

# From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan

The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists

A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project

## AUTHORS

Thomas M. Sanderson  
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Cover: The photo depicts Hasan Alfidan, a.k.a. Abu Muslim Kurdi, a Turkish national and member of the Islamic Jihad Union who died on June 4, 2008, during a suicide attack on a facility used by the Afghan intelligence service in Meydan-e D zadzi in the Khost Province of Afghanistan. (See Ronald Sandee, "The Islamic Jihad Union," NEFA Foundation, October 14, 2008, <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefaijuoct08.pdf>, p. 16.) The image was obtained from an Islamic Jihad Union propaganda video featuring Kurdi posted on the jihadi forum Ansar Al-Mujahideen.

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

- A group of Central Asian jihadists survived ejection from their native countries and the collapse of the Taliban regime to remain active today. Some of these fighters have adopted al Qaeda's global focus, while others prioritize a reestablished presence in Central Asia.
- Central Asian militant networks have depended on external sanctuaries since the 1990s. The safe havens currently used by these groups are concentrated in Pakistan's tribal belt. Today, these refuges face increasing pressure from a combination of ethnic violence, CIA drone strikes, and Pakistan Army operations.
- Rising pressure on safe havens in Pakistan's tribal belt and expanding coalition effort in Afghanistan could push more locally focused Central Asian jihadists homeward.
- The return of these fighters does not pose an existential threat to Central Asian stability—they lack popular support. But a militant influx could set off a destabilizing cycle of terrorist action and government overreaction amid deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- In response to this threat, the United States should avoid any grand schemes designed to undermine the appeal of radicalism in the region. Instead, it should support Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as they deal with a small but growing militant threat primed by the dynamic conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- To help these states combat the threat of militancy on the tactical level, the United States should consider:
  - Dedicating intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and direct action assets to interdict militants before they reach Central Asia;
  - Boosting intelligence sharing with European partners and regional governments;
  - Enhancing U.S. intelligence capacity on Central Asian target sets;
  - Launching a border interdiction initiative;
  - Focusing more attention on travel documents;
  - Engaging the counterdrug community in militant interdiction efforts;
  - Encouraging enhanced Central Asian counterterrorism cooperation;
  - Engaging Russia and China in Central Asian counterterrorism efforts;
  - Helping Central Asian authorities reform their prison systems;
  - Pushing to bring the counterterrorism legislation of Central Asian countries in line with EU directives and human rights laws; and

- Convening a “best practices” conference on successful counter-radicalization and extremist demobilization programs.

Though there are significant differences among them, the Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek governments abet radicalization with shortsighted policies, making them imperfect partners. This will remain the case as long as authoritarianism, kleptocracy, and the selective suppression of religious practice continue to characterize these regimes.



# FROM THE FERGHANA VALLEY TO SOUTH WAZIRISTAN

## THE EVOLVING THREAT OF CENTRAL ASIAN JIHADISTS

### Introduction

When Admiral Dennis Blair, the U.S. director of national intelligence, delivered the intelligence community's annual threat assessment to Congress in February 2009, he painted a bleak picture of post-Soviet Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Describing Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as a morass of “highly personalized politics, weak institutions, and growing inequalities,” Blair argued that they are “ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by Islamic violent extremism, poor economic development, and problems associated with energy, water, and food distribution.”<sup>2</sup>

The Obama administration has put Afghanistan and Pakistan at the top of its foreign policy agenda. Blair's well-founded pessimism about their northern neighbors reminds us of a frequently ignored variable in the AfPak equation—the 60 million people who call Central Asia home. Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a dim tide of repression, corruption, and poverty has submerged the region's once-bright promise. If it fades further, the broader goal of “disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda” in Central Asia will become that much more difficult to achieve.

Washington's AfPak policy needs to expand its field of vision to include Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. All three nations suffer from a combustible combination of poor governance and potential militancy. Tajikistan, which endured a debilitating civil war from 1992 to 1997, and Uzbekistan border Afghanistan. Drug smuggling routes link all three nations to the poppy fields in the Afghan south, and militant networks now extend from Pakistan up through Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

The declining global economy and the collapse of migrant worker remittances have hit the three countries hard.<sup>3</sup> And ongoing military and intelligence operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan have disrupted safe havens used by Central Asian militants, spurring an unknown number of fighters to look homeward for a new front in their struggle to restore the caliphate.

For these reasons, a serious strategy for eliminating jihadism in Central and South Asia must include Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This report reviews the progress and prospects

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1. The term “Central Asia” is here understood to mean Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

2. Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 12, 2009, p. 27.

3. International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis*, Asia Report no. 183, January 5, 2010, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central\\_asia/183\\_central\\_asia\\_\\_\\_migrants\\_and\\_economic\\_crisis.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central_asia/183_central_asia___migrants_and_economic_crisis.pdf).



Map 1. Southern Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Northern Pakistan



Source: Google Earth™ Mapping Service.

of militancy there, examines its interrelation with events in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and offers specific recommendations for an integrated regional strategy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda–style jihadism throughout Central Asia.

## Scope and Sources

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are the center of gravity for Central Asia's violent extremists outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and they stand at the center of this analysis. Although Kazakh and Turkmen fighters can be found in the ranks of Central Asia's jihadist groups and some reports suggest a degree of militant activity in Kazakhstan, we found no evidence of significant militant networks in these countries.<sup>4</sup> As a result, this assessment does not address those countries directly.

4. For more on the Kazakh link, see Daniel Kimmage, "Analysis: Kazakh Breakthrough on Uzbek Terror Case," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 15, 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1055882.html>. The International Crisis Group also reports that "the number of Islamists in Kyrgyz and Kazakh prisons is small but growing, in both size and political significance." International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, Asia Report no. 97, December 15, 2009, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central\\_asia/b97\\_central\\_asia\\_\\_\\_islamists\\_in\\_prison.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central_asia/b97_central_asia___islamists_in_prison.pdf).

This report is based on open sources, interviews in Washington, D.C., and several visits to Central Asia in 2008 and 2009.<sup>5</sup> Given the risk to our sources in the region, many are cited anonymously. We acknowledge that key questions about the current composition, capabilities, and resources of Central Asia's jihadist networks are difficult to answer with open sources, a challenge compounded by the relative lack of reliable, free media in the region. Despite these limitations, we feel that open sources and field reporting provide significant insights into current conditions and trends and can form the basis for rigorous analysis and informed judgments.

## Militant Islam in Central Asia

We argue that the U.S. strategy to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda” in Afghanistan and Pakistan should be expanded to include Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Our thesis rests on the judgment that Central Asia's jihadists<sup>6</sup> pose a potentially grave threat to regional stability and international security. They operate in a geographically contiguous and increasingly inter-linked environment that stretches from Pakistan's safe havens up through the Ferghana Valley. Ongoing hostilities and deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan could transform what has been a relatively minor problem into a potent destabilizing factor in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The time to address this issue is now, before it metastasizes.

Unfortunately, years of intemperate and biased assessments have muddied the waters of Central Asian jihadism to a state of near-impenetrable murkiness. By some accounts, regional and external governments manipulate the menace of armed Islamist groups for political gains,<sup>7</sup> going so far as to stage terror attacks to further this nefarious agenda.<sup>8</sup> Others have warned for years that militant networks in Central Asia are already opening up into the next front of the global jihad.<sup>9</sup>

Both perspectives have some validity, but each obscures almost as much as it illuminates. The skeptics ignore the demonstrated presence of jihadist groups and their clandestine support networks. The fearmongers exaggerate the threat that small groups of extremists pose and downplay the gains authoritarian states reap from dramatizing the militant menace. Meanwhile, the historic drivers of radicalization in Central Asia persist and, in some cases, have worsened, making extremist movements sustainable and increasing their appeal to a larger pool of potential recruits.

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5. Interview sources included journalists, academics, and representatives from nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, foreign and local governments, the private sector, and extremist groups.

6. The term “jihadist” refers to a violent extremist who espouses the theories and practices popularly associated with al Qaeda and allied movements. The known organizational structures for this phenomenon in Central Asia are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The designation does not include groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir with no proven record of violence.

7. For example, according to a Kyrgyz member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the IMU, al Qaeda, and the Taliban were all created by the United States to serve its interests. When asked, this individual stated that this was a commonly held view. Author interview in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

8. Craig Murray, “The Mysterious Islamic Jihad Union,” September 8, 2007, [http://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2007/09/the\\_mysterious.html](http://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2007/09/the_mysterious.html).

9. See “Unrest in Uzbekistan: Fata Fergana [sic],” *The Economist*, June 11, 2009; “Uzbekistan: If a Taliban Outpost Falls in Pakistan, Is the Ripple Felt in the Ferghana Valley?” *Eurasianet*, May 26, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav052609.shtml>; or Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking Penguin, 2008).

## State Capacity

Developing intelligence on and responding to these threats is the responsibility of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan (SNB), the Ministry of Security in Tajikistan (MoS) and the State Committee of National Security in Kyrgyzstan (GKNB). Although they all evolved from the Soviet KGB system, they have unequal capabilities, and the degree to which they focus on militancy varies from country to country.

Sources inside and outside the region characterize Uzbekistan's SNB as more professional, better educated, and generally better aware of regional and global events than its regional counterparts. Uzbekistan's larger national budget provides the organization with greater human and financial resources than its peers. The SNB is also part of a pervasive surveillance apparatus that not only combats legitimate security threats, but also underpins a robust police state always on the prowl for real and imagined dissent. As such, it acts as both a bulwark against violent extremism and a driver of the very phenomenon it seeks to combat.

This duality pervades the security architecture of Central Asia, but it is particularly striking in Uzbekistan. For example, the SNB uses the country's *mahallas*, traditional neighborhood structures that provide governance and welfare services to local communities, to search for evidence of extremism among the population. But the practice has perverted an artifact of traditional urban culture into a "perfect invention for spying on the population"<sup>10</sup> and a vehicle for flagrant rights abuses.<sup>11</sup>

Informed observers see the Kyrgyz GKNB, on the other hand, as less capable than the Uzbek SNB and less willing to confront the militant groups that use Kyrgyz territory to mount attacks on Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan "is generally considered 'an attractive base for extremist and insurgent groups due to its porous borders [and] the weakness of its security forces.'"<sup>12</sup> Inattention from senior figures in the Bakiyev regime, whose primary concerns in recent years have been self-enrichment and political maneuvering, compounds existing deficiencies in the security service. As a longtime observer of security and political affairs in Central Asia indicated, Maxim Bakiyev, the influential son of the Kyrgyz president, is so obsessed with wealth building that he has ignored the guerrilla threat in the south.<sup>13</sup> Sadly, the situation is indicative rather than exceptional.

The preoccupations of Tajikistan's MoS are internal political threats to President Emomali Rahmon and counterintelligence activities focused on Uzbekistan.<sup>14</sup> Militants' documented use of Tajikistan as a staging area for attacks on Uzbekistan appears to be a lesser concern. This contrasts with the Uzbek SNB, which views the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and related groups as existential threats to the regime and subsequently front-loads its counterterrorism efforts with aggressive measures, including "harassment, detention, and torture of many suspected members of these groups."<sup>15</sup>

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10. Author interview in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

11. Human Rights Watch, "From House to House: Abuses by Mahalla Committees," September 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0903full.pdf>.

12. Stéphane Lefebvre and Roger McDermott, "Russia and the Intelligence Services of Central Asia," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 274.

13. Author interview in Washington, D.C.

14. Lefebvre and McDermott, "Russia and the Intelligence Services," p. 279.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 283

## Militant Networks in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan

The main organizations carrying out militant activities in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, and an offshoot called the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). Other splinter groups affiliated with the IMU or the Tajik opposition also exist.<sup>16</sup> The identities and motivations of fighters are often unclear. Some operate in organized militant groups, while others are freelance vigilantes with a rough idea of Islamic justice, armed narcotics traffickers, or some combination thereof.<sup>17</sup>

Fluid and situational organizational affiliations conspire with tendentious and incomplete sources to place a coherent picture of these shifting entities almost, if not entirely, out of reach. What can and should be grasped is the following: The most dangerous militant networks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan today grew out of the IMU after the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> They espouse ideas consonant with the global jihadist ideology of al Qaeda, but with a greater focus on Central Asia, particularly on the regime of Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov. They have flirted with al Qaeda's methods, such as suicide bombings, but have eschewed extreme tactics like mass-casualty attacks within Central Asia in favor of "regime targets."

Security crackdowns in Central Asia and the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan spread the neo-IMU networks as far as Pakistan by the early 2000s. As they wandered, they mingled with a veritable alphabet soup of global jihadist militancy, developing ties with groups and individuals far removed from their origins in the Ferghana Valley. We trace some of those perturbations here, reminding readers that the violence that continues to roil Pakistan and Afghanistan will almost certainly impact the myriad manifestations of the neo-IMU.

### IMU

The IMU is Central Asia's largest and most important militant organization, and all known strains of Central Asian jihadism are linked to it in some fashion. Its roots lie in Namangan, a small Uzbek community in the Ferghana Valley. It was there in 1990 that Tohir Yo'ldosh<sup>19</sup> and Jumaboy Khojayevev emerged as key figures in a local movement to bring about a more Islamic way of life after decades of Soviet rule. Yo'ldosh was a homespun mullah, and Khojayevev, who would later become known as Juma Namangani, had served as a paratrooper with the Soviet Army in Afghanistan, where he rediscovered his Islamic identity.<sup>20</sup> The two soon formed an organization called Adolat (Justice).

The specifics of Adolat's avowedly Islamist political program are difficult to ascertain. Ahmed Rashid quotes a representative at the time as saying, "We want an Islamic revolution here and

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16. Author interview in New York, N.Y.

17. Ibid.

18. Given their common origins, the networks might be grouped under the rubric of a "neo-IMU," even though some of the fighters soldier on under the banner of the original IMU while others have broken off to fight under other flags.

19. Yo'ldosh's name allows for a bewildering variety of English transliterations, further complicated by its loss of the Russian "-ev" suffix in some renderings. The official Uzbek version is Tohir Yo'ldosh, which we use here.

20. Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 138. Rashid's sober account of the pre-history of the IMU in this book is based primarily on original reporting.

now.”<sup>21</sup> But Adeeb Khalid notes that Adolat was “as much a product of Soviet culture as of Islam,” adding that “we do not know what its founders meant by the term ‘Islamic state’ in 1991.”<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Solih, the exiled Uzbek opposition figure, wrote in a 2000 memoir that local authorities initially paid little heed to Adolat’s religious rhetoric and even cooperated with the group on crime-fighting initiatives.<sup>23</sup>

In December 1991, only months after Uzbekistan had become an independent state, Adolat members occupied the local Communist Party headquarters in Namangan. President Islam Karimov—the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic’s Communist Party head, whose power would only be sealed in the sovereign nation’s first presidential election at the end of the month—traveled to Namangan, where he met with Yo’ldosh and his followers. By some accounts, Karimov tried to placate the demonstrators with promises of efforts to strengthen the Islamic basis of national legislation.<sup>24</sup> A short video clip of the meeting shows a hesitant-looking Karimov nervously addressing what appear to be hundreds of chanting Adolat members.<sup>25</sup>

By 1992, Karimov had sufficiently strengthened his hold over the country to ban Adolat, and Yo’ldosh and Namangani fled Uzbekistan for neighboring Tajikistan, where local Islamists formed one group in an incipient civil war. Yo’ldosh subsequently traveled throughout the Muslim world, networking with fellow radicals, sympathetic intelligence services, and wealthy donors.<sup>26</sup> Namangani remained in Tajikistan, where he applied his knowledge of Soviet combat tactics against the neo-communist forces. Namangani was an important field commander during the conflict, serving as the deputy to Mirzo Ziyoev, chief of staff of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO).<sup>27</sup>

When the Tajik civil war ended in 1997, Namangani opposed the cease-fire agreement.<sup>28</sup> Eventually Ziyoev convinced him to stand down; Namangani settled in the town of Hoit in Tajikistan’s Karategin Valley.<sup>29</sup> It was there that Yo’ldosh and Namangani reunited to plan their next move.<sup>30</sup> Amid crackdowns against opposition-minded Muslims in Uzbekistan, the two men felt increasing pressure to renew their struggle against President Karimov. By 1998, with Yo’ldosh a guest of the Taliban in Kabul, the two had branded their group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek government blamed the IMU for a series of six bombings in Tashkent in February 1999 that killed 16 people, but no convincing evidence emerged to attribute the attacks. Studies by outside researchers have identified other plausible explanations for the violence, such as clan dis-

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21. Ibid., p. 139.

22. Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), p. 147.

23. Muhammad Solih, *Yo’lnoma* (ERK, 2000), p. 289.

24. “Тахир Юлдаш: «Крах США близок, ждите нас в Вашингтоне»” [Tohir Yo’ldosh: The end of the USA is near, wait for us in Washington], Ferghana.ru, October 15, 2007, <http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5403>.

25. “Тоҳир Йўлдош ўлими 100 % тасдиқланмади” [Tohir Yo’ldosh’s death has not been 100 percent confirmed], RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service, October 02, 2009, <http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/1841758.html>.

26. Ibid.

27. Senator Gordon H. Smith, *Statement of the Honorable Gordon H. Smith before the Senate Judiciary Committee*, March 21, 2002, [http://judiciary.senate.gov/hearings/testimony.cfm?id=196&wit\\_id=345](http://judiciary.senate.gov/hearings/testimony.cfm?id=196&wit_id=345).

28. Ibid.

29. Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 144.

30. Ibid., p. 145.

putes within the Uzbek elite.<sup>31</sup> A June 1999 trial of the alleged perpetrators featured elements that would resurface in subsequent trials: Sweeping accusations that brought together varied foes of the government (in this case, the IMU and exiled opposition leader Muhammad Solih), a reliance on confessions that were likely obtained under duress, and a general failure to conform to international norms of investigative or judicial practice.<sup>32</sup>

The first attributable action of the newly proclaimed IMU took place later that summer. In July and August 1999, between 200 and 700 fighters—the largest group of which Namangani led personally—left Tajikistan and seized several villages in the Kyrgyz portion of the Ferghana Valley in the hope of using this territory to launch attacks into Uzbekistan.<sup>33</sup> By October 1999, Kyrgyz forces, backed by Uzbek and Kazakh aircraft, repelled the guerrillas.<sup>34</sup> In August 2000, roughly a year after the first incursion into Kyrgyzstan, another column consisting of dozens of IMU and other militants attacked again, only to be turned back by October.<sup>35</sup> Namangani did not carry out an offensive in 2001, having already relocated to Afghanistan with 300 IMU fighters aboard Russian military helicopters in January of that year.<sup>36</sup>

In Afghanistan, Namangani linked up with Yo'ldosh. The two men then led the IMU as it fought alongside al Qaeda and Taliban forces, first against the Northern Alliance and then against coalition forces in Operation Enduring Freedom. But their defense of the Taliban regime in October 2001 cost the IMU dearly; it suffered many losses, including Namangani himself. And as the Taliban crumbled and fled under the U.S. onslaught, the IMU's brief respite in the Afghan sanctuary came to an end, ushering in a new phase that would begin with displacement and disintegration.

## The IMU after the Fall of the Taliban

Uzbek adherents of salafi-jihadist ideology had cohered into a movement in the 1990s—from the emergence of Adolat in Namangan in the early 1990s through participation in the Tajik civil war to an uneasy haven in Tajikistan in 1997. Consolidation came in 1998, when the formation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was announced with Juma Namangani and Tohir Yo'ldosh at its helm and Afghanistan as its base of operations. The IMU then integrated itself more closely in the global jihadist movement in 1998–2001, rubbing elbows with al Qaeda and the Taliban in the safest haven it had ever enjoyed, even as it made forays into its Central Asian heartland.

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 ended this jihadist idyll and set the IMU on a trajectory of fragmentation and reconstitution that was, in its broad outlines, shared by al Qaeda

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31. Abdumannob Polat and Nickolai Butkevich, "Unraveling the Mystery of the Tashkent Bombings: Theories and Implications," International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research, March 1999, [http://iicas.org/english/Krsten\\_4\\_12\\_00.htm](http://iicas.org/english/Krsten_4_12_00.htm).

32. Rashid, *Jihad*, p. 152.

33. Jim Nichol, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, Congressional Research Service, September 21, 2009, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf>, p. 10. The estimates of total fighters come from Ikbol Mirasaitov and Alisher Saipov, "Ex-gunmen of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Claim That Their Organization Is No More," *Fergana.ru*, April 3, 2006, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=1386>.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Ahmed Rashid, "They're Only Sleeping: Why Militant Islamicists in Central Asia Aren't Going to Go Away," *New Yorker*, January 14, 2002, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/01/14/020114fa\\_FACT?currentPage=6](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/01/14/020114fa_FACT?currentPage=6).

and the Taliban.<sup>37</sup> Juma Namangani, the group's military leader, was killed, leaving Yo'ldosh alone in charge. According to Ikbol Mirsaitov and Alisher Saipov, two journalists who interviewed several former IMU members in the Iranian city of Zahidan in 2006, the IMU split into three groups after the early phases of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom.<sup>38</sup> IMU members who remained committed to Yo'ldosh and his cause relocated to Pakistan. A larger group of fighters who had grown disillusioned with the IMU left the organization for good, settling in Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Middle East. The third and final group consisted of demobilized IMU fighters who returned to Central Asia, either taking advantage of amnesties offered in Uzbekistan or settling elsewhere in the region.

The reconstitution of the Uzbek jihadist movement after its expulsion from Afghanistan would lead, by around 2007, to the public emergence of two distinct organizations—the IMU and the IJU—each based in Pakistan with its own leadership and external communications network. But the period 2002–2007 is one of confusion, with a paucity of reliably sourced reports and a multiplicity of interpretations reflecting what appears to have been a time of considerable disarray among Uzbek jihadists themselves.

One account describes a 2002 split in the IMU that produced a splinter group first known as the Islamic Jihad Group, under which name it purportedly carried out a series of terror attacks in Uzbekistan in 2004. This version of events, laid out most completely in a 2008 NEFA Foundation report, details a conflict over strategy at an IMU shura in 2002—with Yo'ldosh and his comrades-in-arms disagreeing over whether to target the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan or engage in global jihad—and the emergence of a splinter group.<sup>39</sup> The NEFA report of the IJU's genesis, which virtually all subsequent accounts duly cite,<sup>40</sup> rests on an unsure foundation, however—U.S. government and EU sources from a later date that themselves cite no supporting evidence, one 2006 article in a Pakistani newspaper, and one 2005 article in a government-controlled Uzbek news outlet.<sup>41</sup>

The story of an offshoot from the IMU after a 2002 split may contain some truth, or a great deal, or none—available sources preclude a definitive judgment. The same goes for the attribution of 2004 violence in Uzbekistan. In late March 2004, a bomb blast in Bukhara and a series of suicide

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37. For a good account of the Taliban's fragmentation and reconstitution see Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "The Taliban in Their Own Words," *Newsweek*, October 31, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/216235>.

38. Mirasaitov and Saipov, "Ex-gunmen of the Islamic Movement."

39. Ronald Sandee, "The Islamic Jihad Union," NEFA Foundation, October 14, 2008, <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefaijuoct08.pdf>.

40. For an example of a report that relies heavily on NEFA, see Einar Wigen, "Islamic Jihad Union: Al-Qaida's Key to the Turkic World?" Norwegian Defense and Research Establishment (FFI), February 23, 2009. Guido Steinberg (see "A Turkish Al-Qaeda: The Islamic Jihad Union and the Internationalization of Uzbek Jihadism," [http://www.swp-berlin.org/common/get\\_document.php?asset\\_id=5147](http://www.swp-berlin.org/common/get_document.php?asset_id=5147)) is somewhat more cautious. For a skeptical take, see Joshua Foust, "Are Terror Groups Faked? Does the IJU Even Exist?" at <http://www.registan.net/index.php/2009/06/20/are-terror-groups-faked-does-the-iju-even-exist/>.

41. The full range of sources the NEFA report cites for the 2002 split include Europol, TE-SAT 2008, *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (2008), p. 18; Ismail Khan, "Rocket attack plan was approved by Al Qaeda," *Dawn*, November 4, 2006, <http://www.dawn.com/2006/11/04/top4.htm>; Bundes Verfassungsschutz, *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2007 Vorabfassung*, p. 180; [http://www.bmi.bund.de/Internet/Content/Common/Anlagen/Broschueren/2008/VSB\\_\\_Vorabfassung,templateId=raw,property=publicationFile.pdf/VSB\\_Vorabfassung.pdf](http://www.bmi.bund.de/Internet/Content/Common/Anlagen/Broschueren/2008/VSB__Vorabfassung,templateId=raw,property=publicationFile.pdf/VSB_Vorabfassung.pdf) (inactive link); <http://www.fdic.gov/news/news/financial/2008/fil08060.pdf> (inactive link); [http://www.interpol.int/public/data/noticesun/notices/data/2008/71/2008\\_19971.asp](http://www.interpol.int/public/data/noticesun/notices/data/2008/71/2008_19971.asp) (inactive link); Huquq, Tashkent, January 5, 2005, p. 6.

bombings and shootouts in Tashkent left nearly 50 people dead, almost all of them either attackers or police.<sup>42</sup> The attacks featured the first use of suicide bombing as a tactic in Central Asia. More suicide attacks followed in late July, as bombers struck the U.S. and Israeli embassies and Uzbek Prosecutor General's Office, killing four law-enforcement personnel (in addition to the three bombers).<sup>43</sup>

Several claims of responsibility emerged on the Internet during and after the March 2004 violence—some in the name of “Islamic Jihad,” others in the name of “Jihad Islamic Group”—but none referenced a known quantity or provided corroborating evidence to bolster their credibility.<sup>44</sup> For its part, the Uzbek government blamed the IMU, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and mysterious “jamoats,” or “groups,” a story prosecutors stuck to in a stage-managed trial in the fall.<sup>45</sup> Subsequent arrests in Kazakhstan further muddied the waters, bringing to light an IMU-linked group called the Mujahedin of Central Asia with ties to the violence in Uzbekistan in 2004.<sup>46</sup>

Subsequent accounts, like the 2008 NEFA report that unambiguously attributes all of the 2004 violence in Uzbekistan to the IJU, appear to have back-projected somewhat more certainty than was evident at the time. (According to NEFA, the Islamic Jihad Group changed its name to Islamic Jihad Union in 2005.) The U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) also paints a confident picture of IJU involvement in its profile of the group.<sup>47</sup> As with the alleged 2002 split in the IMU, however, it is equally possible that the 2004 violence, which bore the earmarks of the IMU's bitter opposition to the Karimov regime but not the imprint of al Qaeda-style mass casualty attacks against civilian targets, was the work of the regrouping remnants of a post-Afghanistan IMU:

The neo-IMU would seem to consist of surviving members of the original IMU who fled Afghanistan after late 2001 and regrouped elsewhere, some in remote areas of Pakistan and others in Central Asia. The neo-IMU may also have drawn current or former adherents of HT in Central Asia, and particularly Uzbekistan, who wished to take more direct action.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever the case may be with the 2004 violence in Uzbekistan and the initial meanderings of the IMU after the loss of its Afghan stronghold, firmer evidence of a split and the real existence of an internationally active Uzbek-linked group calling itself Islamic Jihad Union emerged in 2006–2007. In November 2006, Pakistani authorities arrested IJU members in Islamabad after they tried to attack presidential offices, the legislature, and the headquarters of military intelligence with rockets.<sup>49</sup>

In September 2007, German authorities detained two Germans who had converted to Islam and a German of Turkish descent in the town of Medebach-Oberschledorn; they were in posses-

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42. For detailed accounts of the violence in Uzbekistan in 2004, see Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Central Asia Report, archived at [http://www.rferl.org/archive/Reports\\_Archive/20040101/865/865.html](http://www.rferl.org/archive/Reports_Archive/20040101/865/865.html).

43. Kimmage, “Kazakh Breakthrough on Uzbek Terror Case.”

44. Daniel Kimmage, “Terror in Uzbekistan: The Aftermath,” Radio Free Europe/Liberty Radio Liberty, April 14, 2004.

45. Daniel Kimmage, “Uzbek Terror Trial a Missed Opportunity,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 1, 2004, and Kimmage, “Terror in Uzbekistan: The Aftermath.”

46. Kimmage, “Kazakh Breakthrough on Uzbek Terror Case.”

47. National Counterterrorism Center, <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/iju.html>.

48. Kimmage, “Kazakh Breakthrough on Uzbek Terror Case.”

49. Nichol, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications*, p. 12.



sion of 730 kilograms of bomb-making chemicals.<sup>50</sup> All three men were suspected of visiting terrorist training camps during visits to Pakistan and were thought to have ongoing contact with the IJU. In an online statement, the IJU—which by this time had developed an online media wing—claimed responsibility for the so-called Sauerland plot and identified the U.S. airbase at Ramstein and American and Uzbek consulates in Germany as the targets.<sup>51</sup> Though a failure, the Sauerland plot highlighted the IJU’s ability to successfully attract Germans and Turks to its ranks. This has probably been driven in part by the group’s propaganda, which features releases in these languages.<sup>52</sup>

According to multiple sources, the IJU coordinates its attacks in Afghanistan, where it is also active, with the Haqqani network, a Taliban faction led by Jalaluddin Haqqani.<sup>53</sup> The organization has also developed ties to al Qaeda. In an IJU video released on May 28, 2009, for instance, a senior al Qaeda leader named Abu Yahya al-Libi can be seen alongside IJU leader Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih.<sup>54</sup>

At present it seems clear that the IJU is active in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and that its efforts to retain a presence in Uzbekistan are somewhat limited. On April 4, 2009, the IJU carried out a suicide attack in Miranshah, North Waziristan, killing one Pakistani soldier and wounding seven civilians.<sup>55</sup> On May 28, 2009, the IJU claimed responsibility for an attack on a police check-point near the Kyrgyz border in Khanabad, Uzbekistan, involving as many as 25 militants armed with rocket-propelled grenades.<sup>56</sup> The group also took credit for a suicide attack in Andijon two days earlier.<sup>57</sup>

As for the IMU, by 2008 the clear consensus among outside observers was that the group, which had reportedly sparred with local Pashtun tribesmen in South Waziristan in 2007,<sup>58</sup> was “dispersed and decimated.”<sup>59</sup> Despite aggressive efforts to root them out, however, some IMU-

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50. Matthais Gebauer and Yassin Musharbash, “Islamist Terrorists Planned Massive Attacks in Germany,” *Spiegel Online*, September 5, 2007 (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,504037,00.html>).

51. German Federal Ministry of the Interior, “IJU Claims Responsibility for Foiled Attacks in Germany,” September 11, 2007, [http://www.en.bmi.bund.de/cln\\_012/nn\\_1016300/Internet/Content/Nachrichten/Pressemitteilungen/2007/09/Bekennerschreiben\\_\\_en.html](http://www.en.bmi.bund.de/cln_012/nn_1016300/Internet/Content/Nachrichten/Pressemitteilungen/2007/09/Bekennerschreiben__en.html).

52. In the past few years, IJU has released videos featuring German-speaking militants, among them Eric Breininger, a German-born convert who joined IJU, and Cüneyt Ciftci, a German of Turkish descent who killed two American soldiers during a suicide VBIED attack in the province of Khost. These videos can be viewed on the NEFA Foundation’s Web site (<http://www1.nefafoundation.org/index.html>). Since 2007, Turkish seems to have been the primary language of IJU propaganda.

53. See Jeremy Binnie and Joanna Wright, “The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *CTC Sentinel* 2, issue 8 (August 2009): 5, and Einar Wigen, “Islamic Jihad Union: Al-Qaida’s Key to the Turkic World?” p. 17.

54. Binnie and Wright, “The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters,” p. 6.

55. *Ibid.*

56. “Uzbekistan: If a Taliban Outpost Falls in Pakistan, Is the Ripple Felt in the Fergana Valley?” *Eurasianet*.

57. Binnie and Wright, “The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters,” p. 7. See also a June 5, 2009, statement by the IJU from Sodiqlar.com: *Исломий жиҳод*” иттиҳоди амирининг бош ноиб баёнот беради [Chief Deputy of the Islamic Jihad Union’s Amir Makes a Statement], <http://www.sodiqlar.com/uz/index.php?newsid=184> (dead link).

58. Daniel Kimmage, “Central Asia: Has the IMU Reached the End of the Line?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 30, 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075600.html>.

59. Author interview, Washington, D.C.

affiliated individuals remained underground in Central Asia.<sup>60</sup> According to a highly reliable source, the IMU still maintains support networks in the region. Some evidence of this can be seen in Kyrgyzstan, where the security services have captured IMU men whom they characterize as “logisticians,” clearly differentiating these individuals from the IMU “terrorists” they have dealt with in the past.<sup>61</sup> These arrests suggest that IMU operatives are setting up lines of communication and safe houses, presumably for future operations, and that the group’s clandestine network has some financial resources.<sup>62</sup>

Although the covert presence of IMU/IJU members and supporters within inhabited areas of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is a concern, the danger posed by these individuals should not be overblown. Local intelligence services, relying on well-developed networks of government informants, make high-profile activities such as training and operations very difficult to conceal in populated locations. This remains true in most of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, even though their security apparatuses are less capable than in more tightly controlled Uzbekistan.

In parts of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where the writ of the central government is weak, intelligence gathering is less effective, giving IMU/IJU members and affiliates greater freedom of movement and operation. These locations include the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan and the parts of Tajikistan only indirectly controlled by Dushanbe such as Rasht, Tavildara, and Badakhshan. Although these areas are certainly more permissive for IMU/IJU fighters than urban centers, it would be hyperbolic to refer to them as safe havens like Afghanistan before 2001 or present-day North Waziristan.<sup>63</sup> Central Asia’s weak and porous borders mean that operatives can organize in these tenuously controlled hinterlands to strike elsewhere. Uzbekistan’s heavily policed territory is likely to remain a hard nut for Uzbek jihadists to crack, however, as the proximity of 2009 IJU strikes to the border with Kyrgyzstan suggests.

The larger threat to regional stability comes from fighters who left Central Asia and remain mobilized in South Asia. Although estimates about the number of these individuals vary, they are seasoned veterans who have fought in many different terrorist operations and insurgent campaigns. According to Abubakar Siddique, the IMU’s “stronghold” is located in and around Wana in South Waziristan—though more recent evidence suggests that this base of operations may be near the village of Kanigoram, also in South Waziristan.<sup>64</sup>

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60. During author interviews in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the Ferghana Valley was identified as an area where IMU members were hidden. The Uzbek cities of Namangan, Andijon, and Kyrgyzstan’s Batken Province were highlighted as probable locations for these individuals. Areas of Tajikistan controlled by former members of the UTO were also identified as home to IMU members.

61. Author interview, Washington, D.C.

62. Ibid.

63. As one astute observer of the region stated, the undergoverned areas of Tajikistan “have their own businesses going on and, at least for now, they don’t want outsiders interfering.” This attitude explains why the “Tavildarian warlords collaborated with Dushanbe to expel militants in the summer of 2009, whereas just one year before Dushanbe could not assert control over these areas.” The same observer also noted that Kyrgyzstan too is “quickly becoming more hostile to extremists.” Author interview, Washington, D.C.

64. Abubakar Siddique, “The Pace of ‘Talibanization’ Appears to Accelerate in Pakistani Tribal Areas,” *Eurasianet*, April 26, 2007, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav042607.shtml>. According to the *New York Times*, 1,500 Uzbeks are located near Kanigoram (Jane Perlez, “By Air and Ground, Pakistani Soldiers Penetrate Militant Heartland,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/19/world/asia/19pstan.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/19/world/asia/19pstan.html?_r=1&ref=world)). The fact that Yo’ldosh was reportedly killed there may indicate that these men are affiliated with IMU.

The IMU maintains an active external communications operation through a dedicated and increasingly active Web site in Uzbek.<sup>65</sup> Recent communiqués suggest close cooperation with both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban—but not al Qaeda, whom the IMU rarely mentions—and the presence of a contingent of allied foreigners, including Germans.<sup>66</sup> Ideologically, the IMU’s message is increasingly one of global jihad—a January 2010 video showed Tohir Yo’ldosh saying, “Our goal is not only conquering Afghanistan and Uzbekistan . . . our goal is to conquer the entire world.”<sup>67</sup>

The IJU’s dedicated Uzbek-language Web site, Sodiqlar, appears to have been defunct for some time. The group distributes its media products primarily in Turkish on a Turkish jihadist Web site,<sup>68</sup> though the frequency of IJU statements and videos seems to have dropped off in recent months. Interestingly, an October 22, 2009, statement by the IJU in Turkish notes that the group is not connected to al Qaeda and stresses that “our primary goal is to set up a monotheistic system [*tevhidi sistemi*] in opposition to the tyrannical system [*tağuti sistem*] in Central Asia.”<sup>69</sup> Genuine or not, the public disavowal of ties to al Qaeda and focus on Central Asia are somewhat ironic, given that the conventional wisdom on the group appears to be that it has a more global-jihadist focus than the IMU.<sup>70</sup>

Significant information gaps on the nature and extent of the IMU/IJU split highlights not only the limits of open sources on this issue, but also, and more broadly, the weakness of an organization-centric analytic paradigm. The IMU and IJU may exist as discrete and even competitive entities, they may cooperate,<sup>71</sup> or they may be orderly public facades concealing the chaotic to-and-fro movements of Uzbek extremists and a smattering of foreigners who merge, separate, and recombine for a variety of personal, ideological, and other reasons.

Ultimately, we have compelling evidence that a group of active Central Asian jihadists survived the collapse of the Taliban regime and are primarily based in Pakistan. According to a well-informed source from the U.S. Department of Defense currently based in South Asia, the combined number of IMU/IJU fighters in Pakistan and Afghanistan is around 1,200–1,500.<sup>72</sup> Some of these individuals are looking to reestablish their presence in Central Asia. Others may join them in the future.

## Safe Havens . . . Still?

Central Asian militant groups have depended on external sanctuaries since being driven from their native countries in the 1990s. The safe havens used by these groups have been pushed further

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65. The IMU’s Web site is at <http://www.furqon.com>.

66. IMU martyr list and operational update are from [www.furqon.com](http://www.furqon.com).

67. “Die Welt: Tahir Yuldashev Wants to Conquer the World in his new Propaganda Video,” *Ferghana.ru*, January 13, 2010, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=1530&mode=snews>.

68. See <http://www.sehadetzamani.com/index.php>; the IJU blog at <http://elifmedya.wordpress.com/> no longer seems to work.

69. See [http://www.sehadetzamani.com/haber\\_detay.php?haber\\_id=2273](http://www.sehadetzamani.com/haber_detay.php?haber_id=2273).

70. The FFI report states: “The new group [the IJU] espoused a more internationalist, global jihad-oriented approach, apparently as a result of the ideological strife that had emerged within the movement.”

71. Author correspondence with Department of Defense official.

72. Ibid. Although the source was confident in their estimate, they highlighted the difficulty of including the facilitation and enabler networks that operate in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

south over time and are now concentrated in Pakistan's tribal belt. Today, these areas face increasing pressure from a combination of ethnic violence, aerial bombardment, and Pakistan Army operations.

Clashes between local Pashtun tribesmen and Central Asian fighters are one threat to the security of these safe havens. This tension was evident in March 2007, when clashes between Uzbek fighters and local tribesmen in South Waziristan reportedly killed 160 people, 130 of them foreign fighters.<sup>73</sup> A month earlier, tribesmen had fought Uzbeks under Yo'ldosh's control in South Waziristan, forcing the latter to seek protection from the late Baitullah Mehsud.<sup>74</sup>

A far bigger threat to Central Asian fighters in the tribal areas comes from ongoing strikes of unmanned Predator and Reaper drones operated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). These attacks have created serious leadership disruptions within both the IMU and IJU. On October 31, 2008, a drone attacked a compound in Wana, South Waziristan, that contained Yo'ldosh and a Pakistani Taliban leader named Mullah Nazir.<sup>75</sup> The U.S. government initially thought it had killed Yo'ldosh in this attack, but subsequent evidence proved otherwise.

On August 27, 2009, Yo'ldosh's luck reportedly ran out when a missile from a drone struck a house in Kanigoram, South Waziristan.<sup>76</sup> On September 28, 2009, a man claiming to be Yo'ldosh's bodyguard called Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Uzbek service to report that Yo'ldosh had died of his wounds a day after the missile strike.<sup>77</sup> An anonymous Taliban commander quoted by the Pakistani press confirmed that Yo'ldosh had been killed in the blast.<sup>78</sup> Although a Taliban spokesman told the Associated Press that Yo'ldosh had not been killed,<sup>79</sup> and the IMU's Web site continued to release video and audio materials featuring Yo'ldosh after the strike, no evidence emerged that Yo'ldosh had survived.<sup>80</sup>

A CIA drone strike on September 14, 2009, near Mir Ali, North Waziristan, killed Najmiddin Kamolitdinovich Jalolov.<sup>81</sup> Jalolov, the leader of the IJU, had allegedly asked members of the Sauerland cell to carry out the attacks in Germany.<sup>82</sup> In January 2010, missiles were fired on a house in the Shaktoi area of South Waziristan believed to have been occupied by Usam Jan, Yo'ldosh's

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73. "Uzbeks Outstay Pashtun Welcome," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2007, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2007/03/2008525134826680697.html>.

74. Bruce Pannier and Abubakar Siddique, "Ten Years after IMU Raids, Central Asia Still Battling Militants," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 6, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Ten\\_Years\\_After\\_IMU\\_Raids\\_Central\\_Asia\\_Still\\_Battling\\_Militants/1794035.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Ten_Years_After_IMU_Raids_Central_Asia_Still_Battling_Militants/1794035.html).

75. Bill Roggio, "US Predators Strike Again in Waziristan," *Long War Journal*, October 31, 2008, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/us\\_predators\\_strike.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/us_predators_strike.php).

76. Bill Roggio, "Tahir Yuldashev Confirmed Killed in US Strike in South Waziristan," *Long War Journal*, October 4, 2009, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/tahir\\_yuldashev\\_conf.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/tahir_yuldashev_conf.php).

77. "Radio Ozodlik: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Leader Tahir Yuldashev Killed All Over Again?" *Ferghana.ru*, September 29, 2009, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=1389&mode=snews>.

78. "Taliban Confirm Uzbek Commander's Death in Drone Attack," *The News*, October 5, 2009, [http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=201636](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=201636).

79. "Uzbek Rebel 'Killed' in Pakistan," *BBC Online*, October 2, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8286315.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8286315.stm).

80. In his post-strike audio and video appearances, Yo'ldosh makes no reference to events after the date of his reported death.

81. Bill Roggio, "Two al Qaeda Leaders Reported Killed in North Waziristan Strike," *Long War Journal*, September 16, 2009, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/09/two\\_al\\_qaeda\\_leaders.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/09/two_al_qaeda_leaders.php).

82. Yassin Musharbash, "Jihad Leader Reported Killed in US Drone Attack," *Spiegel Online*, September 18, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,649978,00.html>.

purported replacement as the head of IMU.<sup>83</sup> Although it is unclear whether Jan was killed in the strike, four Uzbeks were confirmed dead.<sup>84</sup>

The greatest potential threat to Central Asian fighters in the tribal areas comes from Pakistani security forces, though the Pakistani government's on-and-off commitment to forceful action against militants is a significant mitigating factor. After years of peace deals and failed efforts, the Pakistani military finally pushed into Taliban-controlled areas in the Swat Valley and Buner District in May 2009. In addition, they also "softened up" South Waziristan with air strikes.<sup>85</sup> In May 2009, President Asif Ali Zardari pledged that the successful ground operations in Swat and Buner would be extended to South Waziristan.<sup>86</sup> Delays ensued, as Lieutenant-General Nadeem Ahmed stated in August that the Pakistan Army was "trying to create the 'right' conditions for a full-blown offensive in the rugged South Waziristan region by imposing a tight blockade on entry and exit points, and by pounding the militants from the air."<sup>87</sup> But on October 17, 2009, the South Waziristan offensive, named Operation Rah-e-Nejat (Path to Salvation), finally began.<sup>88</sup>

The campaigns in Swat, Buner, and South Waziristan displaced hundreds of thousands of people and disrupted foreign fighters in these areas. During their offensive in Swat, for example, the Pakistani government claimed to have captured Uzbek militants alongside Pashtun Taliban.<sup>89</sup> The South Waziristan offensive was especially harmful for IMU, which used the area as its base of operations. In late October 2009, General Athar Abbas, a Pakistan Army spokesman, reported that "quite a number of [Uzbek militants] have been killed" by the sweep.<sup>90</sup> This assertion was confirmed by a 20-minute propaganda film, released by the IMU in January 2010, that celebrated fighters from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as well as Russia, Germany, and Pakistan who had died while fighting the Pakistan Army in South Waziristan.<sup>91</sup>

Although the South Waziristan offensive was a blow to the IMU, it proved to be less than fatal. The Pakistani government telegraphed the operation six months in advance, providing ample opportunity for Central Asian militants to flee to other areas. According to local residents interviewed by a Pakistani paper, "Uzbeks were moving away from the area of fighting to find new safe havens in North Waziristan with their families."<sup>92</sup>

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83. "Officials: Suspected U.S. Drone Kills 20 in Pakistan," *USA Today*, January 17, 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-01-17-pakistan-drone-attack\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-01-17-pakistan-drone-attack_N.htm).

84. "Twenty Killed as Drones Attack Shakto Again," *Dawn*, January 18, 2010, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/03-at-least-10-killed-in-drone-strike-in-south-waziristan-ss-05>.

85. Ben Arnoldy, "Delayed Offensive Wears at Pakistan's Antiterror Credibility," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 24, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2009/0724/p06s04-wosc.html>.

86. *Ibid.*

87. Adam Entous, "Pakistan Needs 'Months' for Waziristan Push: General," Reuters, August 18, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSP485768>.

88. "The Pakistani Army Pushes on in South Waziristan," *The Economist*, October 20, 2009, [http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=14686889](http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14686889).

89. "Here Comes Trouble: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," *The Economist*, June 11, 2009.

90. "Pakistani Troops Capture Town Used by Uzbek Militants," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 30, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Pakistani\\_Troops\\_Capture\\_Town\\_Used\\_By\\_Uzbek\\_Militants\\_/1864845.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Pakistani_Troops_Capture_Town_Used_By_Uzbek_Militants_/1864845.html).

91. "Die Welt: Tahir Yuldashev Wants to Conquer the World in His New Propaganda Video," *Ferghana.ru*, <http://enews.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=1530>.

92. "Uzbek Fighters Flee South Waziristan," *Daily Times*, [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C11%5C02%5Cstory\\_2-11-2009\\_pg7\\_15](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C11%5C02%5Cstory_2-11-2009_pg7_15).

As a result of ethnic fighting, drone strikes, and ground operations, some sources indicate the foreign fighters are starting to flee Pakistan in favor of less exposed areas. On June 12, 2009, the *New York Times* reported that dozens of al Qaeda fighters and a few leaders were leaving the tribal areas in favor of Yemen and Somalia.<sup>93</sup> Around the same time, analysts voiced fears that Central Asian fighters in Pakistan were fleeing to Afghanistan or returning home.<sup>94</sup> In the summer of 2009, Russian and Tajik media reported that Abdullo Rakhimov (aka Mullo Abdullo), a former UTO field commander who had fled south after the Tajik Civil War, had returned to Tajikistan's Rasht Valley with 100 IMU fighters.<sup>95</sup> A well-informed source in the region also indicated that some of the IMU men airlifted by the Russian military from Tajikistan in 2000 had since returned to Tavildara in Tajikistan.<sup>96</sup>

Central Asian fighters operating in Pakistani safe havens are not cut off from their native lands. The region's porous borders, rugged terrain, and undergoverned areas form a corridor connecting North Waziristan and South Waziristan with the Ferghana Valley. Central Asian fighters are clearly making use of this corridor. In fact, a combined German-Afghan offensive in the Kunduz Province in northern Afghanistan in the summer of 2009 was aimed at IMU fighters fleeing from Pakistani operations in South Waziristan.<sup>97</sup>

The trafficking of significant volumes of opiates from southern Afghanistan to Central Asia relies on this corridor as well. According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 19 percent of Afghanistan's opium exports go to Central Asia.<sup>98</sup> The IMU historically played an active role in the Central Asian drug trade. According to a 2002 report from the Library of Congress, the IMU "is known to rely heavily on narcotics trafficking, using connections Namangani developed in Afghanistan and Tajikistan during his pre-IMU participation in the Tajik Civil War."<sup>99</sup> Extensive interviews in the region suggest that the IMU currently exerts far less, if any, control on the Central Asian narcotics trade today.<sup>100</sup> Instead, the trafficking is led by a mixture of corrupt government officials, former Tajik field commanders, and entrepreneurs coming together in what one senior official characterized as "increasingly well-coordinated, organized groups."<sup>101</sup>

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93. Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, "Some in Qaeda Leave Pakistan for Somalia and Yemen," *New York Times*, June 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/world/12terror.html>.

94. See Jeffrey Mankoff, "Beyond 'Af-Pak,'" *Foreign Policy* (June 2009), and "Uzbekistan: If a Taliban Outpost Falls in Pakistan, Is the Ripple Felt in the Fergana Valley?" *Eurasianet*.

95. "Tajikistan: Are Islamic Militants Trying to Make a Comeback in Central Asia?" *Eurasianet*, May 26, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav052609a.shtml>. The figure of 100 fighters comes from an author interview in Washington, D.C.

96. Author interview, Washington, D.C.

97. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "German, Afghan Offensive in North Targets IMU," July 23, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/German\\_Afghan\\_Offensive\\_In\\_North\\_Targets\\_IMU/1783999.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/German_Afghan_Offensive_In_North_Targets_IMU/1783999.html).

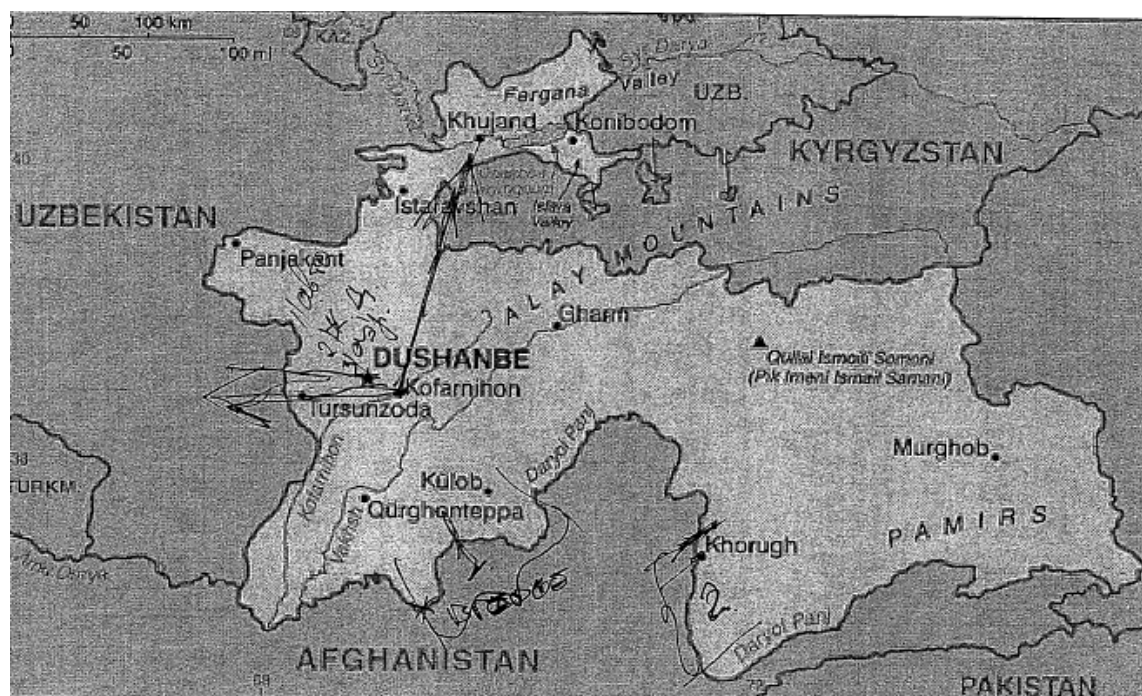
98. United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2009* (Vienna: UNODC, 2009), [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2009/WDR2009\\_eng\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2009/WDR2009_eng_web.pdf), p. 44.

99. Glenn E. Curtis, *Involvement of Russian Organized Crime Syndicates, Criminal Elements in the Russian Military, and Regional Terrorist Groups in Narcotics Trafficking in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Chechnya* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, October 2002), <http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/RussianOrgCrime.pdf>, p. 13.

100. Author interviews in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Several well-informed individuals indicated that the IMU still had connections to the drug trade, but all agreed that the IMU was far less involved in trafficking than before.

101. Author interview, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

## Map 2. Annotated Map of Drug Trafficking Routes in Tajikistan



Source: Map annotated by senior Tajik official, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 2008.

Although there does not seem to be a direct link between Central Asian militancy and narcotics trafficking, the existence of well-established drug smuggling routes makes it easier for fighters to move across borders. Map 2, annotated by a senior Tajik official, shows the main trafficking routes into and out of Tajikistan.<sup>102</sup> Presumably, returning fighters could exploit these same thoroughfares.

Coalition efforts in Afghanistan are another factor setting Central Asian fighters in motion. For example, an elder interviewed by a journalist in the Afghan city of Kunduz, the eponymous province's capital, stated that the Taliban had "invited more foreign fighters to the region of late, mostly Central Asians: Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen but also some Arabs and Chechens fleeing from U.S. operations in the south of the country."<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, the expansion of insurgent control within Afghanistan makes it easier for Central Asian groups to travel through and operate within the country. Though the geographic breakdown of coalition/insurgent control in Afghanistan is a constantly shifting mosaic, the momentum of the fight is currently in the hands of insurgents. This can be measured both kinetically and by the

102. According to this official, the most common routes into Tajikistan start in the Shuro-obod and Hamadoni districts of the Khalon Province and then travel to Dushanbe. The second most common route enters the country in Ishkashim and Rusham. Most of the drugs trafficked along this route go to Bishkek, with some going to Dushanbe. In both cases, traffickers need to cross the Panj River. Couriers know where the border is unguarded and which border guards will help them. Once over the border, traffickers use trucks to transport their cargo. Traffickers also use trains and human mules via airlines. Drugs leave Dushanbe in two directions, but most go north via the city of Khujand. Author interview, Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

103. Ghath Abdul-Ahad, "Face to Face with the Taliban: 'The People Are Fed up with the Government,'" *The Guardian*, August 18, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/aug/18/taliban-committee-kunduz-afghanistan>.

proliferation of insurgent activity. According to a report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the number of insurgent attacks per month in Afghanistan went from fewer than 10 in June 2003 to more than 100 in August 2009.<sup>104</sup>

More important, the insurgent presence is spreading throughout Afghanistan. Data compiled by the International Council on Security and Development and cited by CSIS expert Anthony Cordesman show that areas with heavy insurgent activity covered 54 percent of Afghanistan in November 2007, 72 percent in November 2008, and 80 percent in August 2009.<sup>105</sup> A December 2009 intelligence briefing obtained by CNN in January 2010 also confirmed that the Taliban's "organizational capabilities and operational reach are qualitatively and geographically expanding."<sup>106</sup> By 2009, the areas of heavy insurgent activity formed a contiguous expanse connecting the Afghan-Pakistan border with the Afghan-Uzbek and Afghan-Tajik borders.

The factors outlined here—various pressures on safe havens in Pakistan and Afghanistan with available conduits back home—do not seem to be pushing Central Asian militants in a single direction for now. The safe haven in South Waziristan seems to have been severely compromised, though not altogether dismantled. North Waziristan is still under pressure, albeit to a far less extent than South Waziristan. But the Pakistan Army recently announced that it plans no new offensives within the country's borders for up to a year, opening the door for militants to regain territory and rebuild strongholds.<sup>107</sup> The corridor connecting Pakistani havens to Central Asia does face a growing risk from the expansion of the coalition presence in Afghanistan, but this does not seem to be hampering the northward spread of the insurgency toward the Uzbek and Tajik borders. Central Asia is not yet in the crosshairs, but it is in range.

## A Return from Exile

The uncertainties that attend the possible return of Central Asia's jihadists from the Afghan and Pakistani borderlands to make trouble at home in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are relatively simple to identify: How many jihadists might return home? What factors might send them homeward? What form might their return take? And what might they do upon returning? Definitive answers remain out of reach, but a review of available sources and appropriate historical analogies narrows the range of the possible and the probable.

We lack reliable information on the precise numbers of Central Asia jihadists currently active in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Press estimates range widely, from a few hundred to a few thousand, suggesting that the actual number is likely to fall somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000 fighters.<sup>108</sup>

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104. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Afghanistan's Security Environment," GAO-10-178R, November 5, 2009, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10178r.pdf>, p. 3.

105. Anthony Cordesman, "*Shape, Clear, Hold, Build, and Transfer*": *The Metrics of the Afghan War*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 12, 2010, [http://csis.org/files/publication/100112\\_AfghanLngMetrics.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100112_AfghanLngMetrics.pdf).

106. Peter Bergen, "U.S. Intelligence Briefing: Taliban Increasingly Effective," CNN, January 25, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/01/25/afghanistan.taliban/>.

107. Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, "Pakistan's Rebuff over New Offensives Rankles U.S.," *New York Times*, January 24, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/25/world/asia/25waziristan.html>.

108. Saylab Mas'ud, a journalist based in North Waziristan, told RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan in 2007 that the number of "Uzbek militia" in the area was 2,000 to 2,500. See Daniel Kimmage, "Has the IMU Reached the End of the Line," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 30, 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075600.html>. According to Eurasianet, "Habibullah Khan Khattak, an administrator from



An extrapolation of the number of IMU fighters who left Tajikistan for Afghanistan in the late 1990s, and then Afghanistan for Pakistan after 2001—factoring in combat losses, perhaps some new recruits, and the introduction of a new generation of fighters in more than a decade of exile—would also suggest a very rough estimate of a Central Asian jihadist presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan numbering in the low single-digit thousands. This figure roughly corresponds with the Department of Defense estimate cited above.

The number suggests limited possibilities at present but significant potential in the future. As journalist Kamil al-Tawil notes in his extensively documented history of al Qaeda, the “Afghan Arabs”—Arab volunteers who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s—who went on to lay the foundations for a global jihadist movement in the 1990s were also a relatively small group.<sup>109</sup> By all accounts (except their own), their contribution to the actual fighting was minimal. The aftereffects of their involvement, from the civil war in Algeria to the eventual actions of al Qaeda, were not.

Central Asian jihadists differ from the Afghan Arabs of an earlier era in one significant way. The Afghan Arabs arrived piecemeal over the course of a decade, in part seeking escape from the difficult conditions for Islamist movements in their native lands and in part answering the well-articulated call in numerous publications and other media for a jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The IMU decamped en masse, first from Tajikistan to Afghanistan, and then, under much less favorable conditions, from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Although some recruits from Central Asia may have made the difficult trek to Pakistan, no evidence suggests a mass migration of Central Asian Islamists across Afghanistan to Pakistan.

But if Central Asia’s exiled jihadists have not benefited from a rising tide of new recruits, those who survived to the present and have not given up the fight are likely to form a dedicated and battle-hardened community. According to a former journalist living in Tashkent, the desire for these individuals to stay mobilized is also a primary factor.<sup>110</sup> This might explain why Yo’ldosh and Namangani decided to renew their fight against Karimov in the aftermath of the Tajik civil war. It also accounts for the decision of Yo’ldosh’s men to follow him into Pakistan when they could have demobilized along with many of their comrades and settled in Iran, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The exiled Central Asian fighters who remain active today are clearly committed to the long haul.

All previous large-scale movements of Central Asia’s jihadists have resulted from significant changes to the status quo. The very emergence of the Islamist cohort that would later form the

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Pakistan’s tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, told the Pakistani parliament on September 12 that North and South Waziristan are havens for ‘not less than 5,000’ Uzbek fighters.” See: Deirdre Tynan, “Afghanistan: Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Fighters Active in Kunduz,” *Eurasianet*, September 14, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav091409a.shtml>. An unclassified assessment made public by the Australian Parliament in 2009 puts the strength of the IMU at 500. See Parliament of Australia, Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, “Review of the re-listing of six terrorist organisations under the *Criminal Code Act 1995*,” March 2009, <http://www.aph.gov.au/House/committee/pjicis/six%20terrorist/>.

109. Kamil al-Tawil, *Al-Qa’idah wa-akhawatuha* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2007), pp. 13–42. The numbers of “Afghan Arab” fighters are disputed. Tawil notes that the number of Arabs fighting in Afghanistan stood at a mere 15 in 1984, a figure he attributes to Abdallah Anas, author of a firsthand account called *Birth of the Afghan Arabs* [Wiladat al-Afghan al-Arab] (London: Dar al-Saqi, 2002). Tawil cites the Syrian jihadist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri as putting the total number of foreign fighters in Afghanistan at 40,000 in the early 1990s, a figure other informed sources told the author was “exaggerated.” A 2010 Al-Jazeera documentary put the number of active Arab fighters in Afghanistan at the time of the Soviet withdrawal at around 2,000.

110. Author interview, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

backbone of the jihadist movement in the region came about only when the Soviet Union collapsed and Uzbekistan became a sovereign nation. The future founders of the IMU then fled Uzbekistan when President Islam Karimov consolidated his power there in 1992 and set about eliminating all potential rivals. The move to Afghanistan came in the late 1990s, when the warring sides in the Tajik civil war finally signed a peace agreement. And finally, a U.S.-led operation to oust the Taliban and chase down al Qaeda in 2001 sent the IMU across the border into Pakistan. The prominent role of external factors in each of these changes to the status quo clearly shows how much Central Asia's jihadists have not been masters of their own fate.

Future large-scale shifts are likely to continue this pattern. The most obvious external factor capable of triggering the displacement of Central Asian jihadists from their current redoubt is a significant change to the security environment in Pakistan. A major decline in the fortunes of the Pakistani Taliban, either at the hands of the Pakistan Army or through infighting occasioned by repeated drone strikes against the movement's leaders, could displace the Central Asians. Coupled with pressure on the insurgency in Afghanistan, such a turn of events could make for a powerful engine pushing the Central Asians homeward through the existing conduits of drug-smuggling routes across porous borders. The upswing in violent incidents in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in 2009 after a few years of relative quiet—illustrated in figure 1—likely owed something to a small-scale confluence of these factors.

More broadly, a favorable resolution to the insurgencies plaguing Afghanistan and Pakistan could also exert homeward pressure on Central Asian jihadists. At the time of this report's publication, however, with the Afghan Taliban faring well on the battlefield and turning up its nose at negotiations and with the Pakistan Army abjuring further offensives in the restive tribal regions, no major change to the status quo seems to be in the immediate offing.

It also worth considering how a Taliban victory in Afghanistan might impact the homeward migration of Central Asian jihadists. A reconstituted Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan could make peace with its northern neighbors rather than seek to destabilize them.<sup>111</sup> In fact, the Taliban sent an open letter to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2009, pledging “they would establish friendly relations with all neighboring states, after foreign troops had been expelled [from Afghanistan].”<sup>112</sup> Despite this pledge, renewed Taliban control of Afghanistan could enable Central Asian jihadists to use the north of the country as a safe haven from which to launch operations into Central Asia. On the other hand, Mullah Omar paid a heavy price for permitting terrorist groups to operate from Afghanistan in the past, and he may keep these networks in check to use them as a bargaining chip with the West and regional governments. Such a scenario could eliminate Afghanistan as a potential refuge for displaced Central Asian militants, likely encouraging their homeward migration or dispersal farther afield.

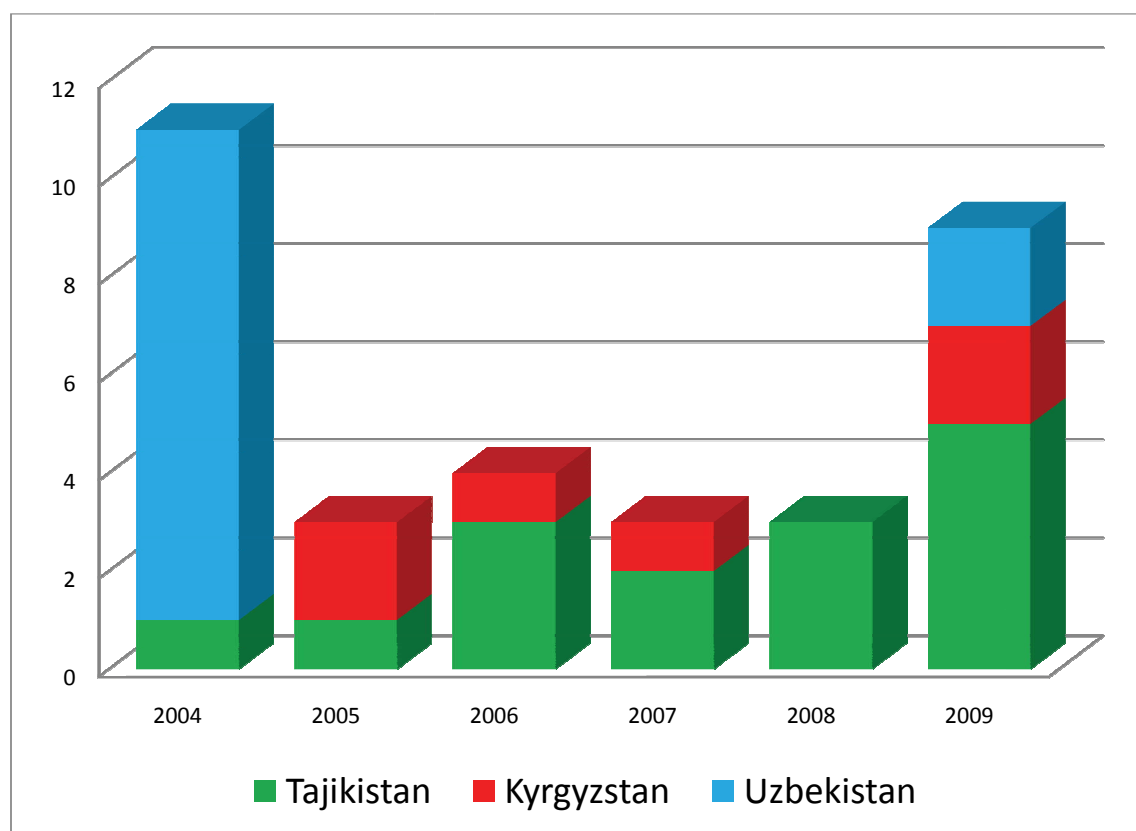
Fragmentation is likely to influence how Central Asian jihadists react to a change in the status quo. Whatever truth there is to the specifics of the division between the IMU and IJU, Central Asian militants surely hold divergent views about targeting. Some fighters have a more globalist outlook, while others are primarily dedicated to waging jihad in their homelands. In the event of

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111. Deeper Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik involvement in Operation Enduring Freedom through the Northern Distribution Network could also factor into the Taliban's post-conflict calculus.

112. Indrani Bagchi, “Taliban's Political Ace: A Letter to Shanghai Group,” *Times of India*, October 16, 2009, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/Talibans-political-ace-A-letter-to-Shanghai-group/articleshow/5129198.cms>.

**Figure 1. Number of Terrorist Attacks in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan by Year**



*Note:* This chart clearly shows that the cumulative number of attacks across all three countries in 2009 was more than twice as high as any time since the Uzbek crackdown.

*Source:* Data from National Counterterrorism Center. See this report's appendix A for more details on these attacks.

increased pressure, the globalists are more likely to stand their ground against International Security Assistance (ISAF) and Pakistani forces than the localists. Although many exiled Central Asian militants have developed strong ties, and even a sense of loyalty, to al Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, or the Pakistani Taliban, the bulk of them ultimately wish to return to their native lands.<sup>113</sup>

The paths taken by the Afghan Arabs in the 1990s sketch the options available to Central Asian militants today. After the end of the jihad against the Soviets, one group of Afghan Arabs returned home to play a direct role first in politics and then in the continuation of politics through civil war. These were the Algerians. A second group scattered to the various fronts of the jihad—Bosnia, Tajikistan, Chechnya, and elsewhere. And a third group set out to advance the jihadist cause from another safe haven—Sudan—when Afghanistan degenerated into factional infighting, eventually returning once the Taliban emerged as sympathetic winners. This was Osama bin Ladin and al Qaeda.

Translated to the Central Asian context, none of these options is as appealing today as in the 1990s for the Afghan Arabs. Returning home to participate in anything other than a hounded underground would seem to be impossible, given the thick blanket of authoritarianism that now smothers Central Asia. The fronts of the jihad are fewer and farther flung than they were in the

113. Author interview, Washington, D.C.

1990s; Somalia and Yemen are hard to imagine as particularly attractive, or even practical, locations for renegade Uzbek or Kyrgyz militants. The same might be said about other safe havens—save Pakistan’s tribal areas. Only the desolate Sahel would seem to present itself.

Given the paucity of other options, a move to reinvigorate the domestic underground might seem most alluring to Central Asian militants. Moreover, as U.S. engagement with the region’s regimes increases, appealing targets are emerging. Attacks on the U.S. installation at Manas or key nodes of the Northern Distribution Network supplying Operation Enduring Freedom would further the agendas of those who prefer to hit the indigenous regimes and those who want to pursue global jihad. Central Asian militants have targeted U.S. interests in the region in the past. As noted above, terrorists targeted the U.S. embassy in Tashkent in July 2004. A year earlier, a Kyrgyz court convicted three Kyrgyz and one Kazakh for allegedly planning to attack Manas and possibly the U.S. embassy in Bishkek—though certain details of that case suggest it should be treated with some skepticism.<sup>114</sup>

## Conditions at Home

Returning fighters do not pose an existential threat to Central Asian stability—they lack a base of popular support and even the weakest of the region’s regimes is more than a match for them. The danger is that the return home of hundreds—or, in the worst case, thousands—of committed fighters hardened through battle and contact with the global jihadist elite could set off a deadly and destabilizing cycle of terrorist action and authoritarian reaction amid deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

When confronted with violent extremists, all three regimes have consistently chosen the hard-line response with little consideration for long-term consequences. Uzbekistan has distinguished itself in this company with a particularly brutal approach, jailing thousands amid scant concern for legal niceties. Overall, the dismal fact in Central Asia is that ongoing state-sponsored violence has almost certainly claimed more lives, and surely maimed more fates, than the sporadic actions of handfuls of terrorists.

Should Central Asian jihadists return home to cause trouble—and, most ominously, should they bring with them the mass-casualty suicide attacks that plague Pakistan and Afghanistan but are thus far unknown in Central Asia to the north—past experience gives grounds to believe that local governments would react with excesses almost perfectly calculated to validate the extremist narrative of a Manichean struggle against tyranny where violence offers the only way out of the impasse. This prospect of terrorist action and authoritarian reaction, rather than some mythical possibility of a takeover by fanatics lacking any base of social support, is the greatest danger posed by returning jihadists.

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114. The men were alleged to have received military training in Pakistan and Iran; a search of the alleged cell leader’s apartment yielded “drawings of bombing devices, maps of Manas airport, a layout of the air base’s checkpoints, a large amount of aluminum powder, ammunition, an F-1 hand grenade, a small amount of heroin and extremist literature;” and all three men were convicted by the court of being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir—a radical organization, but one with no documented history of engaging in violence. “Four Sentenced for Planning Attack on U.S. Base in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst*, April 23, 2004, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/2086>.

Conditions in all three countries could easily support a renewed extremist fringe with ideological and organizational ties to jihadists across the globe. Authoritarian political systems, rampant corruption, and deadening state controls on religious practice stymie opportunity and alienate millions. The worldwide increase in food prices and the global financial crisis have heightened deprivation, adding another potentially radicalizing factor to the milieu. Migrant labor remittances, which account for a significant percentage of these countries' GDP, have diminished as external labor markets in Russia, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere have contracted.<sup>115</sup> Key export commodities such as natural gas, cotton, and, in the case of Tajikistan, aluminum, have also sunk in value, providing less income to state coffers.<sup>116</sup>

Instead of seeking to raise the chronically low levels of their citizens' social and economic welfare, Central Asian regimes remain fixated on preserving the status quo and sustaining their grip on power. In the short term, this is counterproductive; in the long term, it could prove disastrous. Instead of strengthening regime stability, government policy sows discontent, and perhaps even the seeds of regime change. As one former member of Parliament from the region put it, "these regimes are already ideologically defeated [by Islamist groups]" because they cannot point to tangible policies that benefit their citizens.<sup>117</sup>

## Recommendations

The United States faces a familiar conundrum in Central Asia: The only available partners for counterterrorism cooperation are governments that abet radicalization with shortsighted policies. Although there are major differences across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, authoritarianism, kleptocracy, and the selective suppression of religious practice create an environment conducive to the embrace of extremist and militant ideologies. Political reforms that could undermine the appeal of extremist solutions are highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

The United States should tread lightly and hew to the middle ground—pursuing engagement but avoiding entanglement while pressing for change but eschewing harassment. Washington should avoid lecturing Central Asians on the shortcomings of their policies. As a nation that still holds terrorists without due process and until recently tortured detainees, the United States is constrained in its ability to pass judgment. In our efforts to combine counterterrorism with respect for human rights and values, we should make it clear that we are students, not teachers.

At the same time, the United States must avoid measures that would be seen by ordinary citizens as an endorsement—or, worse, a reinforcement—of the police state. We should not enhance the repressive capacity of security agencies, and we should make it clear that we will not turn a blind eye to the employment of security services against defenseless citizens. And we should realize that no amount of finesse will avail under some circumstances. If Uzbekistan witnesses another popular uprising of the sort that convulsed Andijon in 2005, the government there is likely to respond with the same brute force and blame it on the same extremists.

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115. The International Crisis Group cited estimates that remittances in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan fell by 30 percent, 30 percent, and 25 percent respectively in 2009 from the previous year. International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis*, p. 4.

116. For instance, the global price for cotton averaged 12 percent lower in 2009 than in 2008, and the average price of aluminum in 2009 was 35 percent lower than the 2008 average. *Global Commodity Markets: Review and Price Forecast* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2009), pp. 14 and 10.

117. Author interview, Washington, D.C.

For now, the United States should avoid any grand schemes designed to undermine the appeal of radicalism in the region. The United States has a poor record of addressing local grievances, particularly when the host nation is an uncommitted partner. But in the end, Washington has to work with the regimes that *are* in the region, not the regimes it *wants* in the region. And, though the United States certainly has its share of differences with these states, it should support Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as they deal with a militant threat primed by the dynamic conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

To help to combat the threat of militancy in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on the tactical level, the United States should consider the following initiatives in the areas of intelligence, borders, regional cooperation, and counter-radicalization:

## Intelligence

- **Dedicate Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Direct Action Assets to Interdict Militants before They Reach Central Asia.** If Central Asian militant groups continue to face pressure in Pakistan and enjoy an expanding corridor extending from the Pakistani frontier to their former areas of operation, it is likely that some of these fighters will leave FATA and head north. The United States should target these individuals before they return home and are effectively out of reach of U.S. counterterrorism assets. While ongoing counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan require significant and dedicated ISR and kinetic resources, the United States should act expeditiously to damage these networks before they can expand throughout Central Asia.<sup>118</sup>
- **Boost Intelligence Sharing.** The U.S. Intelligence Community should share more information with European partners and regional governments about the homeward migration of Central Asian fighters. This will build confidence and help Central Asian security services to identify and locate dangerous individuals. The United States, European partners, and Central Asian governments should also work together to draw up a list of “AfPak Central Asians”—Central Asians who are, or have been, active in Afghanistan and Pakistan-based terror networks.<sup>119</sup>
- **Enhance U.S. Intelligence Capacity.** The U.S. Intelligence Community should increase its knowledge of Central Asian languages and environments, as well as its ability to independently evaluate information received through intelligence sharing with partner governments that have agendas of their own.

## Borders

- **Launch a Border Interdiction Initiative.** Realizing that it already has border programs in Central Asia to address proliferation, the United States should do everything it can to raise

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118. Although it would be unwise to extend military and paramilitary operations into Central Asia in pursuit of these fighters, the United States should continue to covertly monitor formerly exiled militants after their return to the region. By observing these fighters and tracking the networks they tap into, the U.S. Intelligence Community could gain important insights into the covert infrastructure within Central Asia that supports these militants. When necessary and appropriate, this intelligence should be shared with local authorities to assist their efforts to apprehend suspected terrorists.

119. Given the current role played by “Afghan Arab” veterans from the anti-Soviet campaign in the 1980s in the global jihad, it will be equally important to identify Central Asian fighters currently fighting coalition forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

awareness about homebound fighters crossing these frontiers. The United States should offer increased support to border authorities and alert border guards to these issues through initiatives like the State Department's Terrorist Interdiction Program (TIP).<sup>120</sup>

- **Focus More Attention on Travel Documents.** The United States should convene, with Interpol, a conference on the integrity of travel documents. This conference could match partners with training and even act as the opening step in a regional database on the movement of fighters.
- **Engage the Counterdrug Community.** Knowing that militants use trafficking routes to enter Central Asia, the United States should engage local and international counterdrug organizations operating in the region and integrate them into broader counterterrorism and militant interdiction efforts. Such direct contact would encourage greater probity and transparency across local counterdrug agencies that can themselves fall prey to corruption and trafficking.<sup>121</sup>

## Regional Cooperation

- **Encourage Enhanced Central Asian Counterterrorism Cooperation.** The United States should foster a regionally coordinated approach to Central Asian militancy.<sup>122</sup> The United States and other appropriate donors can incentivize Central Asian participation and cooperation by funding this initiative. Such an initiative could draw upon the lessons learned from past multiagency, regional programs designed to counter transnational threats such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative (EACTI), and the Merida Initiative.<sup>123</sup> Despite their differences and mistrust, there is a certain and rising degree of concern for militant networks among the Central Asian states that could facilitate a multilateral approach.
- **Engage Russia and China in Central Asian Counterterrorism Efforts.** Militancy in Central Asia is a more immediate problem for Russia and China than for the United States. Washington should encourage these states to take a lead role in fashioning a productive response to the threat. The process should begin with modest goals, seeking to build on early successes. One way to catalyze engagement would be to encourage the Eurasian Group (the Financial Action Task Force–style regional body encompassing the region) to convene a special meeting on money laundering and terror financing tied to Central Asian groups. Another approach could

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120. For more information on TIP, see <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/about/c16663.htm>.

121. This may include the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Department of Defense, the Department of Justice, private sector contractors, and international entities such as the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, many of which are already active in training Central Asian drug control agencies.

122. The regional nature of Central Asian militant groups demands a coordinated response. Central Asian states, along with their Russian and Chinese neighbors, all recognize the dangers of terrorism and extremism. These mutual concerns, however, have not translated into effective multilateral action. Central Asian states have complex and often antagonistic relationships, and any efforts by external actors to promote integration are seen as encroachments on sovereignty. It is for these reasons that multilateral mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Cooperative Security Treaty Organization have failed to foster significant collaboration on regional security issues. Despite these challenges, it is in the best U.S. interest to continue seeking a regional response. The bilateral/multilateral format used by the United States Trade Representative in the region offers an interesting approach that could help further this agenda.

123. The Merida Initiative is a multiyear, multiagency, counternarcotics assistance program funded by the United States that provides equipment and training to support anti-drug efforts in Mexico, Central America, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

involve good-faith outreach to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)<sup>124</sup> to create a contact group with seats at the table for ISAF and the United States, though this is likely to prove a tough sell in light of the SCO's generally anti-American orientation.

## Counter-radicalization

- **Prison Reform.** Prison radicalization has proven to be an ongoing challenge for governments battling terrorists and insurgents. Central Asia is no exception, as a December 2009 report by the International Crisis Group clearly shows.<sup>125</sup> As local regimes continue to crack down on and incarcerate violent and nonviolent Islamist activists, they are unintentionally drawing “more inmates into the Islamist orbit”<sup>126</sup> and further radicalizing those prisoners who were detained with relatively moderate views. The United States and other donors should help Central Asian authorities to reform their prison system so as to prevent incarcerated Islamists from expanding their networks behind bars. Given the challenges of addressing this sensitive topic directly with most of these governments, the best approach may well be to establish and fund ongoing dialogues between Central Asian, U.S., European, Saudi, and Indonesian prison officials.
- **Legislation.** Push to bring the counterterrorism legislation of Central Asian countries in line with EU directives and human rights laws. European nations with a proven record of combining tough counterterrorism policies with vigilance for human rights—like France or Germany—should work through the OSCE to share their experience with Central Asian partners. Kazakhstan's 2010 chairmanship of the OSCE provides a good opportunity to pursue this agenda through the OSCE's security and human rights dimensions.
- **Counter-radicalization Best Practices.** Convene a “best practices” conference with Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and Colombia on successful counter-radicalization and extremist “demobilization” programs. Realizing that these programs need to be tailored to specific cultures and conditions, lessons from other states can still help inform effective local programs. Within Central Asia, state religious institutions could sit at the table as partners in this initiative.

The primary goal of U.S. security policy in Central Asia should be to ensure that the problems with militancy that currently beset Afghanistan and Pakistan do not spread to the broader region. To achieve this, the United States will need to help build local capacity and facilitate the exchange of information, both among Central Asian states and beyond their borders. It should also seek to replace what are perceived as transactional and ephemeral relationships with long-term, multifaceted partnerships. Such enhanced relations will make possible more meaningful counterterrorism cooperation. All of these efforts will need to be conducted with real transparency, lest Russia feel that the United States is encroaching on its perceived sphere of influence. Here, as elsewhere, expectations should be modest. Even if the United States is completely open about its intentions in the region, it should harbor no illusions that Russia will react favorably to an expanded U.S. role in Central Asia.

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124. The SCO includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Iran, India, Pakistan, and Mongolia have observer status in the organization, which has rebuffed U.S. efforts to reach out to it.

125. See International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*.

126. *Ibid.*, p. 13.



## Conclusion

This report argues that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are active fronts in the wider conflict against violent extremism centered on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although these states are less vital to U.S. security interests in the region than nuclear-armed Pakistan, their stability is an important and unacknowledged component of the AfPak equation. And, as conditions in Afghanistan continue to deteriorate, the menace of jihadism could eventually worsen into a strategic threat for Central Asian states, particularly when paired with a succession crisis, natural disaster, or other sudden shock. Beyond threatening indigenous regimes, some Central Asian militants have also demonstrated a clear intent to mount operations against foreign targets, both within the broader region and, in the case of the Sauerland Plot, in the European Union.

Alarmist predictions have dogged Central Asia since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent states in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, yet the region has proved remarkably resilient. Despite Tajikistan's Civil War in the early 1990s and, since then, episodic outbreaks of violence in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, stability has been the rule and disorder the exception. Amid much ambiguity, the region has "muddled through." It may continue to do so, but declining remittances, looming succession struggles, latent ethnic tensions, counterproductive government policies, and returning militants are conspiring against the forces of stasis.

Juan Zarate, former deputy assistant to the president for counterterrorism, testifying in January 2010 before the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, argued, "We must be proactive and not reactive in our efforts to deprive al Qaeda and like-minded groups the luxury of safe haven."<sup>127</sup> Central Asia will be a difficult place to translate this sound advice into fruitful practice: Regional complexities defy simple solutions, and a fractured U.S. economy and misgivings about foreign entanglements make greater engagement with Central Asia a hard political sell domestically. But U.S. policymakers should not wait for militancy in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to become entrenched before taking action. With attention to both threats and caveats, this report provides a sober assessment to inform and support a realistically proactive policy.

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127. The Honorable Juan C. Zarate, Statement before the House Armed Services Committee, *Al Qaida in 2010: How Should the U.S. Respond?* January 27, 2010, [http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/FC012710/Zarate\\_Testimony012710.pdf](http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/FC012710/Zarate_Testimony012710.pdf).

## Appendix A. Terrorist Attacks in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, January 1, 2004–September 30, 2009

Date	Country	Subject	Perpetrator Characteristic	Dead	Wounded	Hostage	Total
2004	Tajikistan	1 police officer wounded in armed attack in Tojikobod District, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	1	0	1
2004	Uzbekistan	2 police officers, 1 child killed, 15 civilians, 11 police officers wounded in bombing by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	3	26	0	29
2004	Uzbekistan	2 police officers, 1 civilian killed, 22 civilians, 1 police officer wounded in armed attack by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	3	23	0	26
2004	Uzbekistan	2 police officers killed in armed attack by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	2	0	0	2
2004	Uzbekistan	1 police officer killed in suicide IED attack by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	1	0	0	1
2004	Uzbekistan	3 police officers, 3 civilians killed, 5 police officers wounded in suicide bombing by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	6	5	0	11
2004	Uzbekistan	2 police officers wounded in IED attack, 3 civilians held hostage by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	2	3	5
2004	Uzbekistan	7 civilians wounded in suicide bombing by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	7	0	7
2004	Uzbekistan	2 Uzbek guards killed in suicide bombing by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	2	0	0	2
2004	Uzbekistan	2 guards killed in suicide IED attack by IJU in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	2	0	0	2

Date	Country	Subject	Perpetrator Characteristic	Dead	Wounded	Hostage	Total
2004	Uzbekistan	Police officers attacked in Tashkent, Toshkent Shahri, Uzbekistan	Unknown	0	0	0	0
2005	Tajikistan	4 civilians wounded in bombing in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	4	0	4
2005	Kyrgyzstan	2 residences damaged in IED attack in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	Unknown	0	0	0	0
2005	Kyrgyzstan	1 assembly hall damaged in bombing in Osh, Osh, Kyrgyzstan	Unknown	0	0	0	0
2006	Tajikistan	1 prison guard killed in armed attack by suspected IMU in Sughd, Tajikistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	1	0	0	1
2006	Tajikistan	1 soldier killed in armed attack in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	1	0	0	1
2006	Tajikistan	2 civilians wounded in armed attack by suspected IMU in Isfara, Sughd, Tajikistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	2	0	2
2006	Kyrgyzstan	5 border guards killed, 2 police officers wounded in armed attack in Batken, Kyrgyzstan	Unknown	5	2	0	7
2007	Tajikistan	1 vehicle destroyed in IED attack in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	0	0	0
2007	Tajikistan	1 private security guard killed in IED attack in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	1	0	0	1
2007	Kyrgyzstan	1 journalist killed in armed attack in Osh, Osh, Kyrgyzstan	Unknown	1	0	0	1
2008	Tajikistan	Several houses damaged in grenade attack in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	0	0	0
2008	Tajikistan	Police officers targeted in armed attack by suspected IMU in Isfara, Sughd, Tajikistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	0	0	0
2008	Tajikistan	1 police officer wounded in armed attack by suspected IMU in Isfara, Sughd, Tajikistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	1	0	1

Date	Country	Subject	Perpetrator Characteristic	Dead	Wounded	Hostage	Total
2009	Tajikistan	1 police officer wounded in armed attack in Isfara, Sughd, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	1	0	1
2009	Tajikistan	5 soldiers wounded in armed attack near Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	5	0	5
2009	Tajikistan	1 apartment building damaged in IED attack by suspected IMU in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	0	0	0
2009	Tajikistan	1 vehicle damaged in IED attack by suspected IMU in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	0	0	0	0
2009	Tajikistan	2 police officers wounded in IED attack in Dushanbe, Tajikistan	Unknown	0	2	0	2
2009	Uzbekistan	1 police officer killed, 3 civilians wounded in suicide IED attack by IJU in Andijon, Andijon, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	1	3	0	4
2009	Uzbekistan	1 police officer killed, 3 others wounded in armed attack by IJU in Khonobod, Andijon, Uzbekistan	Islamic Extremist (Sunni)	1	3	0	4
2009	Kyrgyzstan	1 government building damaged in armed attack in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	Unknown	0	0	0	0
2009	Kyrgyzstan	1 government official killed in armed attack in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	Unknown	1	0	0	1

Source: U.S. National Counterterrorism Center.



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