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DIY TERRORISM: A LOOK AT THE PARADIGM SHIFT IN DAESH'S RECRUITMENT TACTICS THROUGH THE LENS OF CENTRAL ASIAN FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS

ABSTRACT: With Daesh having almost completely lost its hold over Syria and Iraq, it has shifted its strategy towards spreading its brand elsewhere. It has undergone a noticeable shift in its media from attempting to promote travel to the so-called caliphate to promoting attacks on the "far enemy", or targets outside of Muslim lands. Daesh is lowering the threshold for executing a terrorist attack by promoting a new style of terror attack called 'Just Terror' which utilizes easily acquired materials to inflict high casualty attacks. By doing so it is creating a higher frequency of terror attacks by making the attacks more accessible to unskilled extremists. Daesh is codifying these attacks by creating a detailed guideline in their online journals. This has spawned a new type of terrorist known as an 'enabled attacker', where they have all of the operational knowledge of a terrorist trained by a terrorist organization without the direct interaction with that terrorist organization. This enables Daesh to spread its brand and have strikes committed in its name without direct involvement in the operation of the attack. Daesh is additionally looking towards recruiting from new regions as their influence in Syria and Iraq is dwindling. Central Asia has been experiencing a growing level of extremism since its involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War, and Daesh is looking to subvert al-Qaeda's hold on the region through encouraging enabled attackers. It has invested significant resources of its media operations to create propaganda that resonates with disenfranchised Central Asians, and its efforts seem to be garnering it a foothold in the region. As the Daesh-inspired attacks from the Central Asian diaspora increase, Daesh will appear to be the dominant force in the region, which will in turn increase its influence in Central Asia. Daesh will increase its digital campaigns in regions around the world to create a global 'caliphate'.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, Daesh, ISIS, al-Qaeda

INTRODUCTION

The latter half of 2017 has seen the most significant blow to Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, since the international terrorist organization's birth in 2014. Daesh experienced continuous defeats on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, from the Iraqi military retaking Mosul and Tal Afar to its losing its supposed capital in Raqqa and finally being driven out of one of its last remaining strongholds in Deir ez-Zor. Daesh has been completely ousted from all

urban areas in both Iraq and Syria, with Rawah being retaken on 17 November by Iraqi forces and al-Bukamal being captured by Syrian government forces two days later.¹

Their largest territorial holding is in the desert in northeast Syria east of Ash Shaddadi, which is likely to soon be taken by the SDF². It seems Daesh's days of holding physical territory are numbered. But is it too soon to celebrate its demise? While holding physical territory gave gravitas to Daesh's narrative of representing a new caliphate, its true power comes from its influence on social media. Daesh's media operations has had unprecedented success in attracting foreign terrorist fighters to its cause. It initially used this influence to entice its followers to travel to its territory in Iraq and Syria and join its so-called caliphate. However, as its physical territory has shrunk, its strategy in spreading its brand has undergone a major shift. Daesh has spawned a new wave of terrorists known as enabled attackers, those that execute attacks abroad in Daesh's name using tactics and methodology derived from Daesh media sources. These tactics are known as 'Just Terror', an entirely new approach from the suicide-bombings that permeated the 2000s. Daesh is employing this new tactic in tandem with a new focus on recruitment in Central Asia. The confluence of these two strategic shifts will be examined in this paper as a case study to understand its implications on foreign terrorist fighters as a whole.

EXAMINING THE PARADIGM SHIFT THROUGH ONLINE MESSAGING

As Daesh loses its physical territory, there has been a noticeable shift in its messaging. At its height of territorial control from Summer 2014 until January 2015,³ Daesh's propaganda revolved around highlighting its idyllic way of life in the so-called caliphate. Daesh would show videos of happy children in parks, doctors speaking on the healthcare services provided and scenic views of nature in the territory.⁴ Daesh's media arm, al-Hayat Media Centre, began uploading a series of videos called Mujatweets in May 2014. These sharp and easily digestible clips showed "snippets of day-to-day life in the Islamic State", interviewing foreign recruits as they extolled the virtues and benefits of 'making hijrah' (alluding to the Muslim prophet's journey from Mecca to Medina to represent coming to Daesh territory) and becoming Daesh fighters.⁵ The vast majority of propaganda during this period had the clear intent of enticing people to move to the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

¹ Abdul-Zahra, Q. "ISIS loses its last major territory in Iraq". *The Christian Science Monitor*. 17 November, 2017. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/1117/ISIS-loses-its-last-major-territory-in-Iraq>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

² Illingworth, A. "ISIS Launches Attack against Kurdish Forces near Key City in Hasakah". *AMN - Al-Masdar News* | زوين رخصملا. 18 January, 2018. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/isis-launches-attack-kurdish-forces-near-key-city-hasakah/>, Accessed on 15 April 2018.

³ Moore, J. "ISIS is going broke and its caliphate is unlikely to survive the year, says new analysis". *Newsweek*, 29 June 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/islamic-state-wont-survive-fourth-year-after-territory-and-revenue-collapse-630018>, Accessed on 30 November, 2017.

⁴ Zelin, A. Y. "Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output". *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9/4. 2015. 85–97.

⁵ "Digital Developments: Extremists' Use of Modern Communication Tools". Counter Extremism Project. 13 December 2016. <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/digital-developments-extremists-use-modern-communication-tools>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

By mid-2016, Daesh was beginning to experience a series of significant territorial losses. Daesh lost control of key cities such as Ramadi in January 2016, Abu Ghraib in February 2016 and Falluja in June 2016. The previous year it had lost many key border towns essential for movement of goods and militants, such as Kobani and Tal Abyad on the Turkish-Syrian border. By June 2016, Daesh had lost 45 percent of its territory in Syria and 20 percent of its territory in Iraq.⁶ It was clear that Daesh's plans for establishing a territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq were in jeopardy. No one was more cognizant of this than Daesh itself. This can be seen in its propaganda messaging during this period. In the July 2016 issue of its popular English-language propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, Daesh had a clear shift in strategy. One passage read:

But if you are unable to [perform hijrah to the Islamic State], then know that you have been blessed with the opportunity to serve a much greater purpose than dwelling among Muslims and waging jihad on the outer edges of the land of Islam. Indeed, you are behind enemy lines, able to strike them where it hurts them most.⁷

Rather than directly discouraging hijrah which might indicate weakness or acknowledgement of defeat, Daesh framed the argument as an alternative to hijrah if making hijrah was a difficulty. At the time, it was indeed becoming increasingly difficult to enter Daesh territory as the common entry points through Turkey were being secured and Daesh's territory was being threatened from all sides. Their aim in this text was alternatively to encourage attacks on the 'far enemy', a jihadist term for the enemies in the 'Dar al-Harb' (lands of war) or non-Islamic lands. Daesh's initial focus was on the 'near enemy', or 'Dar al-Islam' (lands of Islam), and it pursued this by establishing a territorial stronghold in the Arab lands of Syria and Iraq, hoping to extend to the rest of the Dar al-Islam and establish its extreme form of Sharia throughout the Muslim lands. As this goal is becoming out of reach, Daesh is attempting to stay relevant in the Islamist discourse. Through inspiring attacks on the far enemy throughout the world in its name, Daesh maintains its dominance in the jihadist arena. This is effectively accomplished by stoking fear in the West. The same *Dabiq* article quotes its senior leader Abu Muhammad al-Adnani saying the following:

If the tawaghit have shut the door of hijrah in your faces, then open the door of jihad in theirs ... If one of you wishes and strives to reach the lands of the Islamic State, then each of us wishes to be in your place to make examples of the Crusaders, day and night, scaring them and terrorizing them, until every neighbor fears his neighbor.⁶

In its encouragement of attacking Westerners (whom it calls Crusaders), Daesh is promoting its new tactic of spreading terror throughout the West. This is attractive to Daesh from a marketing standpoint. If the West deems Daesh as their main threat, international media outlets will give Daesh prominent press coverage. Daesh wants to be seen as the strongest and most influential jihadist organization to attract the next generation of recruits. Especially as its revenue sources are drying up with the loss of oil fields and smuggling routes, it is benefitting from the free press that fearmongering provides. This is also influencing the type of attack it is promoting.

⁶ Almkhtar, S., Wallace, T. and Watkins, D. "ISIS Has Lost Many of the Key Places It Once Controlled". *The New York Times*, 18 June 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/18/world/middleeast/isis-control-places-cities.html>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

⁷ "Words of Sincere Advice from an American Convert in the Islamic State to the Former Christian Who Accepted Islam". *Dabiq*, 15. 2016.

NEW TERRORISM STRATEGY: JUST TERROR

Daesh is instigating a paradigm shift in the style of terror attack to be used by their followers. The suicide bombings and large-scale IED (improvised explosive device) plots of the 2000s are giving way to a more readily actionable form of terrorism. This is known as 'Just Terror'.⁸ Just Terror promotes using easily accessible materials to execute attacks on as many people in a populated area as possible. Prominent Just Terror tools are vans which can be used to ram people on busy streets and knives to stab people once the van becomes inoperable. The benefits of this tactic for Daesh are fivefold:

1. Encourages the layman jihadist to act

Before, executing a terrorist attack required a great deal of technical prowess. The jihadist would need to learn how to make a bomb, usually from online forums with questionable reliability. This could have discouraged many individuals who were radicalized but did not have the ability or skillset to assemble a suicide jacket or IED. With Just Terror, all one needs is to rent a van and/or buy a knife, and they have all of the tools necessary to act. The ease of executing an attack makes the threshold for action much smaller.

2. Eliminates financial barriers to executing attack

The financial cost is much lower in Just Terror than bombing plots. The terrorist does not need to purchase expensive bomb-making ingredients or technological equipment, but simply can rent or borrow a van and purchase a simple hunting knife. Many Daesh recruiters have had to send money to their militants to pay for flights to Turkey or equipment for an attack. Now that will not be necessary. At a time when its resources are dwindling, this cheaper method is preferred.

3. Minimizes cold feet

The extensive time it takes to assemble a bomb gives the radicalized individual time to rethink their actions and potentially decide against an attack. Any attack using an IED or suicide vest would have required methodical, premeditated action. With Just Terror attacks, emotion plays a much larger factor in decision-making. One can simply decide in a moment of anger to ram their car over pedestrians without the time to reconsider under calmer circumstances.

4. Less chance of capture before executing attack

Many IED plots have been thwarted before they had the chance to be initiated. This is because making an IED requires purchasing many suspicious materials that may raise red flags to security forces. For instance, there was an attempted massive bombing plot in London in 2004. The preparation included purchasing a large amount of fertilizer and storing it in a West London storage unit. The manager of that facility became suspicious of the large amount of fertilizer being stored for a prolonged period of time and alerted the authorities. The police arrested the seven-person terror cell and prevented an attempted attack that could have killed hundreds.⁹ With Just Terror, no suspicious supplies need to be purchased. Renting a van or purchasing a knife raises no red flags in most regions. These supplies can be gathered out in the open.

⁸ "Just Terror Tactics". *Rumiyah*, 3, 2016.

⁹ Summers, Ch. and Casciani, D. "Fertiliser bomb plot: The story". *BBC News*. 30 April 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6153884.stm>, Accessed on November 30, 2017.

5. Allows higher frequency of attacks which strengthens its image and leads to sustained fear to be manipulated

Most significantly, Just Terror creates the conditions which enable more attacks to be executed at a higher frequency, creating more fear for Daesh to capitalize on. If terror attacks become more accessible to the radicalized, it will lead more people to launch attacks who otherwise might have been dissuaded by the complexity of the matter. This is also true for those who may have been discouraged by the financial barriers. The ease of striking allows Daesh to mobilize its followers in a moment's notice. This gives Daesh more control over its image. If there is a sentiment that it is becoming a less dominant terrorist group in a region, Daesh can call on its followers in the region to initiate a Just Terror attack. It only takes one follower present to execute the attack and give the impression of Daesh influence in the region. It also helps build its narrative of being the representative of Islam fighting Western dominance. Higher frequency of attacks in the West by those identifying with Daesh leads to perceiving Daesh as the main threat to the West. For those already antagonistic towards the West, it will convey Daesh as being the most capable of disrupting their influence. Finally, a high frequency of attacks by Daesh followers leads to increased Islamophobia around the world. This can bring about disenfranchisement of Muslims from their wider communities which Daesh can capitalize on by attempting to radicalize them.

CREATION OF THE ENABLED ATTACKER

Given the extensive benefits of this new tactic to Daesh, it has developed a comprehensive methodology for its followers to adhere to in administering Just Terror. In doing so, it has created a new kind of terrorist. This is what is now known as an 'enabled attacker'. Traditionally, there have been two types of terrorist attacks: those committed by lone wolves, terrorists with no connection to an extremist organization, and those that are directly controlled attacks, in which the terrorist is directly communicating with the terrorist organization and is commanded to commit the attack. Enabled attackers are a hybrid of the two previous categories. While they may not have any direct communication with the terrorist organization, they have a detailed strategic framework already mapped out for them to apply to their attack.¹⁰ In the case of Daesh, it has outlined in explicit detail the parameters for executing a Just Terror attack.

In the November 2016 issue of *Rumiyah*, the newest Daesh magazine produced in the style of *Dabiq*, Daesh has explained the methodology behind Just Terror as follows:

Vehicles arouse absolutely no doubts due to their widespread use throughout the world. It is for this obvious reason that using a vehicle is one of the most comprehensive methods of attack, as it presents the opportunity for just terror for anyone possessing the ability to drive a vehicle. Likewise, it is one of the safest and easiest weapons one could employ against the kuffar, while being from amongst the most lethal methods of attack and the most successful in harvesting large numbers of the kuffar.¹¹

¹⁰ Hoffman, B. "A Growing Terrorist Threat on Another 9/11". *The Wall Street Journal*. 08 September 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/a-growing-terrorist-threat-on-another-9-11-1504888986>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

¹¹ "Just Terror Tactics".

The benefit of explaining its rationale to its followers is to entice them to carry out an attack. Daesh presents the act as feasible and attainable by anyone who can drive a car, which is likely a high proportion of *Rumiyah* readers. It also plants the seeds for someone on the fence who reads the magazine to see an opportunity to act in a moment of anger. The article continues by stipulating the exact specifications of the type of vehicle that can best accomplish murdering the most amount of people and indicating all potential targets. Such details enabled the attack of Uzbek national Sayfullo Saipov when he rammed a flatbed truck through a bike path along the Hudson River in New York City on 31 October killing eight people and injuring 12, only stopping when he crashed into a bus. He then exited the vehicle and ran down the highway waving a paintball and pellet gun until he was shot and subdued by police. The FBI believe he was specifically following the instructions of this magazine, and all evidence seems to support this assertion.¹² In addition to having several Daesh videos and articles in his phone, Saipov openly admitted to authorities that he was inspired to attack from Daesh videos.

In examining the methodology of the attack, a pattern of consistency between the instructions in the *Rumiyah* article and the operation of the attack becomes apparent. Firstly, Saipov drove over pedestrians repeatedly until his vehicle was rendered inoperable by ramming into a school bus. The article states, "In a bid to ensure utmost carnage upon the enemies of Allah, it is imperative that one does not exit his vehicle during the attack. Rather, he should remain inside, driving over the already harvested kuffar, and continue crushing their remains until it becomes physically impossible to continue by vehicle".¹⁰ Saipov clearly followed this instruction to a T. Next, the article reads, "At this stage, one may exit the vehicle and finish his operation on foot, if he was able to obtain a secondary weapon".¹⁰ True to the instructions, he left the vehicle with secondary weapons of a paintball gun and a pellet gun. Saipov rented a flatbed truck from Home Depot that was load-bearing up to 3,000 pounds, on a raised chassis and possessing a bumper.^{13 14} These are all stipulated in the *Rumiyah* article's 'Ideal Vehicle' guideline. The article also mentioned targeting "pedestrian-congested streets" which Saipov guaranteed by choosing a crowded bike path in Manhattan. The article further encouraged attacks on civilians by targeting outdoor attractions, stating, "In general, one should consider any outdoor attraction that draws large crowds... All so-called "civilian" (and low-security) parades and gatherings are fair game and more devastating to Crusader nations".¹⁰ This is likely why Saipov chose Halloween to execute his attack, as that is a day of frequent outdoor celebrations. His date of attack could have additionally been influenced by multiple Daesh-linked Twitter accounts which specifically called for attacks on Halloween.¹⁵ Daesh provides all potential extremists with an exhaustive guide to conducting an attack. All independent thought is removed from the equation. One needs solely to follow these

¹² Mueller, B. et al. "Prosecutors Describe Driver's Plan to Kill in Manhattan Terror Attack". *The New York Times*, 01 November 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/nyregion/driver-had-been-planning-attack-in-manhattan-for-weeks-police-say.html>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

¹³ Barron, J. "What We Know and Don't Know About the Manhattan Terror Attack". *The New York Times*, 31 October 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/nyregion/nyc-shooting-truck-attack.html>, Accessed on 30 November, 2017.

¹⁴ "Load N Go Flatbed Truck". *The Home Depot*. <https://www.homedepot.com/tool-truck-rental/load-n-go-truck-rental/>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

¹⁵ Mueller, B., Rashbaum, W. K. and Baker, A. "Terror Attack Kills 8 and Injures 11 in Manhattan". *The New York Times*, 31 October 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/nyregion/police-shooting-lower-manhattan.html>, Accessed on 30 November, 2017.

exact instructions and they can be considered a fully-fledged member of the 'caliphate'. This makes the line needed to cross to execute an attack that much thinner.

Creating enabled attackers builds a sustainable and efficient recruitment platform for Daesh. It can theoretically create a global army without directly communicating with any of them. Saipov and many others are drawn to Daesh propaganda independent of any direct involvement from Daesh operatives and can be operationalized and mobilized through readily accessible online material. Daesh no longer needs training camps to train militants, it only needs internet access. Daesh recruits no longer need to train in weapons-handling and bomb-making, they only need to acquire a vehicle. As Daesh loses resources and territory, this will prove to be an invaluable resource that it will exploit further. As it recalibrates its methodology for recruitment, it is also recalibrating its targets for recruitment.

DAESH SETS ITS SIGHTS ON CENTRAL ASIA

Daesh influence in Syria and Iraq has been thoroughly exhausted, with its number of supporters rapidly dwindling as its stranglehold over the region is lost. It has either revealed itself to be the apostate that it truly is to the locals and current foreign terrorist fighters who see firsthand the atrocities that Daesh is committing and realize the promise of the idyllic caliphate was a lie, or it has lost the stature it once had, and those looking for an extremist group to rally behind will flock elsewhere. Daesh is seeking a new target audience to radicalize and mobilize to its brand. The extent of extremist activity throughout Central Asia seems to have caught Daesh's attention.

The Manhattan attack is only the latest of several high-profile attacks from Central Asian nationals associated with Daesh. Another being the 2017 New Year's Day attack at Reina Nightclub in Istanbul that left 39 killed and 79 injured. The culprit was 34-year-old Uzbek national Abdulkadir Masharipov. Unlike Saipov, Masharipov was a direct operative of Daesh. He was reportedly part of a larger Central Asian Daesh terror cell. He was trained in Daesh training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶ He then received direct orders from Raqqa to travel to Istanbul on 15 December to plan out an attack for New Year's Eve.¹⁷ From 5-6 June 2016, at least 16 Kazak nationals who were suspected Daesh operatives took part in a series of attacks in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, killing 7 and injuring 37.¹⁸ A plot on 10 June 2016 in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan was thankfully foiled by Kyrgyz security services. The perpetrators were 3 Kyrgyz nationals who fought in Syria and returned to organize a terror cell in their home country.²⁰ There is a clear extremist element in the region that Daesh is keen to tap into.

Daesh has been increasingly trying to recruit Central Asians for the past three years. This is evidenced by its investment in Russian language propaganda to attract the disen-

¹⁶ "Istanbul Reina nightclub attack suspect 'trained in Afghanistan'". *BBC News*. 17 January 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38648306>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

¹⁷ "Istanbul Reina nightclub attack suspect captured". *BBC News*. 17 January 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38645787>, Accessed on 30 November, 2017.

¹⁸ "Kazakhstan: Gunmen attack gun shops and army unit in Aktobe". *BBC News*. 05 June 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36455744>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

¹⁹ "Police arrest, kill radical Islamist gang, after attack on military base in Kazakhstan". *RT International*. <https://www.rt.com/news/345468-kazakhstan-shooting-hostages-attacks/>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

²⁰ "Kyrgyz Detain Three Alleged IS Fighters". *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. 17 June 2016. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-islamic-state-suspects-detained/27804683.html>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

franchised from the Russophone region. Al-Hayat Media Centre launched *Istok*, a Russian version of *Dabiq*, in May of 2015. Much like *Dabiq*, *Istok* highlights the ‘heroics’ of foreign terrorist fighters, with *Istok* focusing specifically on Central Asian recruits and recruits from the Caucasus. Just two weeks after *Istok*’s release, Daesh put out a Russian-language journal *Furat Press*.²¹ Daesh also has materials released in Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik languages.²² Before Daesh shifted its focus to the far enemy, it was already trying to entice Central Asians to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. In April 2016, Al-Hayat Media Centre released two YouTube videos to promote Central Asian hijrah. The first showed a Kyrgyz man who traveled to Daesh territory with his family to raise his children under Sharia law. The second video shows two men and their sons from Kazakhstan calling on other Kazakhs to move to the so-called caliphate to leave what he called “Kafiristan” (pun on kafir – infidel – and Kazakhstan) and raise their children under a proper Islamic education.²¹ Both videos were spoken in the native tongues of the countries. The subject matter of these propaganda videos indicates how carefully Daesh studied the values and culture of the region in order to recruit them. Central Asia is a region with strong family values, and appealing to potential Central Asian recruits’ concerns as parents was a key motivating factor for many to move to Daesh territory. Its influence in the region was further solidified when it released a video of the former head of Tajikistan’s special forces, Gulmurod Khalimov, pledging allegiance to Daesh.²⁰

THE BIRTH OF EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

As of December of 2015, over 2,000 foreign terrorist fighters are known to have originated from Central Asia. These numbers are expected to have increased substantially since then. Central Asia is the third largest point of origin for Salafi jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.²³ This is a particularly profound phenomenon, as Central Asian Muslims traditionally belong to either the Hanafi school of Sunnism, which is known for being one of the more flexible and liberal schools of thought in Islamic jurisprudence, or the Sufi sect of Islam which promotes an inwardly focused, non-political practice of Islam.^{24,25} This begs the question of why the number of Central Asians embracing a politicized and radical interpretation of Islam is on the rise. This trend began with the Soviet-Afghan War.

Religious suppression in Central Asia under the Soviet Union led to a growing resentment that Central Asians carried with them through their conscription to the Soviet-Afghan War.²⁶ There they were confronted with the Mujahidin, a fighting force that seemed to represent religious and political freedom to many of the Central Asian conscripts. The identification of religious and cultural bonds shared by Afghans and the wider Central Asian community

²¹ Bacchi, U. "Isis targets jihadists in former Soviet nations with Russian-language propaganda magazine *Istok*". *International Business Times* UK, 03 June 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-targets-jihadists-former-soviet-nations-russian-language-propaganda-magazine-istok-1504238>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

²² Botobekov, U. "ISIS and Central Asia: A Shifting Recruiting Strategy". *The Diplomat*. 17 May 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/isis-and-central-asia-a-shifting-recruiting-strategy/>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

²³ Lynch, Th. F., III. et al. *Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy*. Washington DC: National Defence University Press, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2016.

²⁴ Warren, Ch. S. "The Hanafi School". Online Datasets. 28 May 2013. doi:10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0082.

²⁵ Cornell, S. E., and Spector, R. A. "Central Asia: More than Islamic extremists". *The Washington Quarterly* 25/1. 2002. 193–206. doi:10.1162/016366002753358410.

²⁶ Alexiev, A. *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan*. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1989.

as well as their common struggle with Soviet oppression led many to sympathize with the Afghans' plight and join the Mujahidin in support. Despite the increasing radicalism within the Mujahidin, their perceived effectiveness at freeing their country from outside forces garnered them further praise and adulation from their Central Asian neighbors. Many took up arms in support, leaving their countries and cutting ties with their society. Many of those never returned, further entrenching themselves in more radical movements locally. Those that did return harbored a deep-seated hostility towards their newly independent secular government coupled with a new sense of empowerment. This laid the seeds for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).²⁷

In a period of rising radicalization within Central Asia, the IMU was created in 1998 as an even more radical group who saw the efforts of the current movements as inadequate. Initially formed to remove Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov from power and establish Sharia law in Uzbekistan, the IMU morphed into a more globally-focused terrorist organization. Throughout the mid to late 90s, as their connection with the Taliban and al-Qaeda grew, the IMU began establishing training camps and offices in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. They also developed a large stronghold in Tajikistan in order to have tactical access to the Ferghana Valley, which straddles Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to control drug trafficking routes. The Uzbekistan government's crackdown on radical groups in the early '90s forced many to seek refuge in Tajikistan, further entrenching radical elements in the country. These radicals joined the United Tajik Opposition in the Tajik Civil War from 1992 to 1997.²³ These events led to a funnel effect that brought the radical elements from the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan into the same spaces. This further broke down national identification and grew a unified Islamist sentiment in the region.

This Islamist unity continued during the US invasion of Afghanistan, which saw many Central Asian extremist groups allying themselves with the Taliban. During the campaign, the IMU suffered heavy casualties and escaped to Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).²⁸ In Pakistan they engaged in combat against government forces, while a faction remained in northern Afghanistan to continue their fight against Afghan government forces and international actors like NATO. The IMU were active players at the height of Daesh's rise when their emir Usman Ghazi pledged allegiance to Daesh on 6 August 2015. However, this allegiance was disputed, with another faction of the IMU claiming on 10 June 2016 that they were the true representatives of the IMU and they aligned themselves with the Taliban and al-Qaeda.²⁹ Ghazi and his followers were killed fighting the Taliban in Zabul Province, Afghanistan in October of 2015 and the al-Qaeda-aligned IMU faction is believed to have been absorbed by other al-Qaeda-linked groups.³⁰ Despite their recent dissolution, the IMU played a significant role in international extremism, especially considering the number of splinter groups from the IMU that are active today.

²⁷ Rashid, A. "They're Only Sleeping". *The New Yorker*, 19 June 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/01/14/theyre-only-sleeping>, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

²⁸ Sidikov, A. "Islamabad Pins Border Violence On Central Asian Group". *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. 02 February 2012. https://www.rferl.org/a/Pakistan_IMU_Militants_Afghan_Border_Unrest/1181286.html, Accessed on 30 November 2017.

²⁹ Lynch, Th. F., III. et al. Return of Foreign Fighters...

³⁰ Weiss, C. "Islamic State Eulogizes Former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Figure Killed in Iraq". *Long War Journal*. 08 November 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/islamic-state-eulogizes-former-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan-figure-killed-in-iraq.php>, Accessed on 15 April 2018.

In the early 2000s, Central Asia saw a rise in active terrorist organizations, many of which came from the IMU itself. The Islamic Jihad Union originated as a sect of the IMU and then separated their operations. Like the IMU, their original goal was to overthrow the Uzbekistan government and institute a fundamentalist theocracy. They executed a string of attacks in Uzbekistan in 2004, with organized suicide bombings in Tashkent and Bukhara from 29 to 31 March, killing 47, and another suicide bombing plot at the Israeli and US embassies in Tashkent on 30 July, killing nine.³¹ They moved their operations to the FATA in Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan when security forces in Uzbekistan cracked down on their operations. Katibat Imam al-Bukhari is another terrorist organization of concern in the region. Most abhorrently, they specialize in child soldier recruitment. They weaponize children as young as 10 and train them in hand-to-hand combat and firearms operation. They operate in eastern and northern Afghanistan as well as in northwestern Syria with the al-Nusra Front.³² Even if these children are liberated, a major challenge will arise when they grow up without a family support network and face the difficulties of displacement. It may lead to a new generation of disenfranchised for groups like Daesh to recruit. This leads to a wider question of what will happen to the disenfranchised Central Asian foreign terrorist fighters en totum?

THE FUTURE OF DAESH INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

As territorial boundaries are shifting, many Central Asians active in these extremist groups will get further displaced. Experts believe some may return to their home countries, while others may have difficulty doing so if their government is aware of their activities abroad.²⁷ Those who cannot return to their home country may migrate to other Central Asian countries where they are not on the government's radar, or possibly to Western countries. This creates emerging threats involving radicalized Central Asians throughout the world. Given the prominent influence and allegiances al-Qaeda has to the region, Daesh will have to fight for dominance. Ansar Jihad is a sub-unit of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham which has extensive connections with al-Qaeda, Katibat Imam al-Bukhari has a history of fighting alongside al-Qaeda in several conflicts and Islamic Jihad Union has ties to the Taliban, Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda.³³ It is precisely because al-Qaeda is so influential in Central Asia that Daesh will rely extensively on creating enabled attackers in the region through targeted propaganda. This has already shown to be an effective measure in the region, so it is likely it will further increase its focus on releasing Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh language propaganda through al-Hayat Media Centre. Daesh only needs one Central Asian to be spurred by its message into executing an attack to portray a sense of dominance in Central Asia. This ironically will have the effect of legitimately spreading Daesh's dominance in Central Asia and throughout the Central Asian diaspora community. Daesh's strength over al-Qaeda

³¹ "The 2004 Attacks in Uzbekistan: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests". CRS Report for Congress. April 16, 2004. The Library of Congress.

³² Roggio, B., and Weiss, C. "Uzbek group in Syria trains children for jihad". *The Long War Journal*. 29 December 2015. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/uzbek-group-in-syria-trains-children-for-jihad.php>, Accessed on November 26, 2017.

³³ Roggio, B. and Weiss, C. "Islamic Jihad Union details its involvement in Taliban's Azm offensive". *The Long War Journal*. 25 July 2015. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/islamic-jihad-union-details-its-involvement-in-talibans-azm-offensive.php>, Accessed on 26 November 2017.

is not in its physical influence or physical territory anymore – its strength lies in its digital influence. While al-Qaeda may have significant pull in the region, this influence is under threat. As indicated by the increasing number of high-profile attacks from Central Asian extremists done in Daesh's name, the rebalance of power has already begun to take effect.

Daesh is seeking to portray its global reach in terms of holding physical territory in several provinces around the world. These are known as Wilayah (Arabic for provinces). The dominant Wilayah in Central Asia is Wilayah Khorasan which had counted IMU as a member. In order to become a Wilayah, a group must demonstrate that they are the dominant jihadist organization in the region. There is no evidence to support Wilayah Khorasan was the dominant group when they made their bay'ah, public declaration of allegiance, to Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Quite the contrary, Wilayah Khorasan's area of operation includes Afghanistan and Pakistan, where al-Qaeda is the clear dominating force. Daesh seems to be learning that if it cannot hold physical territory, it will then give the impression of holding physical territory to give off the perception of power. Another requirement to become a Wilayah is to make a public declaration of allegiance in a medium that can go viral. This is key, as it shows the importance to Daesh in utilizing social media to influence the region. If Central Asians see Wilayah Khorasan's public declaration of allegiance to Daesh in a sharable platform, they are more likely to be convinced of Daesh's power. This will make Daesh the most likely group to turn to if they become radicalized.

FUTURE AIMS FOR A GLOBAL CALIPHATE

As Daesh struggles to maintain the illusion of power in Syria and Iraq, it is turning its strategy towards growing the illusion of power in Central Asia. This illusion can quickly grow into real power through the utilization of online platforms enabling attackers to use Just Terror to spread fear and establish its brand in the region. By granting easy access to a foolproof guide to executing a Just Terror attack, Daesh has essentially created a "do-it-yourself" (DIY) tool for committing acts of terrorism. It will further rely on this tool in the years to come as its old ways of influence lose their saliency. Central Asia is one of multiple regions Daesh will seek to grow this digital campaign in an attempt to truly establish a global 'caliphate'. The far enemy is becoming the main focus of Daesh extremism and its primary weapon in this battle is the internet. Global practitioners in counterterrorism need to recalibrate their focus as well towards limiting this influence through disrupting Daesh's message and flooding the digital space with alternative messaging and counter messaging. They need to make particular efforts to empower organizations operating in the Central Asian sphere to provide these alternative narratives and engage Central Asians who may be vulnerable to Daesh's propaganda. Daesh's power circularly lies in its ability to provide certainty of its power to its target audience. It has lost power in Syria and Iraq because it can no longer portray a certainty of power. This is not merely because of the physical losses of territory, but because of the online awareness of their loss of influence in the region. It is unlikely that Daesh will attempt the same plan of establishing a physical caliphate, so as its strategy shifts towards the digital sphere, so must ours.

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