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The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy

by Thomas F. Lynch III, Michael Bouffard, Kelsey King, and Graham Vickowski



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Cover: Fighters at Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad training camp in northern Syria

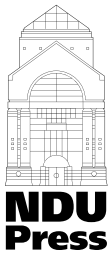
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Implications for
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Executive Summary

Central Asia is the third largest point of origin for Salafi jihadist foreign fighters in the conflagration in Syria and Iraq, with more than 4,000 total fighters joining the conflict since 2012 and 2,500 reportedly arriving in the 2014–2015 timeframe alone. As the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continues to lose territory under duress from U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition activities, some predict that many may return home bent on jihad and generating terror and instability across Central Asia. Yet several factors indicate that such an ominous foreign fighter return may not materialize. Among these factors are that a majority of Central Asians fighting for ISIL and the al-Nusra Front in Syria and Iraq are recruited while working abroad in Russia, often from low-wage jobs under poor conditions making the recruits ripe for radicalization. In addition, many of those heading for jihad in Syria and the Levant expect that they are on a “one way journey,” some to martyrdom but most for a completely new life, and do not plan a return.

Most Central Asian states face their greatest risk of domestic instability and violent extremism as a reaction to political repression and counterterrorism (CT) policies that counterproductively conflate political opposition and the open practice of Islam with a domestic jihadist threat. If improperly calibrated, greater U.S. CT assistance to address foreign fighter returns may strengthen illiberal regime short-term focus on political power consolidation, overplay the limited risks of foreign fighter returns, and increase the risks of domestic unrest and future instability.

The United States has few means to pressure Central Asian regimes into policies that address the main drivers of domestic radicalization, such as political inclusion and religious freedom.

Although an imperfect instrument, U.S. security assistance—and the specific subset of CT assistance—is a significant lever. U.S. CT assistance for Central Asia should eschew additional general lethal assistance and instead scope security attention toward border security intelligence and physical capacity enhancements. This CT aid should be paired with important, complementary socioeconomic programs that help with countering violent extremism, including greater religious and political openness along with support for the Central Asian diaspora.

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and similar Salafi jihadist organizations, such as the al-Nusra Front and other al Qaeda affiliates, have presented the United States with serious counterterrorism (CT) challenges since ISIL expanded its reach in Syria and Iraq in 2014.¹ Among these serious challenges, stemming the flow of foreign fighters to this conflict area as well as preparing for the eventual return of these fighters to their home countries have become issues of significant concern for U.S. policymakers.² The region of Central Asia has played an important, if often overlooked, role in supplying fighters to various violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in Syria and Iraq. The United States, along with Russia and other adjoining countries, could confront serious threats to CT interests in Central Asia as foreign fighters return to this region after having been radicalized and battle-hardened.

This paper assesses the current status and future risk potential for return of the thousands of Central Asian foreign fighters who have joined Salafi jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq since mid-2011. The analysis and policy recommendations draw upon authors' findings from a review of primary source publications from the region, field trips there from 2013 to 2015, and research into English-language and other secondary sources that culminated in June 2016.

Balancing Security, Stability and Socioeconomic Factors

Central Asia is important to overall U.S. CT efforts, having received increasing levels of security assistance since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.³ With Afghanistan bordering three of the five Central Asian states, U.S. security assistance in the region increased with the intensification of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past decade (see map). After a steady increase, there has been some reduction in overall security assistance after 2010.⁴ The United States also has a stated policy interest in seeing that Central Asian governments are accountable to their people for basic human rights and liberties, as well as capable of providing economic opportunities. Although U.S. economic and governance assistance to these states has increased in absolute terms over the past decade, non-security assistance first decreased as a proportion of overall U.S. assistance between 2009 and 2013, and then eclipsed security assistance by 2014. U.S. non-security assistance to Central Asian states is projected to remain greater than security-related assistance through 2017. With a general trend toward authoritarianism in several of these states in recent years, specifically Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the United States faces a policy dilemma. Should, on one hand, greater security assistance in the form of CT support again be prioritized with less attention paid to the development of accountable governance



The Five Central Asian States

and civil and religious liberties? If, on the other hand, the United States does press Central Asian countries for reform in these areas by denying or conditioning security assistance, will Russia simply fill the gap, damaging and perhaps removing U.S. influence in the region?

These questions are all the more significant because Central Asians have been recruited in great numbers as foreign fighters by Islamic jihadist groups such as ISIL. ISIL recruitment from Central Asian countries has benefited from local government policies that have eroded the space for the open and peaceful practice of Islam while also removing outlets of legitimate political opposition. Central Asians as a group have been disproportionately represented as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, with close to 20 percent of all foreign fighters originating from Central Asia while this region accounts for less than 5 percent of global Muslims.⁵ According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), Central Asia is the third largest source of foreign fighters for ISIL and other VEOs in Iraq and Syria.⁶

Poor economic conditions in most of Central Asia, especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, contribute to restlessness and wanderlust among many there. An overarching—and in some states increasingly—repressive political climate generates disaffection and can make populations vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by VEOs. An absence of capable border controls and credible reintegration programs makes most Central Asian governments appear at risk for continuing as a supplier of Salafi jihadist foreign fighters for Syria and Iraq, and at risk from instability and violence upon their return home.⁷ As ISIL steadily loses strength and territory in the Levant region, Central Asian governments will need to address the risks of increasing terrorism and instability if thousands of foreign fighters return home. Increasing the amount of U.S. security assistance, including CT assistance, is unlikely to help these governments weather the turbulence of returning jihadis if there is not an accompanying adjustment in the political-religious climate. The threat of returned fighters moving underground and engaging in terrorist attacks is greater if there is no process to reintegrate and absorb them into a reasonably open society.

The United States can foster an increase in religious and political opening through non-kinetic forms of assistance and public diplomacy. But the returns of such soft power assistance are harder to quantify in the short term than security forces training or weapons transfers. The United States will have to find a balance between military and nonmilitary aid to each of the Central Asian republics, keeping in mind the local context in each state. Mitigating rather than contributing to violence and extremism in Central Asia is the challenge that the United States faces at this important time in the region's history.

ISIL and U.S. Global Counterterrorism Concerns

ISIL changed the terrorist landscape in the Middle East, which had ripple effects around the globe. Skillful marketing has given ISIL greater reach than previously established Islamic VEOs such as al Qaeda.⁸ Manifestations of ISIL's reach have shown up in places where dramatic jihadist terrorism was not an expected threat, such as Brussels and Paris. ISIL has built its ranks by recruiting fighters from across the globe.⁹ The potential for fighters to return to their home states with an objective to practice organized jihad is a major international security concern.

It is also a concern for global U.S. CT efforts. The 2011 U.S. CT strategy calls for coordinating, enabling, and improving capabilities of partner nations.¹⁰ U.S. CT leaders have consistently named places where foreign fighter returns from Syria and Iraq may necessitate additional partnership, and Central Asian states—especially Tajikistan—are on that list.¹¹ Among the key questions for

U.S. security partnerships worldwide is whether Central Asian states merit a \$20–\$50 million increase in CT security assistance in 2016–2017 to address legitimate risks they face.¹²

While the majority of ISIL recruits originate in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and Western Europe, Central Asia is the third largest source of foreign fighters in Syria.¹³ Central Asians also are overrepresented among jihadist VEOs in Iraq and Syria, making up over 17 percent of the foreign fighters there, despite constituting just 5 percent of the global ummah.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated that as many as 7,000 fighters from Russia and Central Asia have joined the ranks of the Islamic State.¹⁶ While many of the Central Asians fighting in Syria and Iraq align with ISIL, they also are present in a number of other Salafi jihadist outfits there, some under the al Qaeda–affiliated umbrella group known as the al-Nusra Front. Among the prominent groups with known Central Asian participation are Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, Jamaat Sabri (a mostly Uzbek group), and Imam Bukhari Jamaat (also predominantly Uzbek). Central Asians also make up small percentages of primarily Chechen-led Caucasian VEOs.¹⁷

Many analysts have written about the “blowback potential” from these foreign fighters, speculating about an increase terrorism and instability across Central Asia but with divergent and often uncertain conclusions. An early 2015 International Crisis Group report labeled the risks of instability from the inevitable return of these Central Asian fighters as great, observing that the governments know of the dangers but are not properly preparing, instead using the forecast threat to bolster domestic political agendas and curtail more civil liberties.¹⁸ Another regional observer noted, “Although a threat from jihadist returnees does exist, it has been exaggerated by the Central Asian governments . . . playing on the population’s fear . . . to legitimate . . . repressive measures.”¹⁹ His sentiments are shared by other regional experts who view the risks from foreign fighter blowback as less significant than those from violent opposition from within.²⁰ Still others have argued that Central Asia faces great risks from foreign fighter repatriation and that this mandates significant scope for policy action and outside security assistance.²¹ Among those sounding the more worrisome alarm are those who point to reports that children of Uzbek and Tajikistani origin are being indoctrinated in radicalism and the practice of jihad by ISIL zealots in Syria and in Turkey.²²

Policymakers require a more discerning assessment of the actual risks from foreign fighter blowback in the Central Asian countries. The number of expatriates from there fighting in Iraq and Syria is not the sole indicator or even the best indicator of blowback risk. Many Central Asian foreign fighters do not expect to return home; some are there to culminate their martyrdom and

most have gone to start a whole new life in an Islamic caliphate. With ISIL currently on the defensive during 2016, its recruiting strategies for Central Asians and others appear to be more centered on bolstering ranks within Iraq and Syria than spreading instability elsewhere.²³

U.S. Policy in Central Asia Pre-2016—A Balancing Act

In March of 2015, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined U.S. policy in the Central Asian region as founded on two distinct ideas: “first that our own security is enhanced by a more stable, secure Central Asia that contributes to global efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism, and second that stability can best be achieved if the nations of Central Asia are sovereign and independent countries . . . benefiting from governments that are accountable to their citizens.”²⁴ Current U.S. policy emphasizes both security assistance and democracy and governance programming equally.²⁵ In most of the past decade, U.S. aid to Central Asia has been imbalanced toward more security assistance focused on tactical training and equipping than on democracy and governance programming.²⁶ The most recent example of this policy was the waiver of sanctions on Tajikistan after being designated a country of particular concern regarding religious liberty.²⁷ However, the U.S. policy challenge is more than one of disproportional funding between hard and soft power programs. U.S.-sponsored countering violent extremism (CVE) workshops and other governance/democratization programming confront limited effectiveness when constrained by wary Central Asian governments and if not buttressed by firm but flexible pressure from Washington’s most senior leaders.

The United States walks a challenging path with a dual concentration on CT assistance and fostering human rights and democratic governance in Central Asia. The difficulties for cohesive U.S. policy in Central Asia are many. Chief among them is the wide disparity in key factors found in the individual regional states. Repressive national political and human rights policies contribute to radicalization and recruitment to the Syria-Iraq front. A one-size-fits-all U.S. policy approach to what are distinct and diverse political and economic national conditions across the five Central Asian countries could have counterproductive results.

The United States faces a number of challenges with implementing effective policy in the region. First, America is not the only—or the preferred—guarantor of security in Central Asia. Historic and contemporary security ties between Russia and the Central Asian states remain strong. Additionally, the United States has few levers to pull when trying to influence Central Asian republics. The option to cut off security assistance to Central Asia exists. However, an end to security assistance would, by extension, cut off the military-to-military relationships

Table 1. U.S. Aid to Central Asia, 2014

Country	Military and Police Aid	Humanitarian and Development Aid	Arms Sales (Deliveries)	Trainees
Kazakhstan	\$19,452,079	\$6,438,000	\$1,084,188	275
Kyrgyzstan	\$8,902,880	\$37,506,150	\$307,400	358
Tajikistan	\$29,214,516	\$26,644,000	\$4,263,198	119
Turkmenistan	\$1,054,809	\$4,078,000	\$38,613	35
Uzbekistan	\$13,674,055	\$9,352,200	\$4,004,190	127
Floating Regional Funds	\$7,000,000	\$31,422,000	N/A	N/A
Total	\$79,298,339	\$115,440,350	\$9,697,589	914

that those assistance programs develop. Additional challenges arise in trying to strike a balance between maintaining ties and assistance while not tying the United States to autocratic regimes.

Given its historic ties in the region, Russia remains the primary security partner for the Central Asian republics.²⁸ Russia provides engagement through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including tactical-level training and equipping, and military professionalization training at the Frunze Academy in Moscow. Within the region, those trained at the Frunze Academy are regarded as part of an elite network of officers, upon which career and promotions depend. While the United States does provide some military professionalization training,²⁹ it is not currently seen as at the same level as Russian training.³⁰ Despite Russian military attention currently focused on Syria and the recent Russian economic downturn, U.S. influence in the region is unlikely to surpass longstanding Russian ties. At the same time, Russia is trying to retain its relevance in the region, whether through its leadership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or bilateral joint-level security and CT exercises with regional countries.

Central Asian governments will participate in ventures such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Partnership for Peace as far as it will benefit them, but there is relatively little buy-in for large institutional reform initiatives emanating from the United States or Western Europe. Conditioning U.S. security assistance on improved governance and political opening is unlikely to work. Rather this will likely drive Central Asia further into Russia's sphere of influence, severely eroding if not ending military-to-military ties between the United States and Central Asia.

Table 2. Forecast U.S. Aid to Central Asia, 2017

Country	Military and Police Aid	Humanitarian and Development Aid	Arms Sales (Deliveries)	Trainees
Kazakhstan	\$ 2,600,000	\$6,183,000	N/A	Unknown
Kyrgyzstan	\$ 3,060,000	\$47,696,000	N/A	Unknown
Tajikistan	\$ 6,515,000	\$35,055,000	N/A	Unknown
Turkmenistan	\$715,000	\$4,100,000	N/A	Unknown
Uzbekistan	\$1,780,000	\$9,828,000	N/A	Unknown
Floating Regional Funds	\$37,200,000	\$37,076,000	N/A	N/A
Total	\$51,870,000	\$139,938,000	N/A	Unknown

In 2014, the most recent year with a full set of security assistance data, the United States spent \$194,738,689 on Central Asian security and economic aid—\$79,289,339 of which was security oriented aid (\approx 41 percent). The United States trained 914 Central Asian security personnel (see table 1).³¹

The volume of U.S. security, governance, and economic aid to the states of Central Asia grew and then declined over the past decade from a relative low point in 2005 to a high in 2010 and then to a smaller amount in 2014.³² So too did the proportion of general security (military and police aid) in that assistance. In 2005, the United States spent \$221,059,971 on Central Asian security and economic aid; \$88,729,971 (\approx 40 percent) of that was security-oriented aid. It also trained 993 Central Asian security personnel. In 2010, the United States spent \$385,159,747 on Central Asian security and economic aid; \$216,707,698 (\approx 56 percent) was security-oriented aid. It also trained 678 Central Asian security personnel.³³ From 2010 through 2014, the proportion of U.S. regional assistance given as security assistance declined from 56 percent per year back to roughly 41 percent in 2014. Incomplete data for U.S. aid to Central Asia in 2015 indicate that the overall amount of aid dropped by almost 50 percent from 2014, falling to \$111,282,000; \$25,702,000 of this amount (23 percent) was general military police and security aid. If all U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Counterterrorism Partnership Funds (CTPF) earmarked for Central Asia—up to \$20 million in fiscal year 2016 and up to \$30 million in fiscal year 2017—are applied, then 60 percent of the total planned U.S. \$51,870,000 security assistance to Central Asia for 2017 will come from CTPF. Projected U.S. economic and development aid for Central Asia in 2017 is almost \$140,000,000. Thus the percentage of U.S. security assistance

of the overall projected \$191,808,000 in total U.S. assistance to Central Asia in 2017 will be 27 percent (see table 2).³⁴

The forecast remix of overall U.S. aid to Central Asia by 2017 appears calibrated to emphasize economic, development, and governance programs nested around CVE initiatives.³⁵ The re-scope of U.S. military and police aid to a less significant proportion of overall U.S. aid and a specific focus on CTPF programs seem aimed to provide sustained but targeted assistance to selected CT programs in Central Asian states.

Foreign Fighter Flows: Why, How, and from Where?

Before the rise of ISIL, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was the main Central Asian VEO of notable consequence in the region.³⁶ Its historic base of operations is in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The case of IMU is informative when assessing the risk of fighters returning to Central Asia from Iraq and Syria. Observers report a conspicuous absence of IMU foreign fighter return to Uzbekistan as of early 2016. Some analysts suggest that this demonstrates IMU members—and other Central Asian jihadists traveling to Syria—view their trip as a one-way ticket, some committed to remaining with the Islamic State forever and others understanding the untenable repercussions they could face if they try to return home.³⁷

As mentioned earlier, most respected estimates indicate that, as of 2015, Central Asia accounted for the third largest source of Islamist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.³⁸ These estimates indicate a political environment that contributes to the radicalization and subsequent recruitment of a significant number of Central Asian Muslims. Indeed, the governments of Central Asia display various deficiencies in the areas of political and religious freedom, some to a much more serious degree than others. Although the absolute number of Central Asian fighters in the Syrian civil war is high, the per capita foreign fighter flows from Central Asia are lower than those from the states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Kazakhstan (1 in 72,000), Kyrgyzstan (1 in 56,000), Tajikistan (1 in 40,000), and Uzbekistan (1 in 58,000) have lower per capita foreign fighter flows into Syria than Turkmenistan (1 in 14,000). Turkmenistan alone has reported per capita foreign fighter flows more comparable to MENA states.³⁹ MENA state foreign fighter flow rates are those from Jordan (1 in 5,300), Lebanon (1 in 6,500), Tunisia (1 in 7,300), Saudi Arabia (1 in 18,200), and Morocco (1 in 22,000). The proximity of MENA states to ISIL territory is likely a pertinent contributing factor, but the lower per capita flows may indicate other mitigating factors in Central Asia.

Some Central Asian fighters originate via recruitment cells actually found in Central Asia. Often these are small, secretive, and sometimes extensions of prayer groups. Not everyone in a



Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov of Tajikistan's OMON, pictured as an ISIL leader in Syria

prayer group will be aware of the activities of other members or the connection to Syria.⁴⁰ A significant number of these radicalized fighters, however, travel directly from Russian territory, which demonstrates a major radicalization factor for Central Asian states—the difficult working conditions and religious and ethnic persecution faced by the Central Asian diaspora within Russian territory.⁴¹ Separated from their home communities, families, and local imams, and with little or no support from their home governments, it is

easy to imagine how Central Asian migrant workers in Russia might become socially alienated and more susceptible to radicalization and VEO recruitment.⁴² Many working in Russia turn to in-person and online social media-based Islamic communities to explore their faith, particularly when it previously was not a strong part of their identity. As they interact with online faith communities in their native languages, many are targeted by extremist recruiters. If they are co-opted, migrants then travel directly to Syria or Iraq to fight with violent extremist organizations.⁴³

In his 2015 *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses*, Central Asia expert Noah Tucker demonstrates that economic migration is one of the primary factors that leads to Central Asian recruitment by Islamist extremists, with the majority of Central Asians being recruited outside of the area.⁴⁴ Given often limited economic opportunities, many Central Asians migrate to Russia or Germany for work. As Russian economic stagnation has increased in the past couple years, Moscow has introduced additional laws and restrictions on economic migrants. These laws have further isolated the Central Asian diaspora in Russia.⁴⁵ While the majority of Central Asian economic migrants go to Russia, more are looking to Germany as an option. In 2000, 546,823 Central Asians lived in Germany, whereas 4,501,585 lived in Russia. In 2015, these numbers were 4,950,593 in Russia and 1,178,397 in Germany.⁴⁶ As Central

Table 3. Russian Remittances to Central Asia, 2014

Country	Remittances from Russia (% of GDP)	Total Remittance from Russia (USD)
Tajikistan	41.45	\$3,831,000,000
Kyrgyzstan	27.36	\$2,026,000,000
Uzbekistan	8.91	\$5,581,000,000
Kazakhstan	0.22	\$480,000,000
Turkmenistan	0.065	\$31,000,000

Source: Bank of Russia, “External Sector Statistics,” available at <www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/?PrtId=svs>.

Asian migrant flows increase, the percent growth from 5 years previously (2010–2015) of those going to Germany (3.45 percent growth) outpaces the growth of total migration from Central Asia (2.65 percent growth), whereas migration to Russia shows less growth (1.91 percent). Russia is the destination for 64.63 percent of Central Asian migrants, whereas Germany is the destination of 15.38 percent. Ukraine is the destination for 6.79 percent, followed by intra–Central Asia migration.

Despite the Russian economic downturn from 2014–2016, much of the Central Asian economy still relies on remittances from migrants living in Russia. Remittances from the Russian central bank, comprise a sizeable portion of the Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek gross domestic products in order of decreasing magnitude (see table 3).

Whether radicalized in Central Asia and transiting Russia onto Iraq and Syria or radicalized and recruited from the diaspora in Russia, there are a number of “celebrity cases,” demonstrating the leadership role Central Asians play in ISIL’s operations. Most notable is Gulmurod Khalimov, who formerly commanded the Tajikistani Special Purpose Mobility Unit (Otryad Mobilny Osobogo Naznacheniya or, OMON). Colonel Khalimov participated in five separate U.S.-led training programs between 2003 and 2014, three of which were on U.S. soil.⁴⁷ In early September 2016, Khalimov reportedly was elevated to the position of ISIL “Minister of War,” succeeding an ethnic Chechen who held the post before being killed in a July 2016 U.S. airstrike.⁴⁸ In August of 2014, a Tajikistani was appointed as emir of the Raqqa Province, which is the location of the Islamic State’s eponymous capital.⁴⁹ There are a few ethnic Uzbeks, veterans of the Afghan jihad, who are leading brigades in ISIL and the al-Nusra Front.⁵⁰ Central Asian foreign fighters linked to ISIL headquarters in Syria also have participated in significant acts of terrorism in other countries. Most notably, a Kyrgyzstani and an ethnic Uzbek from Central

Asia were among the three suicide terrorist attackers/bombers at Istanbul airport that killed over 40 and wounded more than 200 others on June 28, 2016.⁵¹

Given the diverse nature of the Central Asian states, we address the key factors and context for Islamist radicalization and recruitment in each. This assessment considers ethnic and political aspects, number of fighters recruited, and influence of social media or Russian information operations in each Central Asian country.

Kazakhstan

ICSR estimates that a moderate number of 250 foreign fighters had traveled from Kazakhstan to the Levant to “do jihad” as of early 2015.⁵² Many of these are believed to have been radicalized and recruited while in Russia. ISIL propaganda has tried to exploit the diverse ethnic and demographic nature of Kazakhstan through its al-Hayat media wing. Al-Hayat has also played up the presence of women and children in ISIL to portray ISIL as both a multinational and multigenerational movement. This has provoked harsh backlash against ISIL from many Kazakhstanis, including independent Islamic groups online (both strict reformists and Salafists) who reject what they see as exploitation of Kazakhstani society and who reject any relationship between ISIS and Islam.⁵³

The Kazakhstani state enforces some restrictions on free speech and religion, but Kazakhstan is perceived to be relatively free compared to other Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan has participated in U.S. CVE activities by hosting the regional CVE conference in June 2015 in cooperation with the U.S. and other international partners and ensuring ample media coverage for the conference.⁵⁴

The Kazakhstani government does not deny the fact that some Kazakhstanis have gone to fight in Iraq and Syria. Kazakhstani leaders and its press report that Russian information operations blame the United States for the creation of ISIL and al Qaeda. Russian information activities focus on increasing the public perception of a meaningful threat from ISIL and other VEOs in Kazakhstan as part of an effort to isolate the United States and pull Kazakhstan further into Russia’s sphere of influence.

Kyrgyzstan

After a peaceful electoral transition of government in 2011, Kyrgyzstan touts its credentials as an “Island of Democracy” amid the more repressive authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. Recent fears that Islamic extremism is growing in Kyrgyzstan, particularly among the ethnic Uzbek minority in southern Kyrgyzstan, should be tempered by the fact that Kyrgyzstan

does not border other states where ISIL is active and that its populace is targeted less by online recruiters than other Central Asian states.⁵⁵ However, the Kyrgyzstani government has been using fear of ISIL terrorism to justify cracking down on political opposition.

There is no official number of suspected Kyrgyzstani foreign fighters doing jihad in the Levant. In February 2015, the head of Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry reported that 22 of its citizens had been killed in fighting in Syria and some 200 total citizens, 30 of them women, had gone to Syria. He also reported that investigators had uncovered 83 cases of people attempting to recruit Kyrgyzstani citizens to go to Syria.⁵⁶ Details on these radicalization and recruitment patterns were not provided.

Among the Kyrgyzstanis who have left to fight in Syria, a common profile emerges: "identifiable Kyrgyzstani participants in the Syrian conflict are primarily politically and economically marginalized ethnic Uzbeks from southern Kyrgyzstan whose messaging, recruiting, and social media activity is primarily in the Uzbek language and largely ignored by the Kyrgyzstani media."⁵⁷ Best available independent data on fighter flows also indicate that an estimated 500 to 1,000 ethnic Uzbeks were fighting in Syria during 2015, with a majority of them likely from southern Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁸ While many foreign fighters are transiting to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIL, data on foreign fighter flows suggest most Kyrgyzistani/Uzbek fighters are traveling to Syria to fight with al-Nusra Front.⁵⁹

One of the most well-respected voices in the fight against ISIL in Kyrgyzstan has been that of Rashot Kamalov, a prominent imam in the southern town of Kara-Suu near the Uzbek border. Kamalov took over the mosque after his father was killed in a Kyrgyzstani security services operation in 2006. He gained prominence for his willingness to criticize local and state officials, as well as to speak openly against terrorist organizations, including ISIL. In October 2015, a judge in southern Kyrgyzstan sentenced the Kamalov to 5 years in jail for "inciting religious hatred" and "possessing extremist materials."⁶⁰ The prosecution used sections from Kamalov's sermons condemning ISIL to demonstrate the state narrative that he was allegedly supporting ISIL. Although the Kyrgyzstani government advertises its actions as necessary for security, the sequential persecution of Kamalov, other religious leaders, and the common ethnic people following them not only risks their good will toward the government but also may be increasing the internal risks to domestic stability.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan is the poorest country of the former Soviet Republics and its economy continues to face major challenges. It has a deep dependence on remittances from Tajikistanis working in

Russia, exhibits pervasive government corruption, and struggles with a major narco-trafficking role in the country's informal economy.⁶¹ The Tajikistani government estimates that up to 1,000 citizens have left to fight in Syria and Iraq, while ICSR reports a far more conservative figure of 190 as of early 2015.⁶² This reporting discrepancy may indicate a motivated inflation of foreign fighter numbers by the Tajikistani government or it may reflect the fact that the government reports its diaspora in Russia in its accounting, while ICSR data do not. ISIL recruitment of Tajikistanis relies heavily on the glorification of celebrity jihadist commanders, such as Gulmurod Khalimov, who interact with independent journalists and religious leaders in Tajikistan via correspondence from the frontlines.⁶³ Despite this, ISIL recruitment in Tajikistan is perhaps the least organized of all the Central Asian states as Tajikistanis fighting for ISIL maintain no dedicated official media outlet or spokesman.⁶⁴

The Tajikistani government restricts religious freedom to an exceptional degree. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) was Central Asia's only legally registered Islamist political party until it was banned by the government of President Emomali Rahmon in 2015, leaving the political opposition without any venue for peaceful political redress.⁶⁵ The government continually tries to tie ISIL to Tajikistan's domestic opposition, specifically the IRPT, and to a "Western" plot to "destabilize" the country, effectively amplifying information operations coming from Moscow.⁶⁶ The government has engaged in acts such as forcible beard shavings and strict regulation of Friday mosque content, prompting the resignation of some of the more influential (and anti-ISIL) clerics in the country, including Kulobi imam Hoji Mirzo.⁶⁷

Analysts of Tajikistan point out that while no change appears to be forthcoming on these repressive policies, "the Tajikistani state has attempted to show a changed approach to returnees, granting at least six Tajikistani citizens who had participated in the conflict in Syria amnesty." In two specific cases, two 22-year-old Tajikistanis, Rizvon Akhmedov and Farrukh Sharifov, were among at least six currently reported Tajikistani citizens to take advantage of an amnesty offer. Sharifov and Akhmedov were migrant laborers in Russia when they chose to join ISIL. They have told their story on television and in talks around the country, warning others of the Islamic State brutality that motivated them to leave what they thought would be a paradise when they joined. In the view of many Tajikistanis on social media, allowing returnees to speak for themselves and granting them amnesty may be the only effective response to the ISIL threat adopted by the government so far and one that appears to enjoy broad public support.⁶⁸

Much of U.S. policy in Tajikistan is predicated on the worry of militant "overflow" from bordering Afghanistan. Drug-trafficking has been a consistent concern along the Tajikistani-Afghan border, and it remains unclear whether the current upswing in border incidents is due

to traffickers or militants. This ambiguity is further obfuscated by the murky relations between opium production and the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁶⁹

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's opacity makes it difficult to comprehensively analyze the local government policy regarding the threat from ISIL and other VEOs. Citizens are subject to stringent travel restrictions. The government limits independent news media and restricts certain Web sites. State-run (and oriented) news sources persistently deny Russian claims that there is an "active threat" within Turkmenistan.⁷⁰ While tight control of travel in and out of the country limits the likelihood of attacks inside Turkmenistan, individual experiences with Draconian restrictions may contribute to radicalization. ICSR estimates that the number of Turkmen in Syria and Iraq was 360 as of early 2015.⁷¹ What remains to be seen is whether estimates of Turkmen in Syria and Iraq differentiate between ethnic Turkmen native to the Levant area and Turkey with Turkmen coming from Turkmenistan.⁷² Current Turkmen ISIL activity does not exceed what would be expected of an estimated 30–60 person population with origins in Central Asia: "Evidence observed from jihadist media by the Digital Islam project over the past two years would not support claims for an estimate larger than perhaps a few dozen Turkmenistan militants. No Turkmen language messaging targeting the public in Turkmenistan has been observed."⁷³

Uzbekistan

As noted already, an estimated 500 to 1,000 ethnic Uzbekistanis were fighting in Syria during 2015, with a majority of them believed to be from southern Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁴ As many Uzbekistani-national jihadists have been expatriates for many years, we can safely assume that there may be as many as 400 to 500 more Islamist fighters with ties to Uzbekistan who have made it onto the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. This accounts for widespread reporting of many Uzbek-speaking militants fighting in the conflict across the Levant.

Much of Uzbek language messaging that extols the virtues of jihad in Syria was disrupted throughout 2013–2014 due in large part to the short lifecycle of Uzbek fighters in the field there. However, ISIL's language messaging strategy continues to target all Uzbek speakers, those in Uzbekistan, throughout Central Asia, and in Russia.⁷⁵ Uzbek language media, both domestic and international (such as BBC), portray ISIL as the primary jihadist threat for Uzbekistan, and largely ignores the Uzbekistani-led battalions and groups fighting for al-Nusra Front and the Syrian Islamic Front. A majority of Uzbekistani fighters are believed to be aligned with Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Although the IMU declared an official affiliation to ISIL in

September 2015, some of its splinter groups retain ties to al Qaeda and reportedly fight with al-Nusra Front.⁷⁶

In February 2015, Uzbekistan's domestic intelligence agency announced that it had intercepted militant communications claiming that terrorist attacks were planned across the country for that spring. These attacks did not materialize, leading outside analysts to believe that reports of ISIL activities and risks in Uzbekistan, as across Central Asia, are highly politicized and speculative.⁷⁷

At the same time, changes to Uzbekistani policy since March 2015 demonstrate that religious openness can be effective in countering radicalization propaganda—even in the repressive Central Asian context and within a highly authoritarian system such as that of Uzbekistan—if the government actually commits to it. Uzbekistan's movement toward greater tolerance for the open expression of Islam's beliefs has come without any direct U.S. policy intervention. After the March 2015 presidential election that again stamped authoritarian strongman former President Islam Karimov's longstanding lock on power, Uzbekistan has changed its tactics and started to actively downplay the threat ISIL internally poses to the country and to show that ISIL is subverting true Islam.⁷⁸

The Uzbekistani government has begun empowering religious leaders to speak out against ISIL.⁷⁹ Former President Karimov took the unprecedented step of releasing Hayrulla Hamidov, a highly respected Islamic poet and teacher, from jail to make him the face of the anti-ISIL campaign. Hamidov was jailed on dubious terrorism charges in 2010, but since his release he is still seen as a legitimate and popular religious figure, despite working in concert with the Uzbekistani government. Hamidov's efforts to counter ISIL messaging have become extremely popular among ethnic Uzbekistanis. This tactic achieved immediate resonance, attracted significant attention, and prompted an official response from IMU and other dissenting radical Uzbekistani Islamic figures.

Whither Blowback? What Is Its True Potential in Central Asia?

There is significant anxiety regarding the prospect of jihadists returning from the conflict zone who are intent on overthrowing governments in Central Asia.⁸⁰ Regional governments in particular fear such a scenario and have used this fear to justify stricter laws on religious practice and personal liberties. The risks of returning fighters, however, are not uniform across the region and are far from certain as a whole. Central Asian governments do face violent threats, but most of the important threats have originated from domestic rather than foreign sources. As of mid-2016, there is little evidence of Central Asian fighters returning in significant numbers, and even

less that those who have returned are organized for jihad. Many are likely to have been killed in Syria. A blanket description of all migrants to ISIL-controlled territory as potential returnees fails to recognize the motivations that prompted them to leave in the first place.

Tajikistanis fighting for ISIL have repeatedly threatened to return and wage jihad in Tajikistan, but they have remained in Syria so far. In January 2015, members of an IMU cell planning to attack a police station were arrested in Tajikistan.⁸¹ Yet as of mid-2016, instability and violence due to extremism has yet to materialize. It may be that ISIL's current need for fighters in Syria (in order to bolster ranks depleted by coalition efforts) outweighs the desire of fighters to return home and fight, assuming that desire for return exists in the first place. Ongoing, low-level violence along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan is generally attributed to narcotrafficking despite contrasting government claims that the violence is terrorism related.⁸²

In Turkmenistan, the threat of instability due to returned fighters is not high. The government is more concerned with issues along its Afghan border than it is with Turkmens leaving to fight for ISIL or returning. Formal and informal restrictions prevent many Turkmens from leaving the country in the first place. The security services in Turkmenistan take an active role in dominating the narrative against ISIL. The Turkmens fighting in Syria and Iraq are not particularly organized and as such do not present a threat to Turkmenistan.⁸³ However, Turkmenistan has requested security assistance from the United States in response to issues along its border with Afghanistan.⁸⁴

Unlike Russia and its Central Asian neighbors, Kazakhstan has rarely seen attacks by Muslim hardliners. This does not mean that it has no risk of returning fighters because an estimated 250 fighters of Kazakhstani origin have left the country for Syria and Iraq. In early June 2016, 17 people, including 11 "extremists," were killed in Aktobe, near the site of attacks in 2011. The government claimed that the attackers followed radical, nontraditional religious movements.⁸⁵ However, security services "often imitate counter-terrorism operations by accusing average criminals of siding with religious fighters." It remains unclear if the June 2016 reported attack was a case of violent religious extremism or a case of armed gangs robbing commercial shops and being accused of terrorist activities.⁸⁶ Kazakhstan has taken a relatively more constructive approach to addressing ISIL recruitment. In contrast to its post-Soviet neighbors, it has refrained from hyping the threat as a means of justifying internal religious repression, and it is much less reliant on remittances from migrant workers in Russia. This helps to reduce a major recruitment dynamic faced by neighboring countries such as Tajikistan.⁸⁷

Kyrgyzstan has made significant progress in implementing democratic reforms over the past several years. The government, however, has recently begun using a seemingly exaggerated

threat of Islamic extremism as justification to crack down on political and religious opposition leaders. Rather than discouraging already marginalized people away from extremist organizations and recruiters, government heavy handedness plays into the narratives that extremist recruiters use. By silencing the moderate voices, the Kyrgyzstani government risks pushing marginalized communities towards more radical action.

Regional Recommendations

Any overarching U.S. policy addressing fighter flows from Central Asia must acknowledge that the region is first and foremost dominated by Russia's security interests and capacity. Russian policy there will be focused on maintaining security and predominant influence. Some Russian interlocutors may acknowledge the long-term importance of addressing drivers of radicalization, but most observe that Russia will prioritize regime stability over human rights in the Central Asian countries.⁸⁸ Russia wishes to see jihadist groups in Afghanistan that are isolated there denied access to Central Asia and Russia itself. But this potential point for security cooperation with the United States is presently lost in rhetoric from Moscow accusing Washington of intentionally orchestrating the deterioration of security in Afghanistan and the expansion of the Islamic State there.⁸⁹ Combined with the visceral Russian opposition to U.S. influence in Central Asia, there seems little room for U.S.-Russian cooperation on Central Asian foreign fighter or radicalization issues directly in those countries. Even with a significant downturn in the Russian economy and the subsequent drop in remittances from Russia to Tajikistan and other Central Asian states, historic ties remain strong. At the same time, Central Asian states do want cooperation with and assistance from America, especially in the area of security. Simultaneously, they will remain resistant to U.S. calls for socioeconomic reform when receiving U.S. assistance, routinely criticizing the United States for pushing nefarious "Western influence."

Rather than increasing direct general security assistance, the United States should pursue targeted increases in limited CT-focused security assistance and pair this with an increase funding for soft power activities such as CVE and civil society building, as well as its support for diaspora labor migrants. Because the U.S. Agency for International Development can no longer operate in Russia, the United States should facilitate skills training and information access for Central Asian labor migrants while still in Central Asia. These initiatives would not be as immediately visible as security assistance activities, but their long-term dividends are too important to ignore. Instead of delivering additional general military aid to governments that likely use it for more repressive and counterproductive purposes, selective CT security assistance and enhanced

socioeconomic aid could sow the seeds of gradual social and political change—change far more meaningful for dampening the incentives for radicalization.

In parallel with the soft power focus, U.S. security assistance given to Central Asian states should prioritize greater CT border patrol intelligence cooperation that improves national abilities to track and intercept foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria who might return to their home countries, particularly through Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. In this context, the current DOD Counterterrorism Partnership Funds proposal for \$20–\$50 million in fiscal year 2016–2017 for Central Asia security programs (aimed at assisting regional border security forces to improve border security intelligence, facilities, and mobility) seems prudently targeted for best effect—if the proposal remains limited to those specific aims.⁹⁰

Tajikistan

Issues facing Tajikistan are some of the most nuanced in Central Asia. Thus a nuanced U.S. security and socioeconomic assistance policy is required. Hard policy decisions must be made: Is the main U.S. assistance priority that of stability? Is it maintaining U.S. influence? Or is it facilitating democratization? To some extent, tenets of these priorities may be mutually exclusive. Policymakers should be aware of the possibility that continued security assistance to Tajikistan would be seen as an endorsement of the occasional heavy-handed crackdowns on “radical Islamist threats” emanating from Dushanbe.

To the threat perception of radical Islam in Tajikistan, Central Asia experts John Heather-shaw and David Montgomery of Exeter University have stated, the Government’s response to the conflict may increase the likelihood of outbreaks of Islamic militancy in the longer term.”⁹¹ A case in point is the recent forced beard-shaving campaign conducted under the guise of an “anti-radicalisation campaign.”⁹² If the roots of radicalism were in facial hair, this would indeed be an astute policy approach. Unfortunately, this potential risk factor has been struck from the list of correlates to jihad. The actions taken by the Tajikistani government to counter extremism quite predictably will, as a consequence of “being detained in the street and forcibly taken to the police department or a barber shop,” create legitimate grievances among the 13,000 Muslims, and some may take things further.⁹³

In counteracting ISIL messaging to Tajikistanis, prominent cleric Hoji Mirzo Ibrinov has been moderately successful, and this should be capitalized on. Having taken such drastic measures against the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan while allowing Hoji Mirzo to remain in the public arena takes away from the perception of his independence and as such delegitimizes his message, as effective as it may be. A good start for Tajikistan would be to empower other

imams across the country to speak out against ISIL, allowing them independence while removing restrictions such as state approval of sermons or forcible shaving of beards. It remains to be seen whether the Tajikistani government can reverse course and what amount of political Islam it can tolerate, but even a token political group, independent from governmental Islam, would have a positive effect, as the IRPT has previously.

Russian information operations have saturated Central Asian Internet forums and social media. They state that ISIL is the result of U.S. meddling and conspiracy. The United States could be effective in advocacy, however, by pressuring the Tajikistani government to release imprisoned political activists (especially those involved with the IRPT). U.S. support for democracy should result in concrete gains for the Tajikistani public. Given Russian control of the information sphere, this is one of the few places America could improve its image.

The United States reportedly provided \$29 million in security and defense assistance aid to Dushanbe in 2014 and about \$8 million in 2015, but the amount could jump again because the CTFP proposed in February 2016 to allocate \$50 million to Central Asia over the next 2 years to help counter the Taliban, Islamic State, and other militant groups, with a priority focus on assistance for Tajikistan.⁹⁴

The CTFP proposal for Tajikistan in fiscal year 2016–2017 must exercise discipline when making the country a “feature state” for its CT approach, limiting the scope of activities to prudent security increases along critical borders with a focus on intelligence, facilities, and mobility there.⁹⁵ Simultaneously, the United States should resist initiatives to extend or expand general Tajikistani military and paramilitary capabilities to prevent more capable and repressive activities against ethnic and religious minorities across the country. Concurrently, the United States should tether additional targeted CT assistance to Tajikistan with the government’s willing participation in conferences and other activities aimed to improve national capabilities to counter violent extremism, building on the CVE seminar hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe in February 2016.⁹⁶

Turkmenistan

The threat of instability in Turkmenistan is not particularly high. The Turkmen fighting in Syria and Iraq are not particularly organized and as such do not present a threat to Turkmenistan.⁹⁷ The government of Turkmenistan is more concerned with issues along its Afghan border than with Turkmen leaving to fight for ISIL or coming back. Since Turkmenistan has requested security assistance from the United States in response to issues along its border with Afghanistan,

that aid might come with U.S. conditionality targeted at greater openness in stability collaboration and in expanding socioeconomic opportunities across the country.⁹⁸

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has taken a relatively more constructive approach to addressing ISIL recruitment. That said, degrees of religious persecution are still evident and the government must take significant steps in other areas. President Nursultan Nazarbayev is widely praised for turning Kazakhstan into one of the most prosperous former Soviet states. But his rule has grown increasingly heavy handed with political opponents jailed and marginalized.⁹⁹

The United States should continue to solicit Kazakhstan's support in carrying out CVE activities, including by hosting conferences like the one in January 2015.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, while Kazakhstan has acknowledged the recruitment of some of its own citizens by ISIL, it has often resorted to censorship of online and independent media outlets in order to maintain its control over the narrative and convince its citizens that there is no significant problem posed by ISIL that it cannot control. Ultimately, the significant degree of government censorship is counterproductive; it inhibits potentially moderating voices from Muslims who are strongly anti-ISIL.

As with all Central Asian states, Russian information operations penetrate the public and private discourse in Kazakhstan. While ISIL is not portrayed as an existential threat to Kazakhstani territory, which necessitates the repression of Kazakhstani Muslims, ISIL is frequently depicted as a bogus threat created by the United States. In response, the United States should seek to demonstrate tangible support for moderate and anti-ISIL voices wherever possible, including bringing pressure to release imprisoned imams and to recognize the efforts of moderating voices.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has made significant progress in implementing democratic reforms over the past several years. However, the government appears to have begun to use of an exaggerated threat of Islamic extremism as a justification a crackdown on political and religious opposition leaders. By silencing moderate voices, the Kyrgyzstani government risks distancing the marginalized ethnic Uzbek minority even more. This may lead to greater domestic instability and animus toward the Kyrgyzstani government, either from indigenous religious extremism or renewed ethnic violence.

The United States should advocate for moderate and anti-ISIL voices wherever possible. Addressed earlier in this paper, Rashot Kamalov is an imam who gained prominence for his willingness to criticize local and state officials as well as speak openly against terrorist organizations, including ISIL. Kamalov was sentenced to 5 years in jail for “inciting religious hatred” and “possessing extremist materials” in October 2015.¹⁰¹ However, his arrest and sentencing were almost certainly in response to his criticisms of corrupt local and state officials.¹⁰²

Uzbekistan

Although former President Karimov’s March 2015 release of Islamic Imam Hayrulla Hamidov from jail and Karimov’s tolerance of greater open discussion of Islam and Islamic beliefs has been noteworthy, the U.S. State Department continues to assess Uzbekistan’s human rights conditions as of “serious concern.”

Despite some press reporting from the state-controlled media, the threat of Islamist-inspired instability in Uzbekistan is not high. State-run security agencies have tight control and reportedly resort to exceptional measures of torture and depredation to maintain it.¹⁰³ In the past, the U.S. State Department has issued waivers for direct security assistance to Uzbekistan, and this has led to sharp criticism of America from a wide array of international human rights agencies, including Amnesty International.

Uzbek-language ISIL radicalization and recruiting propaganda is broad-based in its targeting and tends to have most impact upon Uzbekistani expatriates and migrant workers. Thus the direct danger to Uzbekistan stability from that propaganda is less within and more outside of the country. Neither the United States nor its allies would generate much advantage in trying to support Uzbekistan’s longstanding efforts to tightly control media or social media messaging.

As in Kyrgyzstan, the United States should seek to demonstrate support for religious and political openness. To the extent that Hayrulla Hamidov represents a figure of moderate Islam, the United States should support his and other similar voices in Uzbekistan. President Karimov’s successor will certainly be selective and clever in the assistance he or she seeks from Washington. However, the United States should not agree to direct support of Uzbekistan’s repressive security apparatus, and should instead emphasize support for political and economic openings that will provide all Uzbekistanis with greater opportunities and more reasons not to leave the country and join with jihadist groups.

Conclusions

From 2012–2015, ISIL has attracted a coalition of Central Asian jihadists and sympathizers with a network of links in the region and in the nearby areas of Xinjiang, China, and the Caucasus. Dangerous violent extremist organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have leveraged affiliations in Syria and Iraq to gain traction lost across Central and South Asia in years prior to 2012. But the clear operational nexus of Central Asian jihadists in the heart of the Middle East does not mean that the repressive governments of Central Asia confront a dire or certain blowback threat from jihadist violence at home. The risks are present, but properly assessed in mid-2016, the problem is not dramatic. Many factors mitigate against a return to Central Asia of a critical mass of Syria-trained jihadists capable of toppling regional governments and establishing an extension of the ISIL-led caliphate.

Many Central Asian governments are using—and often overstating—the risks of foreign fighter return to bolster repressive political agendas, curtail civil liberties, and seek additional lethal assistance from outside donors. In this manner, they are exploiting rather than realistically addressing the problems of radicalization and instability. These governments must be encouraged to create balanced and viable CVE action plans. Such plans must feature programs to reduce the risk factors for radicalization and generate credible rehabilitation programs for those seeking to return from doing jihad in Syria or elsewhere abroad. This kind of balance can only be struck when the leaders of the region move away from repressive-only approaches and expand political, economic and educational opportunities while at the same time ending ruthless security services practices that generate widespread distrust and fear.

The United States, as other outside security partners, is best advised to refrain from any hasty favorable response for greater, more lethal general security assistance by these governments as the best means to combat returning foreign fighters. Instead, the U.S. should offer the Central Asian governments additional and targeted border and intelligence CT security assistance, simultaneously extending to them the more robust socio-economic assistance necessary to expand domestic opportunities and establish de-radicalization programs as part of wider CVE initiatives for those seduced by ISIL or other jihadist propaganda.

Notes

¹The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Qaeda, the al-Nusra front, and numerous other Salafi jihadist organizations fit under the much broader U.S. category of violent extremist organizations. See *Fact Sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 18, 2015), available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>; Paul Davis, *Influencing Violent Extremist Organizations and Their Supporters without Adverse Side Effects*, Working Paper WR-909-OSD (Washington, DC: RAND, March 2012), 3–8, available at <www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2012/RAND_WR909.pdf>.

²In early 2016, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism Tina Kaidanow observed that, “the international terrorist threat picture has been transformed by ISIL’s territorial expansion, the promulgation of its so-called caliphate, and its campaign aimed at the West. Weak or failed governance has allowed ISIL to take territory in Syria and Iraq and continues to provide an enabling environment for ISIL and its affiliates, notably in the Sinai, Libya, and Yemen. ISIL’s seizure of territory in Iraq and Syria; its continued access to significant numbers of foreign terrorist fighters; its increased number of global branches; its unprecedented use of social media to spread its message, radicalize and recruit individuals to violence; and its external plotting through directed and inspired attacks has elevated it to our most pressing counterterrorism priority at this moment.” See Tina S. Kaidanow, “Countering the Spread of ISIL and Other Threats,” remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Washington, DC, February 3, 2016, available at <www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/rm/252082.htm>.

³Eugene Rumer, Richard Solitsy, and Paul Stronski, *U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 25, 2016), available at <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/25/u.s.-policy-toward-central-asia-3.0/itlr>>.

⁴Data demonstrating U.S. assistance trajectory is presented later in the paper.

⁵Described in more detail later in the paper. See *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, Europe and Central Asia Briefing No. 72 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, January 20, 2015), 1–3, available at <[www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf)>.

⁶Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” International Center for the Study of Radicalization, January 26, 2015, available at <<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>>.

⁷Of note, there is a grand debate among experts about the factors that contribute to individual radicalization and the propensity to become a terrorist group member, including a Salafi jihadist group member. Some experts find an absence of economic opportunity to be a factor, if not a major one. Other scholars dispute the role of economic deprivation in the process of radicalization, pointing to the number of rich and privileged joining terrorist organizations. Many scholars view repressive political climates as a key factor in the alternative expression of needs, wants, and grievances as violence. Others minimize the factor of political repression in the individual choice for radicalism and terrorism. Some scholars argue that national programs for identification and reintegration of one-time terrorists and

jihadists are a critical factor in reducing the risks from radicalization and instability. Others have found that these programs produce uncertain results and may not be of much value. For a review of these and other academic debates regarding radicalization and the choice to violent action, see Matthew Francis, “What Causes Radicalisation? Main Lines of Consensus in Recent Research,” *RadicalisationResearch.org*, January 24, 2012, available at <www.radicalisationresearch.org/guides/francis-2012-causes-2/>; Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 11 (Winter 2011), 37–62, available at <<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1140&context=jss>>; Saliha Metinsoy, “What Are the Common Factors That Drive Radicalization,” *Newsweek.com*, June 17, 2016, available at <www.newsweek.com/what-drives-radicalization-471661>. With these debates noted, this paper develops the important role that poor economic conditions, political repression, and an absence of credible means for generating social connections within the Central Asian republic states play in the preconditions for radicalization and the choice to jihad. Each of these factors contributes to what the majority of radicalization literature agrees is a common trait in those ripe for radicalization: the feeling of social alienation and the desire for positive social relations and solidarity that the cells of a terrorist organization provide. For a general review of this consensus on radicalization, see Max Abrahms, “What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy,” *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008), 78–105; Martha Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice,” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7–24.

⁸ For ISIL’s advances in terrorist organization marketing and social media use, see J.M. Berger, “How ISIS Games Twitter,” *Atlantic.com*, June 16, 2014, available at <www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>; Javier Lesaca, “On Social Media, ISIS Uses Modern Cultural Images to Spread Anti-modern Values,” Brookings Institution, September 24, 2015, available at <www.brookings.edu/blogs/techtank/posts/2015/09/24-isis-social-media-engagement>.

⁹ Estimates of non-Syrian fighters joining jihad there and in Iraq between 2011 and late 2015 range from a low of 27,000 to a high of 31,000. All points in this range indicate the great importance of foreign fighters to the jihad in Syria and the Levant. See Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1; *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015), 4–9, available at <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf>.

¹⁰ *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2011), 6, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf>.

¹¹ In part, this is now done through the Department of Defense Counterterrorism Partnership Funds (CTPF) established in 2014. Here Central Asia is among the regions for CTPF partnership-fund focus. The fund targeted \$20 million in CT money toward Central Asia in fiscal year 2016 and proposes an increase to \$30 million for fiscal year 2017. The fiscal year 2017 plan proposes assistance to Tajikistan as a feature state and with focus on security programs for countering regional terrorist groups, while assisting security forces to improve border security intelligence, construction, and mobility as

a priority—but not exclusive—security effort. See *Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund: Department of Defense Budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017* (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller]), February 2016), 1, 10–11.

¹² See Joshua Kucera, “Pentagon Proposes \$50 Million Program to Help Tajikistan Fight Terrorists,” *Eurasianet.org*, February 16, 2016, available at <www.eurasianet.org/node/77366>.

¹³ Maciej Falkowski and Józef Lang, *Homo Jihadicus: Islam in the former USSR and the Phenomenon of the Post-Soviet Militants in Syria and Iraq* (Warsaw: Center for Eastern Studies, September 2015), 40, available at <www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/homojihadicus.pdf>. Also see *Foreign Fighters*, 10, 14–15.

¹⁴ Here, *ummah* denotes the Sunni Islam population worldwide. See Falkowski and Lang, 40.

¹⁵ *Syria Calling*, 1–3; Neumann.

¹⁶ See Thomas Grove, “Vladimir Putin Sympathizes with Turkey after Airport Killings,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2016, available at <www.wsj.com/articles/vladimir-putin-sympathizes-with-turkey-after-airport-killings-1467196514>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸ *Syria Calling*, 13–14.

¹⁹ Edward Lemon, “Assessing the Threat of Returning Foreign Fighters from Central Asia,” *Geopolitical Monitor.com*, September 18, 2014, available at <www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/assessing-threat-returning-foreign-fighters-central-asia/>.

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