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Dynamics of ISKP/ISIS ideological appeal in Tajikistan

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About the Author

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Saadi also teaches philosophy courses tailored to computer science programs at Ajou University and IT Park University in Tashkent. His work has been featured in Diplomat Magazine, and he has contributed articles to peer-reviewed Italian journals such as Matrioska and geopolitica.info, on topics such as security and the sociopolitical transformation of Central Asia, the prospects for democratization, and the state of government institutions and corruption amid increasing Chinese economic influence in the region. His Master's thesis focused on a comparative analysis of political regime transitions in Georgia and Tajikistan, exploring the obstacles to democratic development.

Introduction

Since its inception in 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has proven to be adept and flexible in recruiting new members from all over the world to its ranks. Central Asia in this context proved to be one of the most vulnerable regions which ISIS managed to capitalize to its advantage by recruiting people through various means. After its defeat in Syria and Iraq, the group shifted its campaign to the east, covering primarily the modern territories of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. This task is entrusted to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) branch. The recent ISKP terrorist attacks in Iran, Turkey, and Russia showed that the network still effectively recruits followers from the region for its cause. Although ISKP has members from all Central Asian countries, Tajikistan has stood out in recent incidents, with many terrorist perpetrators originating from this country.

Tajikistan, like most of its post-Soviet Muslim majority neighbors, was subjected to nearly 70 years of state-led atheist indoctrination through educational institutions and policies that were aimed at eradicating religion from public affairs. The interesting fact is that within three decades of independence, a country once dominated by the Soviet anti-religious ideological campaigns found some of its citizens joining extremist organizations, marking a shift from one form of extremism to another.

Following the ISIL defeats in Syria and Iraq in 2017, its military and financial capabilities were substantially curbed and degraded, nevertheless, the ISKP branch as evidenced by its recent attacks in Iran, and Turkey in January 2024, and in Russia in March 2024, as well as the arrests of the Tajik, suspect ISIS affiliates in EU and US demonstrate that ISKP still manages to appeal to some vulnerable citizens from Tajikistan.¹ideologically

For this reason, it is important to explore the dynamics of ISKP's ideological appeal among the Tajiks, especially within the broader context of Tajikistan's political and socio-economic landscape. The analysis of the variables above would allow us to attain a clearer conceptualization of the institutional responses in countering ISKP's ideological appeal in some segments of Tajikistan's population. it will also help

determine if ISKP has further potential to sustain and expand its ideological influence among some citizens of Tajikistan.

It should, however, be clarified that the use of the phrase ‘ideological appeal in Tajikistan’ by no means suggests that the violent extremism resonates with the majority of people in Tajikistan. It would be more accurate to put it as a narrow popular appeal primarily among vulnerable individuals who face poverty, repression, immigration, isolation, and discrimination (especially in Russia).² In Tajikistan, the overall public sentiment is, to a great degree, shaped by people’s experiences and the consequences of the Civil War (1992-1997). Therefore, the devastating effects of the civil war prompt a general aversion toward violence and extremism and underscores the value of maintaining peace and stability in the country.

Nonetheless, exploring the factors driving radicalization is imperative because it can serve to draw more attention to the structural problems in Tajikistan, which enables ISKP to draw more followers for its cause, and inform the long-term efforts in mitigating the spread of extremist ideology, and build more resilient communities against ISKP recruitments.

On top of that, radicalization has implications for regional stability. The spread of extremist ISKP ideology presents a serious threat to Central Asia’s security. Considering the current challenges in the region following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the sanctions against Russia and its ripple effect on Central Asia, particularly on Tajikistan, and the crackdown on Central Asian immigrants in Russia after the ISKP attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, the situation is likely to further exacerbate the existing proclivities toward extremism and radicalization.

The study integrates both quantitative and qualitative dimensions in data collection to develop an extensive analysis of ISKP’s ideological appeal in Tajikistan. The research explores the socio-political landscape in Tajikistan by relying on relevant analytical reports/articles, archives, indices on governance; political institutions, and civil liberties in Tajikistan (i.e., V-Dem, and Transparency International), and (limited) economic indicators. Similarly, the existing research materials, intelligence reports, and expert analyses are used to study ISIS’s organizational structure, resources, and

capacities to carry out its operations and recruit new followers specifically in Central Asia and Russia.

At last, the research would attempt to synthesize the quantitative and qualitative analyses to form a comprehensive explanation of the ISKP's ideological appeal in Tajikistan and outline the potential implications of ISKP's ability to draw followers based on the socio-political realities in Tajikistan.

Socio-political landscape in Tajikistan

Before embarking on the specifics of Tajikistan's present socio-political realities and their potential connection to susceptibility to extremism and radicalization, it is crucial to briefly examine how Tajikistan's Soviet and transitional legacy has shaped the current state of affairs in Tajikistan.

Throughout the 20th century, the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic stood out as the most impoverished and underdeveloped region within the former Soviet Union, partly because of how the Soviet political restructuring and the division of Central Asia into ethno-territorial nation-states took place.³ The Tajik SSR was heavily reliant on Moscow with 46.6 percent of union subsidies being funneled to support the Tajik SSR's fragile economy.⁴ The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 was, consequently, followed by the economic collapse and disruption of trade with the neighboring former Soviet republics sparking regionally defined groups to vie for control over land and resources. These problems ultimately culminated in a devastating civil war that ravaged Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997.⁵

Tajikistan's Civil War was intertwined with the rise of Islamist groups that took part in the conflict. Some segments of Tajikistan's population had shown a leaning toward political Islam, particularly in the late 1980s and during the Civil War in the 1990s, but that by no means, was analogous to ISIS ideology. After enduring decades of Soviet repressive campaigns against Islam, Tajikistan saw a rise in political Islam, which allowed the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) to garner support in some regions of Tajikistan. It could arguably be described as a reaction to the long-standing Soviet repressive policies against Muslims and the ongoing exclusion of regionally based

It could arguably be described as a reaction to the long-standing Soviet repressive policies against Muslims, as well as the ongoing exclusion of regionally based clans from Gharm (Rasht) and Badakhshan regions in Tajikistan from political participation.

Nonetheless, some radical elements among Islamist factions in Tajikistan refused to accept the armistice of 1997, which ended the Civil War in Tajikistan. Today, this Islamist group, known as Ansurullah or Tahrik-e Taliban Tajikistan (TTT), operates under the command of the Taliban in northern Afghanistan.

Poverty, Unemployment & Corruption

Tajikistan remains the most impoverished republic in the region, as it continues to struggle with economic challenges, particularly unemployment and low standards of living. As of recent estimates, Tajikistan's GDP per capita is ranked among the lowest in the world.⁶ Because of unemployment, many citizens of Tajikistan seek work abroad, primarily, in Russia. This makes Tajikistan one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world, with nearly 40% of its GDP coming from remittances.⁷

Corruption in Tajikistan is widespread and the form of governance is marked by a pervasive nepotistic kleptocracy. Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index annually ranks Tajikistan among the most corrupt countries in the world.⁸ The reports from Transparency International often express concerns over transparency and integrity within Tajikistan's state institutions.

The overall political landscape in this Central Asian country is characterized by restrictions on political and civil liberties.⁹ Such restrictions and the lack of adequate institutional mechanisms for people to voice their grievances and dissent leaves many people in Tajikistan disenfranchised especially against the backdrop of unemployment. This is one of the major factors that make some citizens of Tajikistan susceptible to extremism, especially, in Russia where many Central Asian immigrants are regularly subjected to systematic discrimination.

Profile of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

After being defeated in Syria and Iraq and retreating underground in 2019, ISIS evolved into a decentralized network with its cells dispersed across the Middle East, South Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan), and North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Islamic State Khorasan Province is a regional branch of the Islamic State initially formed from former Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2015. This ISIS branch adopted the historical toponym Khorasan to refer to the area of its operation. The toponym roughly corresponds with the parts of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, highlighting ISIS/ISKP's larger jihad aspirations beyond national borders. However, the historic region of Khurasan is known for its cultural and intellectual sophistication and religious plurality, values that are fundamentally opposed to ISIS ideology.¹⁰ Currently, the group is most active in Afghanistan.

ISKP's Organizational Setup, Leadership and Resources

ISKP maintains its link to ISIS, through the General Directorate of Provinces. This directorate acts as a bridge between ISIS's core leadership and its regional branches, which include eight offices worldwide. One such branch or office is Maktab al-Siddiq overseeing ISKP. This ISIS Directorate provides strategic guidance to all ISIS branches/provinces including, ISKP but the group also retains operational autonomy in its activities.¹¹ It is best exemplified in ISKP's organizational structure which includes a Shura Advisory Council for senior leadership, provincial commanders, and leaders responsible for functional aspects such as intelligence and logistics within ISKP.¹²

Since 2021, ISKP has been the most active terrorist group in Afghanistan, which makes it the most valuable branch of ISIS Core leadership. However, at the moment the current state of ISKP leadership is not entirely clear. The leader of ISKP, Sanaullah Ghafuri, was initially reported to have been killed by the Taliban in 2023, but conflicting reports suggest that he may have fled to Pakistan.¹³

ISKP's main revenue streams are extortion, trafficking, kidnapping, and donations. Additionally, it receives financial support from Maktab al-Karrar, another regional ISIS office responsible for operations in Somalia. Maktab al-Karrar, as the U.S. Department of Treasury reports, is the largest revenue generator among all ISIS provinces.¹⁴

Comparing Islamist ideologies: IRPT in Tajikistan and Daesh/ISIS

Political Islam in Tajikistan is best represented by the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which has shaped the country's political landscape for decades. The IRPT and Daesh ideologies represent very distinct ideological streams within the broader spectrum of Islamist thought; their interpretations, goals, and methods differ significantly.

Post-Islamism in Tajikistan: IRPT's Ideology

The IRPT gained legal recognition following the 1997 Peace Accords and held 2 parliamentary seats before it was banned in 2015. The party grew out of The Revival of the Islamic Youth of Tajikistan (Nahzat-e Javanan-e Tajikistan), an underground organization founded in 1972 in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. The two founders of the IRPT, Abdullah Nori and Muhammad Sharif Himmatzade used to attend clandestine Islamic teachings led by the influential Hanafi Islamic Scholar Muhammadjan Khoqandi who was mainly known as Hindustani (Persian word for Indian) since he spent 8 years of his life in India.

The Islamic tradition that Hindustani endorsed was conservative yet aligned with local customs and traditions. Despite their conservative nature, Hindustani's teachings were apolitical.¹⁵ He viewed the Soviet repression of religion as a test of faith that ought to be solved with patience. This political pacificism, during the late tumultuous 1980s, gave way to increasing political activism and armed resistance

in the 1990s, where the movement advocated and fought for an elevated status of Islam in Tajikistan's Civil War.

After the end of the Civil War in Tajikistan, the former conservative leader of the IRPT, Said Abdullah Nori emphasized the gradual and peaceful Islamization of Tajikistan. However, his successor, Muhiddin Kabiri, adopted a more moderate and progressive stance for the party and aimed to integrate local Islamic principles within the secular framework in Tajikistan.¹⁶ But, this shift came at the cost of losing support from radical wings of the party. While in exile, he still promotes dialogue, and political participation by advocating representative parliamentarian, justice, and fair elections in Tajikistan.¹⁷

Daesh Ideology



Photo / The Independent

In contrast to the political Islam that emerged within Tajikistan's distinct socio-political realities, the ISIS ideology originates from the Wahhabi school of thought, a strict puritanical interpretation of Islam that has its roots in Saudi Arabia. The ISIS ideological framework is based on the Wahhabi principles that call for the enforcement of a rigid moral code based on Sharia, and rejection of any practices that are deemed as *shirk* (idolatry).

ISIS emerged from the chaos of the Iraq War, with its roots in the extremist doctrines of a leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi is known as the architect of ISIS tactics and strategy, involving brutal terror attacks and sectarian violence, particularly, against Shia communities and those Sunni Muslims the group deemed to be apostates.¹⁸ Central to the group's ideology is a belief in an apocalyptic vision culminating in the rise of a caliphate.¹⁹ Apocalyptic narratives are often featured in ISIS propaganda and recruitment efforts, appealing particularly to those individuals who see themselves as part of a divine mission.

ISIS rejects modern nation-states with their current borders along with any form of democratic governance. The group, instead, pursued an expansionist strategy aimed at establishing a transnational Islamic caliphate. ISIS explicitly declares a global jihad and seeks a violent overthrow of any government that does not conform to its stringent Islamist ideology.

The history of the IRPT in Tajikistan is intertwined with the Soviet repressive policies against religion in Tajikistan. Hence, the emergence of the IRPT could be somewhat interpreted as a reaction to long-standing Soviet repressive policies. Initially apolitical, the party shifted to activism and armed military engagement during the Civil War. By the end of the Civil War, the party enjoyed a legal status until it was banned in 2015. The party leader embraced a more liberal approach and sought peaceful participation in the politics of Tajikistan. In contrast, ISIS pursues a violent global jihad to establish its caliphate, which starkly differs from the IRPT's approach. The ideology of ISIS is rooted in the Wahhabi school, which is alien to the local Islamic traditions of Central Asia/Tajikistan. Despite this ideological disparity in traditions, it has not deterred some individuals from Tajikistan from joining this group. This indicates that ISIS's ideological appeal transcends regional religious differences and can attract followers even from areas with distinct Islamic traditions.

ISKP's Reach in the Context of Tajikistan

Since 2015, among many extremist terrorist organizations, ISIS turned into one of the most attractive terrorist networks for many extremist sympathizers. In the Central Asian context, the International Center for the Study of Radicalization's (ICSR) estimates of 2018 show that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had the highest number of ISIL affiliates (2500 and 1502 respectively).²⁰

According to a UN report, ISKP itself is estimated to have around 4,000 and 6,000 fighters.²¹ However, this estimate is treated with skepticism, as other sources claim that the actual number of ISKP fighters could be considerably lower. For now, it is hard to ascertain the number of fighters from Tajikistan in this terrorist group given the clandestine nature of ISKP. What is currently known is that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan coincided with an increase in the number of ISKP fighters. Since the Taliban assumed control in Kabul, ISKP has successfully recruited disaffected members from various militant groups in Afghanistan, including the members of the Tajik extremist group Ansarullah/Tahrek-e Taliban Tajikistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

At the same time, ISKP exploits the existing economic and social grievances to attract potential recruits from Tajikistan. This is particularly true against the backdrop of Tajikistan's flawed legal system and the challenges faced by Tajik immigrants in Russia. The Tajik citizens who migrate to Russia often face discrimination and harsh treatment from Russian police and security services, which has further intensified following ISKP's attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow.

As many terrorist attacks this year indicate the fighters from Tajikistan seem to be taking an effective role in ISKP terrorist operations. The Tajik fighters in ISKP represent an asset due to their cultural and linguistic similarities with the broader Eurasian region, which enables them to covertly conduct a range of operations, including logistical support, fundraising, and executing lone-wolf attacks.²² Although there have been cases of high-ranking Tajik ISIS fighters, such as Gulmurad Khalimov – ISIS's war minister and the former head of the Tajik special forces unit, most of the Tajik recruits within ISKP perform terror operations on the ground often involving suicide attacks.



Photo / Social media

ISKP disseminates its propaganda content in Uzbek, Farsi/Tajiki, and Kyrgyz to broaden its appeal throughout Central Asia. Within the Tajik pro-ISKP online ecosystem, a wide variety of audio and visual propaganda is produced, which includes religious content, threats against the government of Tajikistan and its policies, and showcases Tajik jihadist role models for sympathizers.²³ ISKP's online ecosystem also included Tajik Telegram channels such as Sadoi Shaykh, Sadoi Khuroson, and Movarounahr to further its reach among potential recruits.²⁴ These channels have now been suspended by Telegram.²⁵ ISKP often shares instructions on how to download a secure TOR browser and disseminates its propaganda through dark web platforms.

Although ISKP does not have an active and organized presence in Tajikistan, it occasionally conducted attacks within Tajikistan. For instance, in July 2018, IS-affiliated Tajiks attacked Western cyclists in Tajikistan's Danghara District, resulting in the death of four individuals and multiple injuries. Moreover, in November 2019, a confrontation along the Tajik-Uzbek border led to the deaths of 15 Tajik nationals affiliated with ISKP. These individuals were reportedly attempting to cross the border into Afghanistan.²⁶ Similarly, in 2018, the Islamic State was responsible for a deadly prison riot in a facility located east of Dushanbe, which resulted in the deaths of three prison guards and 29 inmates.²⁷ More recently, in January 2024, the Interior Ministry of Tajikistan claimed that a bomb attack targeting, Salim Sayvalizadeh, the chairman of the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDRT) in the city of Kulab, was perpetrated by individuals linked to ISKP.²⁸

Assessing the sustainability of Daesh ideological appeal among the citizens of Tajikistan

Tajikistan has experienced political instability, poverty, and unemployment, more so than other countries in the region. These challenges have made its citizens especially susceptible to ISKP's recruitment strategies. ISKP's focus on Tajikistan is not coincidental, the group aims to exploit the grievances arising from the country's socio-economic and political hardships. The issue becomes especially relevant in the digital age where the pervasive issues of poverty and inequality amplify feelings of injustice, making individuals more vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Individuals facing economic hardships and disenfranchisement, both within Tajikistan and Russia, often experience profound alienation and frustration. This predicament drives some to seek a sense of belonging and purpose in extremist ideologies. Consequently, ISKP's ability to sustain and expand its ideological appeal among the citizens of Tajikistan is deeply intertwined with the nation's complex socio-economic and political realities.

For more than three decades Tajikistan has not seen any political/institutional and economic reforms nor have there been any improvements in civil liberties and indicators of corruption. Amidst the existing issues, the government often conflates certain Islamic religious practices with extremism and implements measures to restrict them. The religious segment of the population views this policy as an attack on Islam, which ISKP often uses in its narrative to its advantage.

On top of that, the Kremlin's brutal crackdown on Central Asian immigrants, especially Tajiks, following the terror attack in Moscow, would play into the hands of extremist groups. Compounding these challenges, Tajikistan's geographic location and porous borders with Afghanistan, where ISKP has an active presence, make the situation even more complex.

Despite state counter-extremism efforts and local resistance against extremism, ISKP still has the potential to expand its ideological appeal given the current internal and external circumstances in Tajikistan. Without implementing necessary and effective institutional measures to address the root causes of extremism – measures that currently appear to be lacking – this threat is likely to persist.

Recommendation

Extremism and radicalization among certain segments of Tajikistan's population are symptoms of deeper, interconnected problems that include poverty, unemployment, systemic corruption, disenfranchisement, and repressive policies in Tajikistan which ISKP capitalizes on with a well-structured organization and resources. These problems require major institutional changes in Tajikistan which is hard to foresee in the near term. However, there are still some practical steps and realistic considerations that can be taken to mitigate the factors contributing to extremism and radicalization in the context of Tajikistan:

- Global actors, such as the EU and the US, can play a more active role in alleviating Tajikistan's ongoing economic and financial hardships. They can contribute by supporting the diversification of the country's labor immigration initiatives by providing safer and legal opportunities for Tajik workers to seek employment abroad. Additionally, the EU and the US could help Tajikistan to improve its infrastructure and healthcare, particularly in poverty-stricken regions and among disenfranchised segments of Tajikistan's population.

- Extending educational programs via civil societies and NGOs to disenfranchised communities in Tajikistan is equally important. The educational initiatives should promote critical thinking, media literacy, and awareness about radicalization processes in the local language, Farsi/Tajiki. Discussions on diversity, tolerance, and the dangerous consequences of extremist ideologies are imperative in such initiatives to reduce the appeal to extremist ideologies. Educated and respected religious leaders should similarly be supported to provide Islamic education in line with local Islamic schools and traditions to counter foreign Salafi-Deobandi interpretations of Islam.

- Addressing the issue of government restrictions on practicing Muslims is very challenging, but it is important to consider ways to relax these limitations to prevent ISKP from exploiting them in its propaganda narratives and recruitment purposes. Human rights organizations and other major international actors such as the EU and the US should adopt a balanced approach, advocating for moderate reforms that protect religious freedoms without risking alienation of the government of Tajikistan.

- More regional efforts should be put into addressing extremism and radicalization in Central Asia. There are already existing bilateral ties and multilateral platforms among the countries of the region. Addressing shared challenges like unemployment, countering the extremist narratives of ISKP, and border management with Afghanistan requires extensive collaborative efforts from the region. ISKP recruitment activities and operations take place across different countries with significant involvement from Central Asian nationals. This fact alone highlights the urgency of promoting more robust cross-border cooperation against extremism and radicalization. To effectively counter the threat posed by ISKP, there must be a comprehensive and coordinated response at both regional and international levels. For this reason, greater engagement with international organizations and utilizing their expertise and resources can help to better tackle challenges associated with extremism and radicalization. For instance, organizations like the UN, UNDP, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can offer valuable support in terms of capacity-building, funding, and technical assistance.

Moreover, as a Persian-speaking country, Tajikistan should foster broader regional cooperation among other Persian-speaking countries. Political leaders, activists, and civil societies from Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan need to engage in more robust dialogue.²⁹ By doing so, they could establish a unified position and develop a collaborative media platform to counteract the extremist narratives propagated by ISKP. Such an initiative would be especially crucial given ISKP's explicit objective to target the geography that includes Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan, and its ongoing effort to expand its recruitment within this geographic area, especially in Tajikistan.

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