱۴۰۱/۱۲/۲۱:۰۹:۱۲  
مرزی-آماده-شوید

“victories” of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, talked about Tajiks who became “shahids”.

Since the Taliban banned foreign extremist organizations under their control from online propaganda and recruitment in 2020, the spread of Islamist propaganda by such groups on the Internet has significantly decreased<sup>12</sup>. Only in the spring of 2022, Jamaat Ansarullah commander Mehdi Arslan (Mohammad Sharipov) posted a video of the militants of his group on his social network page. One of the group's latest media and social media references was also linked to the January 2023 killing of Abu Omar Tajik, who led about 90 members of the Jamaat Ansarullah in Badakhshan.<sup>13</sup> Together with other terrorist groups leaders Abu Omar was involved in arms and drug smuggling in Badakhshan area and was killed under mysterious circumstances by an unknown group that is likely linked to smugglers or foreign terrorist groups.<sup>14</sup>

Until August 2021, Jamaat Ansarullah militants, also known in Afghanistan as the Tajik Taliban, fought in the ranks of the Afghan Taliban against US and NATO forces, as well as the army of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Jamaat Ansarullah unit of up to 300 people played a crucial role in establishing Taliban power in the districts bordering Tajikistan in the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan.<sup>15</sup> Historically, there are many radical Central Asians in these areas who are ready to return home and try to repeat the success of the Taliban in their homeland.

Moreover, today Tajik militants from Jamaat Ansarullah are actually performing the functions of the Taliban border guard here, which seriously irritates and worries Dushanbe. Jamaat Ansarullah has installed an observation tower on the border to monitor the Tajik territory. The tower also houses sound-amplifying equipment, with the help of which provocative speeches against the Tajik authorities are broadcast.

According to the Afghan opposition, the current leader Jamaat Ansarullah Mawlawi Ibrahim (aka Tajik Motasim Billah) was appointed by the Haqqani Network to command a network of foreign fighters in northern Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> In turn, the commander of Ansarullah Mehdi Arslan created in

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<sup>12</sup> О боевиках из Центральной Азии на территории Афганистана и Сирии. // RATS SCO, 26 January 2023. [https://ecrats.org/ru/security\\_situation/analysis/1965/](https://ecrats.org/ru/security_situation/analysis/1965/)

<sup>13</sup> "One of two": How was Abu Omar Tajik killed?". Sangar. 05.01.2023. <https://sangar.info/en/the/t/one-of-two-how-was-abu-omar-killed>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Are the militants ready to storm?”, Pravda, 11.08.2022. <https://gazeta-pravda.ru/issue/87-31290-11-avgusta-2022-goda/boeviki-gotovy-k-shturmu>

طالبان ۱۶ عضو رهبری گروه‌های خارجی را در شمال شرق مستقر کردند  
<https://8am.media/the-taliban-deployed-16-members-of-the-leadership-of-foreign-groups-in-the-northeast/>  
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistani-taliban-move-into-new-territories/a-65503987>

2022 the Tehrik-e Taliban of Tajikistan (TTT), the number of up to 200 fighters located near the Tajik-Afghan border in Badakhshan. According to some reports, TTT is part of Jamaat Ansarullah.<sup>17</sup>

The question of the Taliban's connection with the «Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan» (IMU) remains open. Until 2015, IMU was in close union with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, in 2015, IMU leaders Usmon Ghazi and Sadullah Urgenchi took an oath to ISIS Head Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>18</sup> Spiritual leader, Sheikh Muhammad Ali, likewise pledged to IS. The main reason for the transition to ISIS was that the Taliban concealed the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar and that the ISIS offered IMU a more ambitious concept of extending influence to the territory of Central Asia.<sup>19</sup>

Since then, IMU has been actively involved in the recruitment and training of Central Asian nationals for ISIS. The main recruitment efforts were in Central Asia and among Central Asian migrant workers. After recruitment, migrants were sent to military training camps in North Waziristan and then to war in Afghanistan or Syria, often with families who settled in ISIS-controlled territories.<sup>20</sup> IMU, as an ally of ISIS, was declared an enemy of the Taliban, who killed a large number of IMU militants during the fighting, including their leader Usman Ghazi and the son of one of the founders of IMU, Tahir Yuldash.<sup>21</sup> However, according to the opposition National Resistance Front, Sheikh Zakir was present at the already-mentioned meeting in Kabul. Acting head of Ministry of Internal Affairs Sirajuddin Haqqani and leaders of 16 terrorist groups had meeting including the head of the IMU. In these meetings, Shaikh Zakir and Abdul Haq from Haji Forqan Network assumed the responsibility of strengthening Al Qaeda and communicating with other branches of the group. After the meeting, he left for the Baharak area in Badakhshan province.<sup>22</sup>

If this information is correct, it is possible that the IMU, or part of its leaders and militants, has again begun to cooperate with the Taliban, which in turn, raises the question of the likely Taliban focus on increasing their

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<sup>17</sup> ۳۱/۰۴/۱۴۰۱ در شمال افغانستان خبر دادند, <https://www.afintl.com/202207226732>

<sup>18</sup> UN: Central Asian fighters are among senior ISIS commanders, October 12, 2015. [Gazeta.uz. https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/](https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/)

<sup>19</sup> Accelerationist Narratives: Involuntary Celibacy by Erica Barbarossa, 27th January 2022. Global Network on Extremism and Technology. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/03/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-enduring-influence-on-is-khurasan/>

<sup>20</sup> UN: Central Asian fighters are among senior ISIS commanders, October 12, 2015. [Gazeta.uz. https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/](https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2015/10/12/un/)

<sup>21</sup> Accelerationist Narratives: Involuntary Celibacy by Erica Barbarossa, 27th January 2022. Global Network on Extremism and Technology. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/03/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-enduring-influence-on-is-khurasan/>

<sup>22</sup> Taliban Relocated Leaders of 16 Foreign Terrorist Groups in Northeastern Afghanistan. September 26, 2022. National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. <https://www.nrfafg.org/en/view-points/northeast.html>

propaganda and recruitment efforts among Uzbek citizens in Central Asia and Russia.

According to the law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan, most of the Central Asian fighters present in Afghanistan are serving in the Taliban as instructors and mercenaries in special units «Shuhado», «Badri», «Mansuri», «Umari» and «Intihori». All of them are members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense and Security of the IEA. Central Asian fighters, inspired by the experience of the Taliban takeover by force, do not hide that their goal is to overthrow the secular regimes of the States of the region.<sup>23</sup>

### **Islamic State – Khorasan Province as a key rival of the Taliban in attracting fighters from Central Asia**

The rival of the Taliban in the field of recruitment of citizens of Central Asia is the branch of the Islamic State «ISIS-Khorasan». The group was formed on January 10, 2015, when six commanders of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan publicly pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The first leader of ISIL-Khorasan was Hafiz Saeed Khan. They were later joined by some warlords from the Afghan provinces of Logar and Kunar, Central Asian militants, primarily from IMU. The eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar became the main base of ISIS-Khorasan.

This organization managed to survive despite devastating attacks from Afghan and international security forces for many years. The previous Afghan regime and the forces of the international coalition stated that in the period from 2015 to 2020, more than 13 thousand militants of the group were killed or captured, including five emirs in a row<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated amazing resilience, having managed to make up for lost strength, expand its geographical presence and increase the number and intensity of operations.

During and after the fall of the former government, about 2-3 thousand supporters of ISKP, including 400 foreign citizens from 14 countries, were released from prison<sup>25</sup>. Among them were senior leaders, commanders, media propagandists of the organization. IS-Khorasan has ceased to be pursued by NATO airstrikes, having gained greater freedom of movement inside Afghanistan, and now seeks to unite many regional groups, including some militants from the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Jamaat Ansarullah, as well as defectors from the Taliban.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/24122>

<sup>24</sup> Shashok L., "Afghanistan is turning into a sanctuary of terrorists", Nezavisimaya gazeta, 15.12.2022. <https://centrasia.org/news.php?st=1671140040>

<sup>25</sup> Jadoon A., Sayed A., Mines A., The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan. CTC Sentinel, Jan 2020, vol. 15, Issue 1, p.37. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>



In addition, ISIS allocates significant resources to its branches in Afghanistan, along with groups in a number of African countries. The trend has been particularly pronounced as IS group comes under intense attack in Syria and the weakening of its affiliates in Southeast Asia, Libya and Egypt. ISIS “core” is intensifying its contacts with the ISKP to help it strengthen its potential, expand recruitment of new members and emphasize its supposed successes through increased propaganda.

ISKP is fundamentally a transnational organization. This is indicated by its very name, where "Khorasan" covers parts of Afghanistan, Iran, Central and South Asia. The goal of the Islamic State is to create a single World Islamic Caliphate with the absorption of the territory of all countries and peoples professing Islam. Unlike its main opponent, the Taliban, which claims only to control the territory of Afghanistan and does not claim any territorial claims to neighbouring countries, ISKP considers the existing national borders in this region illegal and arbitrarily established.

ISKP has demonstrated its ability to conduct operations against the Taliban in a number of areas of Afghanistan. In 2022, its militants carried out 181 attacks in Afghanistan, killing and injuring 1,188 people. In terms of the number of victims, the Afghan branch of the Islamic State was ahead of the offshoots of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (833 and 887, respectively), and only second to the Islamic State in Nigeria (1412 people).<sup>26</sup> These ISKP attacks are part of a set of measures to delegitimize the Taliban regime and prevent recognition of their government internationally. Despite claims by the Taliban of significant success against ISKP in their counter-terrorism operations, deadly attacks, such as the January 11, 2023 suicide bombing outside the Afghan Foreign Ministry, signal an ongoing security crisis in the country.

In the northern direction, the IS-Khorasan group seeks to recreate by force the Maverannahr province, which belongs to the ancient territory north of Amu Darya. In an attempt to attract the attention of local Uzbek and Tajik jihadists, IS-Khorasan claimed on the shelling of border areas of the Central Asian states, which were part of the Islamic State's global operation called «Revenge of the Two Sheikhs».<sup>27</sup> The Islamic State provided an audio message from a representative of the organization, as well as photographs and video recordings of the shelling on April 18, 2022 from the territory of Northern Afghanistan in the direction of the Uzbek city of Termez<sup>28</sup>. The Ministry of

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<sup>26</sup> Mapping the Islamic State. Multimedia Project of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 21.03. 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>

<sup>27</sup> The beginning of this campaign was announced on April 17, 2022 by the representative of the Islamic State Abu Umar al-Muhajir, calling on supporters of the organization to carry out terrorist attacks to avenge the death of the leader of the organization Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Kureishi and the official representative of the group Abu Hamza al-Kureishi.

<sup>28</sup> “The "Islamic State" announced rocket attacks on Uzbekistan from the territory of Afghanistan”. Caravanserai. 19.04.2022. [https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2022/04/19/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/ru/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/04/19/feature-02)

Foreign Affairs of the interim government of Afghanistan denied this information.

It is likely that the statements by IS-Khorasan were a signal for the Uzbek Taliban. In mid-January 2022, Uzbek Taliban units in Afghanistan's Faryab province rebelled against the Taliban's central leadership, opening a rift between them. In this regard, IS-Khorasan is trying to exploit this split to increase fragmentation within the Taliban. It should be noted that IS-Khorasan has been attracting militants from Central Asia for a long time. In particular, the organization has a successful experience in recruiting the commanders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

On May 7, 2022, the IS-Khorasan group also announced the launch of missiles at Tajik military installations along the border with Afghanistan<sup>29</sup>. According to analysts at the Institute for the Study of War, demonstrating that IS-Khorasan is able to carry out attacks against the Tajik government, the organization is trying to encourage Tajik jihadist groups such as Jamaat Ansarullah to switch sides<sup>30</sup>.

### **ISKP's media strategy**

The Islamic State manages to stay afloat, maintaining its image as an international terrorist group, both through the creation of a global network of affiliates and through powerful propaganda. Therefore, the Islamic State attaches the same importance to the activities of the propagandists as the activities of the militants. In competition with other Islamist groups, the Islamic State was able to create the most powerful propaganda message, primarily through the proclamation of the "Caliphate." This allowed the Islamic State to significantly increase the share of Salafi-Jihadist agitation in the network.

Any model of radicalization affects the religious side of the issue, since Islamists appeal precisely to Islamic terms and dogmas, justifying their activities. The danger of propaganda of the Salafi-jihadist ideology is that it is one of the most radical currents of Islam, which presuppose not just infringement of the rights of "non-believers", but also their physical extermination. Even co-religionists who do not share the views of the Islamic State are subject to "remaking". The Islamic State has chosen jihad as the only means of establishing its power - a holy war against all "infidels" for the triumph of their religion. At the same time, the attitude that the very concept of jihad was initially interpreted as a war primarily with one's own doubts, a spiritual war with oneself, a path to one's own spiritual self-improvement is completely rejected.

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<sup>29</sup> "Missile strikes were inflicted on Tajikistan from the side of Afghanistan", 09.05.2022. SNG.TODAY. <https://sng.today/dushanbe/22883-po-tadzhikistanu-so-storony-afganistana-naneseny-raketnye-udary.html>

<sup>30</sup> Peter Mills P., "Islamic State Khorasan Province Expands Attacks beyond Afghanistan", 01.06.2022. The Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-khorasan-province-expands-attacks-beyond-afghanistan>

Of all the offshoots of the Islamic State, its regional division, IS Khorasan, has demonstrated the ability to produce and distribute propaganda, not inferior to the level of propaganda of the Islamic State itself. This is due to the fact that from the second half of 2021, IS-Khorasan seeks both greater regionalization and internationalization of its activities. IS-Khorasan is significantly weaker than the Taliban, so the group seeks to gain authority wherever possible. One of these places was the media space, where IS-Khorasan gave additional impetus to the campaign to recruit militants and incite violence against its enemies.

IS-Khorasan is heavily involved in the Islamic State's global propaganda, notably increasing its international scale in recent years. The main propaganda unit of IS-Khorasan is the al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, which at the end of January 2022 presented its English-language magazine "Voice of Khorasan" with the aim of spreading radical ideas to a wider international audience. The magazine includes original content, translations of past and present statements by Islamic State leadership, and issues of the group's official media bodies that serve to incorporate IS-Khorasan regional propaganda into Islamic State's comprehensive global mission.

The Al-Azaim Foundation has also stepped up its efforts to reach a wider range of ethnic and linguistic groups. If originally IS-Khorasan published materials in Arabic, Pashto and Dari, but recently it has expanded to languages such as Uzbek, Tajik, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Russian, English and Uighur. The main information messages are aimed both at supporting the Islamic State's claim to the self-proclaimed global Sunni caliphate and at undermining the ideological legitimacy of the Taliban. Propaganda materials through the accounts of official media centres, closed forums and accounts of members of the Islamic State reach active supporters, including in Central Asian countries, who further distribute the materials to a large audience. In this regard, not only the content and quality of the materials, but also their widespread and rapid distribution, as well as reaching the target audience, are of great importance in the propaganda activities of jihadists.

In order to intensify propaganda among speakers of Central Asian languages, a Tajik-speaking wing of the official propaganda apparatus of the group called Al-Azaim Tajiks appeared. Another media resource called "Voice of Khorasan" produces media content in Uzbek and actively recruits immigrants from Central Asia to the ranks of IS-Khorasan. In the materials of these publications, the group mainly calls for the fight against the Taliban, who are accused of being a Pashtun-centric organization that oppresses ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks. To increase the number of supporters in the region, IS-Khorasan increasingly emphasizes the Taliban's friendly relations with Central Asia's "tyrannical regimes". Conversely, the group positions itself as a tool for destroying arbitrarily established state borders in Central Asia and reviving the ancient province of Maverannahr.

Anti-Taliban propaganda, in particular, is devoted to two books in Uzbek, printed in Latin alphabet.<sup>31</sup> The first book of the authoritative ideologist of the terrorist organization IS-Khorasan Abu Saad Muhammad Khorasani sets out the reasons why the Taliban are the worst enemies of Islam and indicate the so-called "non-Islamic character" of the Taliban government. The second book talks about the Taliban's slave dependence on China, Russia, the United States, Pakistan and Turkey.<sup>32</sup> The book criticizes the Taliban for their foreign policy and attempts to integrate into the international community, voicing open contempt for the Taliban because of their international diplomatic visits and attempts to improve relations with other countries. In particular, the leadership of the movement is condemned for cooperation with international organizations such as USAID and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Even accepting foreign aid is a controversial aspect for IS-Khorasan, since the group believes that financial support from outside dictates the Taliban's line of conduct. In March 2022, Al-Azaim Tajiks published the book "Why Jihad is a Duty", printed in Tajik in Cyrillic, used in Tajikistan<sup>33</sup>.

In shaping the enemy image, Islamic State's claims also include a Taliban killing of IMU members in 2016, the story of which was originally published in the Islamic State's former main international print online publication, Dabiq magazine, and is available today on major online archiving sites. This plot is actively spreading on Telegram through an audio message from the Uzbek jihadist IS-Khorasan Muhammad Ali Domla, in which he spoke about how the Taliban killed more than 150 Uzbek militants and their families.

A prominent place is occupied by the efforts of the Islamic State of the group aimed at attracting the attention of an extremist Tajik audience, making heroes of jihadists of Tajik origin. The martyrs of the Tajik ethnic group are extolled as examples of courage, devotion and self-sacrifice to the cause of the Islamic State. Thus, many audiovisual propaganda materials prepared by Al-Azim Tajiki and Amak publishers praise Tajik militants who participated in a number of high-profile terrorist acts in Afghanistan and military operations in Syria and Iraq. Such heroic image is actively spreading in the Tajik media and social networks. Some extremist channels on Telegram have launched an audio recording of the Islamic State's operation against Sikhs in Kabul with a photo of the perpetrator of the terrorist act, Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki. This

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<sup>31</sup> Webber L., Valle R. "Islamic State in Afghanistan seeks to recruit Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz". Eurasianet. 17.03.2022. <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-seeks-to-recruit-uzbeks-tajiks-kyrgyz>

<sup>32</sup> "Islamic State Khurasan Province threatens Uzbekistan, Central Asia, and neighboring countries». Special Eurasia. 20.05.2022. [https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/05/05/islamic-state-uzbekistan/#\\_ftn5](https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/05/05/islamic-state-uzbekistan/#_ftn5)

<sup>33</sup> Webber L., Valle R. "Islamic State in Afghanistan Looks to Recruit Regional Tajiks, Inflict Violence Against Tajikistan". The Diplomat. 29.04.2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/islamic-state-in-afghanistan-looks-to-recruit-regional-tajiks-inflict-violence-against-tajikistan/>

media file was widely distributed by Tajik-language Telegram channels, including Al-Azaim Tajiki, Umma Muhammad and Sadoi Sheikh.<sup>34</sup>

The photo of Abu Muhammad al-Tajika was also posted on two different pages of the official newsletter of the Islamic State, Al-Nab, and in the magazine Voice of Khorasan, published by the terrorist group. This is another case when information about Tajik militants has received coverage and promotion at all levels from IS-Khorasan's own propaganda publications to the Islamic State's central media apparatus. Given the increased efforts of IS-Khorasan to promote its activities among extremist Tajiks, it is likely that the group will continue to use Tajik militants and representatives of other ethnic groups to carry out high-profile terrorist attacks in order to continue online propaganda and increase the number of non-Pashtun ethnic groups recruited.

### **Evaluation of recruitment among Central Asian migrant workers**

Of all the international terrorist organizations associated with Afghanistan, ISIS is the most active among Central Asian migrant workers. Millions of migrant workers from Central Asian countries are the most vulnerable group to jihadist propaganda, as they are cut off from the cultural and information environment of their countries of origin.

Today, the main directions of labour migrants from Uzbekistan are Russia (61.5%), Kazakhstan (16.9%), Turkey (6.1%), South Korea (2%), UAE (0.8%).<sup>35</sup> According to the authorities of Tajikistan, in the first six months of 2022, more than 322,000 citizens left the country in search of work.<sup>36</sup> More than 90% of Tajik migrants have temporary work in Russia. Most migrants admit that they go to work in Russia due to the limited labour migration options. Many migrants would like to work in South Korea or in some European country, but this requires a visa. Work can also be found in Kazakhstan, but salaries there are lower than in Russia.

Most of the labour migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are recruited to the terrorist groups in Russia. However, their number is limited comparing to the residence of millions of migrants on the Russian territory. At the peak in 2017 approximately 5 thousand militants from Central Asian countries fought in Syria and Iraqy<sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, most of the poorly educated young people who fall into actual social, cultural, linguistic, religious isolation and live in conditions of huge psychological stress are a very

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<sup>34</sup> Webber L. "Islamic State in Khorasan Province Exploits Tajik Martyrs for Online Recruitment in Central Asia. Jamestown Foundation". Terrorism Monitor, Volume 20, Issue, 14, 2022. <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2075977.html>

<sup>35</sup> "Potential destinations for labor migrants from Uzbekistan have been named." Gazeta.uz, 25.04.2022. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/04/25/migration/>

<sup>36</sup> "Ministry of Labor: The number of Tajiks who went abroad to work has doubled". Radio Ozodi. 27.06.2022. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31960984.html>

<sup>37</sup> Richard Barrett. Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees. // The Soufan Center, October 2017. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

convenient object of religious radical propaganda. On the other hand, terrorist organizations forced to limit their operational activities in Syria directed their efforts to intensify propaganda on the Internet in order to online recruit supporters, including from various diasporas. The rapid uptake of new technologies, including in an immigrant environment, as well as the increasing use of social media, has expanded potential audiences at risk.

According to some researchers, the recruitment mechanism consists of several stages<sup>38</sup>. They are recruited not in mosques, but in places of compact residence at construction sites, markets, in densely populated hostels or remotely. Sometimes extremists meet in person with migrants after preliminary study through social networks, where they find out whether one or another person is ready to share extremist views, whether he expresses radical ideas. By calculating those migrants who express extremist beliefs, recruiters can promise large sums for participating in illegal actions, and to some this proposal may seem very attractive.

Experts note that in Russia, the Islamic State most often uses such messengers as Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp and Skype to recruit into its ranks. Thus, the resonant terrorist act in the St. Petersburg metro in 2017, in which immigrants from Central Asian countries participated, was coordinated through WhatsApp and Telegram, and the emissaries of the Islamic State carried out the management of the activities of all sabotage and terrorist groups planning to carry out terrorist attacks in Russia through Telegram and Internet radio Zello.<sup>39</sup>

Currently, a radicalized group of migrants of Central Asian origin has been seen in various areas of terrorist activities of the Islamic State, including the preparation of terrorist acts, recruitment activities, the dissemination of propaganda by an extremist, and the financing of terrorism. The priority task of the Islamic State of the organization is to create cells where labour migrants from Central Asia are also involved. The recruitment work of the Islamic State is indicated by the activities of one of the leaders of the Islamic State, a citizen of Tajikistan T. Nazarov, who recruited Tajik migrants to a cell of the Islamic State in the Moscow region and in Novosibirsk.<sup>40</sup> The purpose of the cell was to commit sabotage and terrorist acts in these regions using improvised explosive devices, which were planned to be detonated in crowded places, including at the facilities of the Russian Railways.

Infrastructure and industrial facilities were the goal of the Islamic State also in the Kaluga region, where two immigrants from Central Asia planned to set fire to tanks with fuel and lubricants at a chemical plant using an improvised explosive device and incendiary means. Attackers who pledged

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<sup>38</sup> Krupnov A. "Islamic State": propaganda of the group and the mechanism of its spread". Center for the Study of New Communications. Moscow. 2017. 123 p.

<sup>39</sup> "The security forces told what messengers are used by terrorists in the Russian Federation". Habr. 7.07.2017. <https://habr.com/ru/news/373613/>

<sup>40</sup> "FSB detains IS leader who plotted to carry out terrorist attacks in Moscow", Novosibirsk. Russian News Agency TASS. 17.04.2023. <https://tass.com/defense/1605319>

allegiance to the Islamic State planned to travel to the zone of armed conflict in Syria after committing a crime. During the arrest, the criminals put up armed resistance and received fatal wounds from return fire. A laboratory of explosives was found in the secret house of criminals, as well as a ready-to-use powerful improvised explosive device, incendiary checkers, firearms and ammunition.<sup>41</sup>

The Syrian case also involves labour migrants in fundraising for the Islamic State. In March 2023, a supporter of the Islamic State, a native and citizen of one of the Central Asian republics born in 2001, was arrested in the Vladimir region for financing terrorists in Syria. According to investigators, the accused on the Internet contacted a member of a banned organization taking part in terrorist activities in Syria. In the process of communication, the defendant decided to support terrorists and transferred personal funds to buy firearms for militants.

In September 2022, a 24-year-old citizen of one of the Central Asian countries was detained in the Moscow region on charges of distributing propaganda materials about terrorist activities in the Middle East. For indoctrination, he actively used social networks and instant messengers to promote the ideology of the Islamic State among his fellow countrymen in their places of work in Moscow and Voronezh<sup>42</sup>.

The participation of Central Asian migrants in the preparation and implementation of terrorist acts in India and Iran, which are in geographical proximity to Afghanistan, especially draws the attention. Participants in these terrorist operations underwent ideological processing, gained skills in sabotage and terrorist activities, and were co-focused on the preparation and implementation of terrorist attacks. On October 26, 2022, the Islamic State managed to attack the Shiite shrine in Shiraz, which killed 13 people. The attacker turned out to be a citizen of Tajikistan, Komron Subkhoni, nicknamed Abu Aisha al-Umari. He went to work in Moscow three years ago and it is not known how he ended up in Iran. On the website of the Al-Naba edition, his suicide photo with a Kalashnikov assault rifle was posted against the background of the Islamic State flag with the words in his honour: "Brother Abu Aisha al-Umari, who attacked the Mushrik prayer house in the city of Shiraz in southern Iran - may Allah accept him".<sup>43</sup>

In August 2022, a citizen of Uzbekistan, Mashrabhon Azamov, was identified and detained on the territory of Russia, who planned to commit a terrorist act against Nupura Sharma, a representative of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party of India, for speaking out against Islam. While in Turkish territory from April to June 2022, he was recruited by one of the leaders of the Islamic

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<sup>41</sup> "FSB foils IS terror plot targeting chemical facility in Russia's Kaluga Region". Russian News Agency TASS. 17.02.2023. <https://tass.com/defense/1577723>

<sup>42</sup> "FSB detained a native of Central Asia in the Moscow region who involved fellow countrymen in ISIS", Rossiyskaya gazeta, 27.09.2022. <https://rg.ru/2022/09/27/reg-cfo/fsb-zaderzhala-v-moskovskom-regione-urozhenca-centralnoj-azii-vovlekavshego-zemliakov-v-ig.html>

<sup>43</sup> News of the Caliphate. 29.10.2022. An-Naba. <https://i31.co.za/146938/>

State as a suicide bomber. Its ideological processing was carried out remotely through the accounts of the Telegram messenger. As the Hindustan Times notes, an audio version with speeches by the famous Islamic State propagandist Yusuf Tajiki, hosted by the Movarounnahr channel, had a significant influence in the radicalization of M.Asamov.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, he underwent special training as a suicide bomber. He was tasked with leaving for the territory of Russia, issuing the necessary documents and flying to India to commit a terrorist act. As India tightened visa checks for a number of Muslim countries, including Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait and Central Asian republics, the suicide bomber chose a Moscow route to avoid scrutiny.

The facts about the influx of citizens from Central Asia into the ranks of terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan over the past year did not appear in the media. At the same time, according to some estimates, in the pre-pandemic period, about 8 thousand people were recruited by emissaries of terrorist groups and ready to engage in subversive activities<sup>45</sup>. However, the strengthening of control on the borders of countries adjacent to Afghanistan, progress in the fight against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in Syria, including the destruction of iconic figures of armed formations of Central Asian origin, as well as the effective work of law enforcement agencies of the countries of the region, preventing attempts to travel to combat zones conflicts, significantly limited the plans of potential militants. In particular, the Tajik authorities announced that in the first half of 2022, 720 criminal cases related to terrorist and extremist activities were registered in Tajikistan. In turn, Uzbekistan for 6 months of last year repatriated 59 citizens detained abroad on suspicion of having links with militants<sup>46</sup>.

The intelligence agencies in the region also blocked dozens of social media channels that recruited, raised funds for terrorist and extremist groups. Nevertheless, the activity of the Islamic State in the digital space continues to be high. This, in particular, is evidenced by the data of the specially created *ISIS Watch* Telegram channel, which publishes a daily report on how many jihadist channels have been blocked. Monitoring of the messenger shows that in January 2022 the Telegram messenger blocked 25749 terrorist bots and channels, and in January 2023 this figure was 13279.

Governments, internet service providers and social media are trying to contain this deluge of unwanted content. The paradox is that as soon as a channel or social media account is blocked, new ones are created to replace them and so is repeated indefinitely. This indicates a high degree of mobility

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<sup>44</sup> “Indian agencies seek access to Uzbek suicide bomber in Russian custody”. 24.08.2022. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-agencies-seek-access-to-uzbek-suicide-bomber-in-russian-custody-101661307893770.html>

<sup>45</sup> “Portrait of a future terrorist. How young Uzbeks get hooked by extremist recruiters”. 21.02.2022. Center for the Study of Regional Threats. <https://crss.uz/2022/01/21/portret-budushhego-terrorista-kak-molodye-uzbekistancy-popadayut-na-kryuchok-k-verbovshhikam-ekstremistov/>

<sup>46</sup> “About militants from Central Asia in Afghanistan and Syria”. 26.01.2023. Regional antiterrorist structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. [https://ecrats.org/ru/archive/facts\\_of\\_terrorism/1965/](https://ecrats.org/ru/archive/facts_of_terrorism/1965/)



and adaptability of the Islamic State in the information space. As the founder of SecDev Group R.Rohozinsky notes, terrorist and violent extremist ecosystems in the region are small but impactful. While having comparatively limited appeal, they proved to be resilient to government crackdowns, adapting and extending their reach via “amplifier networks”<sup>47</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, Afghanistan maintains its status as a threat to the security of Central Asia and a source of radical Islamist and jihadist ideas among the citizens of the region, despite all the assurances of the Taliban that there will be no threat from Afghan territory to neighbouring countries. This is because the Taliban encounters difficulties eliminating links with international and regional terrorist and jihadist groups for numerous reasons.

Thus, any attempt to sever ties with allied terrorist groups would risk withdrawing to ISIS-Khorasan, and this would seriously change the balance of forces inside Afghanistan towards weakening the Taliban’s authority and capacity to control the country. Nevertheless, even though the Taliban will not sever ties with allied terrorist groups, the latter will eventually demand that the Taliban take more active steps to spread jihad towards Central Asia, Pakistan, and Iran. This may present the Taliban with a decision dilemma, as meeting their demands will complicate further international recognition of the Taliban government and the arrival of large-scale foreign investment.

Under either scenario, the Central Asian countries and their migrant workers will remain a priority target for the recruitment, subversion, and terrorist activities of Islamist groups linked to Afghanistan. In this regard, the Governments of the region need to continue their efforts to create efficient national ideologies, improve the economic well-being of the population, and combat the ideologues of extremism and terrorism created by their networks, including through cooperation with states, where there are large masses of Central Asian migrant workers.

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<sup>47</sup> Outcome document of the webinar “Terrorist Use of the Internet”. 12.03.2021. OSCE Secretariat’s Transnational Threats Department. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/7/483059.pdf>