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AFGHANISTAN AND THE TERROR THREAT IN CENTRAL ASIA

Abstract: *A United Nations sanctions monitoring team, warned in a report in June 2023 that the Taliban “have not delivered on the counter-terrorism provisions” in the Doha Accords, the agreement that paved the way for the withdrawal of U.S. forces and two years after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan the country is again devolving into a hotbed of terrorism activity that is already beginning to affect the region.ⁱ*

Central Asian states are deeply concerned about regional security and potential terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan and remained on guard against violent extremist elements from Afghanistan crossing their borders or committing cross-border rocket attacks, as well as the potential threat posed by returning citizens who traveled to Iraq or Syria to fight with terrorist groups.ⁱⁱ Most of the Central Asian countries remained suspicious of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but they adopted a pragmatic policy of strengthening the defense of their borders with Afghanistan on the one hand and negotiating with the Taliban regime on the other. Tajikistan’s primary concerns are with ISIS-K and Jamaat Ansarullah, which operates from Afghanistan and seeks to overthrow the Tajik government and to establish an Islamic emirate.ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike Afghanistan’s other neighbors, which adopted cautious stances vis-à-vis the new rulers in Kabul, Dushanbe has been vocal in its criticism, describing the Taliban regime as a threat to regional stability and slamming it for being non-inclusive.^{iv}

Key words: *ISIS – K, Taliban, Al Qaeda, Jamaat Ansarullah, Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan.*

Introduction

Since the Taliban seized power, capturing the Afghan capital of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and declaring an Islamic emirate, the Taliban pledged not to let militant organizations use the country as a base to conduct terror attacks abroad. Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said: “We assure you that we will not let ISIS to become active in the country, in the areas under our control. “As for the presence of terrorists from other countries, I completely deny this. There are no terrorists from Central Asia or China in the country. We will prevent them from entering the country.”^v The main violent threat to the Taliban regime and neighboring countries comes from the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) armed group. ISIS – K doesn't possess the capabilities to overthrow the Taliban government, but they can damage the credibility of the Taliban, which has claimed that it is the only group that can bring peace and stability to the country. Central Asian states are deeply concerned about regional security and potential terrorist threats emanating from the country and remained on guard against violent extremist elements from Afghanistan crossing their borders or committing cross-border rocket attacks, as well as the potential threat posed by returning citizens who traveled to Iraq or Syria to fight with terrorist groups.^{vi} The Taliban fought ISIS-K, but continued to harbor other terrorist groups. The Taliban hosted and sheltered al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul before his death in a U.S. airstrike on July 30, 2022. The US believes that terrorist groups can easily reconstitute in Afghanistan under Taliban rules and is concerned the country will become a terrorism haven and a launching pad for international attacks.^{vii}

The United States bolstered regional security cooperation in Central Asia through the C5+1 diplomatic platform with programs that develop the region's ability to secure its borders and increase information sharing. These programs included a C5+1 Border Security training program in Almaty, Kazakhstan, which delivered several courses in 2023 ranging from border management to low-light environment operations. Additional U.S. assistance continued to support improved border security in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2023. Countries in the region also received security assistance from Russia, the PRC, and others.^{viii}

The Taliban and ISIS - K – relations

The Taliban were ousted from power by US-led forces in 2001 for refusing to hand over Al-Qaeda leaders responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks. In 2015, at a time when ISIS was at its peak,

controlling much of Iraq and Syria and after the declaration of a worldwide caliphate, ISIS started to extend its geographical reach beyond Iraq and Syria. As part of this strategy ISIS formed its Khorasan Province in Afghanistan.

ISIS – K was established in January 2015 and named itself after “Khorasan”, part of an Islamic empire which stretched from Iran to the western Himalayas from the 6th century. In 2015, ISIS took advantage of the weakness of the Taliban, whose leadership found refuge in Pakistan, and was at war with US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, and began recruiting Taliban defectors and to establish its own infrastructure in the country.

ISIS - Khorasan (ISIS-K) - the Afghan affiliate of ISIS, first appeared in eastern Afghanistan in the Nangarhar and Kunar provinces in 2015 and later made inroads into other areas, particularly the north. It also created sleeper cells in cities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including Kabul. The Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour asked his ISIS counterpart Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to stop recruiting former Taliban fighters. He had called for the two groups to unite under the Taliban’s leadership to achieve a common goal of ruling by sharia law. However, his request was denied and since 2015 ISIS-K battled the Afghan national army, the US-led coalition forces and the Taliban. The sources of the conflict between the Taliban and ISIS - K are mainly religious and ideological. The Taliban and ISIS are both extremist groups seeking to form authoritarian states under their strict interpretation of Sharia law and are prepared to use violence to achieve their aim and have used tactics like suicide bombers. But Taliban’s goals are limited in nature. They were primarily interested in expelling Western forces from Afghanistan and creating an Islamic Emirate within the borders of that country. The Islamic State in Afghanistan, on the other hand, seeks to acquire the same territory as the Taliban but as a part of a global "Caliphate".^{ix} ISIS believes in unmitigated violence, extreme commitment to doctrinal purity and apocalyptic predictions while the Taliban has shown greater pragmatism in recent years negotiating with the US and other countries.^x In 2017, ISIS and the Taliban fought in Jowzjan the northern province of Afghanistan and 22 were killed in battles between the groups. In the summer of 2018, the Taliban succeeded in clearing ISIS - K out of Jowzjan.^{xi} The US forces and the Afghan security forces gave top priority to fight ISIS – K and in the years 2015 – 2020 they conducted intensive operations against the group. The first leader of ISIS - K, was a Pakistani national, Hafiz Saeed Khan. Khan’s deputy within the organization was a former Talib called

Abdul Rauf Aliza. Abdul Rauf Aliza, was a provincial-level Taliban commander before falling out with the Taliban leadership in 2014. In response to attacks in Afghanistan, the US carried out airstrikes to kill Aliza in 2015 and Hafiz Saeed Khan in Nangarhar Province, in 2016. He was replaced by Abdul Hasib, who was killed in an operation on April 27, 2017, conducted jointly by Afghan and U.S. Special Forces in the province of Nangarhar. Hasib's successor, Abu Sayed, only lasted about two months before he and a bunch of cronies were killed in an airstrike on the group's headquarters in Kunar province.^{xii}

In 2017, former US president Donald Trump used aerial operations, including the use of the "mother of all bombs", or MOAB, in a major airstrike launched against the group to destroy the network of tunnels and other hideouts used by insurgents in the Achin district.^{xiii}

The US aerial operations and several operations by special forces crippled ISIS-K

The group also suffered a series of setbacks throughout 2019 and at the end of the year, hundreds of fighters and their families surrender to the Afghan government, totaling almost 1,500 people by the start of 2020. The US killing of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in northern Syria in October 2019 was a further blow and experts even began to declare that the organization had been defeated.^{xiv}

Since June 2020, ISIS-K has been led by Shahab al-Muhajir, also known as "Sanaullah," who took over after Afghan special forces captured his predecessor, Aslam Farooqi, and other senior members. Al-Muhajir is suspected to have previously been a mid-level commander in the Haqqani Network.^{xv} Al Muhajir 's goal has been to lead the organization out of relative decline by launching attacks against the US forces, the Afghan government's forces and sectarian attacks mainly against the Shia Hazara minority. After the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces and the collapse of the Afghan security forces, the ISIS – K can focus the majority of its operational resources on the Taliban, instead of splitting those resources to resist multiple actors. The group was responsible for a 2021 attack at Kabul's international airport that left at least 183 people dead, including 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. military personnel. It has also attacked the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Afghanistan, and launched an assault on a Kabul hotel with the stated intent of killing Chinese nationals. Under Al Muhajir 's leadership, the Islamic State in

Afghanistan has been featured in the Islamic State-Central's propaganda as a high-performing affiliate.

ISIS – K consists of local militants and former Afghan and Pakistani Taliban as well as some former al-Qaeda members. The U.N. Security Council in February 2022 estimated that ISIS-K had 1,000 to 3,000 fighters. ISIS – K has accelerated its recruiting initiatives across Central Asia to recruit people to ISIS – K through distributing and translating propaganda for Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz-speaking communities in the region. This increased zeal in ISIS – K recruitment is a threat to already dismal stability in Afghanistan and the whole region. The destabilization in Afghanistan could spill across borders and pose a greater risk of terror threats to Central Asia.^{xvi}

The threat of ISIS – K to Central Asian countries

ISIS-K has threatened to assassinate the leaders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as Central Asian clerics who spoke out against the Islamic State.

The group's members were implicated in a 2021 plot to bomb Turkmenistan's embassy in Afghanistan. The ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the 2018 killing of four foreign cyclists in southern Tajikistan and staged an attack at an Uzbek-Tajik border post the following year.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has intensified counterterrorism efforts since the August 2021 Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. Despite declarations from the Taliban that other nations need not fear terrorist attacks originating from Afghanistan, Tajikistan's government asserts that northern Afghanistan is a primary source of terrorist activity and host to thousands of violent extremists. The Taliban and the Tajik government have a history of enmity. During the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), resistance to Taliban rule, which was led by the legendary Afghan Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, was based in Tajikistan and it was from here that Northern Alliance fighters, backed by massive U.S. air power, entered Kabul in 2001 to oust the Taliban regime. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Tajikistan has once again underscored its hostility to the new regime.^{xvii} Unlike Afghanistan's other neighbors, which adopted cautious stances vis-à-vis the new rulers in Kabul, Dushanbe has been vocal in its criticism, describing the Taliban

regime as a threat to regional stability and slamming it for being non-inclusive.^{xviii} The Afghan embassy in Dushanbe still represents the deposed Republican regime and runs possibly with assistance from the former Afghan high officials.^{xix} Furthermore, in a move that was probably aimed at reminding the Taliban of the Tajik government's long-standing support to the Afghan Tajiks, it conferred posthumously Tajikistan's highest civilian awards on Ahmad Shah Masood and former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, both ethnic Tajiks. The announcement came barely a fortnight after the Taliban stormed to power.^{xx}

Tajikistan's primary concerns are with ISIS-K and Jamaat Ansarullah, which operates from Afghanistan and seeks to overthrow the Tajik government and to establish an Islamic emirate.^{xxi} Tajik authorities frequently tend to amplify the security concerns posed by Jamaat Ansarullah along the Afghan-Tajik border as a means of rationalizing their politically driven suppression of both religious and secular opposition. Dushanbe has attributed the recent cross-border incursion of armed individuals from the Afghan side to Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) and the Taliban's intelligence services. According to the Tajik State Committee for National Security (SCNS), on September 5, 2023, they effectively thwarted the efforts of three JA operatives attempting a cross-border raid into Tajikistan's Darvaz region from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province.^{xxii} The Taliban has intensified the potential for continued strife by allowing the creation of the Taliban Movement of Tajikistan (Tehreek-e Taliban Tajikistan, TTT), whose proclaimed goal is to overthrow the secular regime in Dushanbe.^{xxiii}

The Jamaat Ansarullah

The Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) was established in 2006 by Amriddin Tabarov, a renegade former field commander of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), along with UTO militants who had rejected the terms of the General Agreement on Peace and Accord in Tajikistan, signed in 1997 in Moscow. Amriddin Tabarov was killed in 2016 during a special operation near Kunduz by Afghan National Security Forces. The current JA leader, is Mahdi Arsalan (whose real name is Muhammad Sharifov).^{xxiv}

In 2015 Mahdi Arsalan arrived to Afghanistan and joined the ranks of JA militants waging jihad against the Tajik government. Mahdi Arsalan believes that only "holy war" can dismantle the existing Tajik regime, replacing it with an Islamic Emirate governed by Sharia law.^{xxv}

A comprehensive examination of Jamaat Ansarullah's jihadi and propaganda efforts indicates that the group's ideological stance and public expressions of faith unquestionably align with its informal label as the 'Tajik Taliban.' Much like its parent organization, JA is committed to a local jihadi agenda, marked by a blend of Islamist and nationalist aims, mainly focused within Tajikistan's borders. JA distinguishes itself from other Central Asian jihadi groups, such as Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), IJU, and KIB, through its commitment to Tajik ethno-nationalism and Islamist ideology. While these groups, which are affiliated with al-Qaeda, aim to impose Sharia law across all of Central Asia, JA's ideological focus is more narrowly tailored to promoting a Tajik-centric agenda.^{xxvi} Tajik Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) group has consistently aligned most closely with the Taliban in terms of strategic goals and jihadi ideology. During the rapid takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, JA publicly identified itself as an integral component of the Taliban movement, even displaying its own flag. In contrast, Uzbek factions like Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) played a part in the fall of Kabul under the Taliban banner without disclosing their participation.^{xxvii}

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT)

Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan (the Movement of the Taliban of Tajikistan – TTT) was formed in 2022 in northern Afghanistan. The leader is Mehdi Arsalan, aka Mohammad Sharipov, who previously headed the Jamaat Ansarulla group. Since 2015-16, Arsalan and around 200 Tajik Islamists fought alongside the Afghan Taliban against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan. In July 2022, as the Taliban advanced towards Kabul, it handed over the security of the districts of Kuf Ab, Khwahan, Maimay, Nusay, and Shekay in Afghanistan's northern province of Badakhshan to Arsalan and his fighters. Due to its loyalty and ideological alignment with the Afghan Taliban, Arslan's group was unofficially bestowed with the title Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT).^{xxviii}

The Taliban regime tightened security along the border by deploying the Arsalan-led Tajik Islamist fighters to guard Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan and provided them with sophisticated American weapons, communication equipment, vehicles and combat gear. The TTT played an important role in the Taliban's elimination of ANDSF soldiers fleeing to Tajikistan.^{xxix} Whether the TTT is in fact "new armed actor" in the Afghan-Tajik border areas is

debatable as its roots can be traced back to the Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), which has been waging an armed insurgency in Tajikistan since 2006 to replace the Tajik secular state with an Islamic one. The TTT comprises many second-generation fighters of the JA and Arsalan, for example, is the son and brother of JA veterans. Therefore, its so-called “emergence” in July 2022 marked the renaming/rebranding of fighters who were already active in the region.^{xxx}

In their current role as a Taliban-appointed force in charge of several border districts in Badakhshan, they are targeting the Afghan Tajik-dominated anti-Taliban National Resistance Force (NRF) and Tajikistan’s government, which is said to be sheltering the NRF. The Taliban regime has denied the existence of the TTT but the group could emerge as a potent weapon in the Taliban regime’s hands to pressure Tajikistan’s government. While its existence in the shadows allows the Taliban regime to deny responsibility for its actions and the TTT has a free hand to act as it pleases.^{xxx}

The TTT operates with the full support and protection of the Taliban regime and the rise of the TTT in the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border areas added to Tajikistan’s already fraught relationship with the Taliban regime and the situation along the Afghan-Tajik border could ignite tensions.

The National Resistance Front (NRF)

In the weeks and months that followed the Taliban’s capture of power in Kabul, thousands of Afghans opposed to its rule, including members of the Ashraf Ghani government, the ANDSF and ordinary ethnic Tajiks and other ethnic minorities, fled to the Panjshir Valley and onward to Tajikistan to escape Taliban brutality and join the anti-Taliban resistance. The first signs of armed resistance to the Taliban have come from the Panjshir Valley with Tajik population, which held out against the Soviets and the Taliban under the leadership of the mujahedeen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (" the lion of Panjshir") a generation ago. The man leading the current armed resistance to the Taliban is Ahmad Massoud, the 32-year-old son of Ahmad Shah Massoud.^{xxxii} The resistance fighters of the National Resistance Front (NRF) were surrounded by the Taliban, cut off phone and internet communications and supplies and had no outside support. The resistance in Panjshir was short and unorganized and the NRF sacrificed the lives of Panjshiris in a battle that they could 't win. Since then, the Taliban have been ruthless in crushing opposition, detaining and in some cases killing people associated with the NRF. The Taliban announced they had taken control of the resistance holdout on September 6,2021, a day

before announcing the makeup of their new interim government and the capture of Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley was a political and propaganda victory for the Taliban. Elements of the National Resistance Front (NRF) claimed that the resistance forces had shifted from conventional warfare to guerrilla warfare, taking refuge in the mountains. But most of the leaders of Afghanistan's armed resistance against the Taliban have left the country and are regrouping in Tajikistan. They represent Afghanistan's various ethnic and religious identities—Sunni, Shiite, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara. The resistance comprises three broad categories: supporters of Saleh and Massoud's National Resistance Front, former officers, including generals of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, as well as senior officials of the former defense and interior ministries and former ministers and deputy ministers. Among the leaders are: Panjshir Valley commander and leader of the National Resistance Front, Ahmad Massoud, Amrullah Saleh, the ex-VP and self-proclaimed acting president of Afghanistan and Abdul Latif Pedram, the leader of the Afghan National Congress Party.

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon is keen to present himself as a defender of Afghanistan's ethnic Tajiks, the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, many of whom are opposed to the Taliban. Tajikistan hosts former Afghan officials and opposition leaders, some of whom are part of the National Resistance Front (NRF) movement, which aims to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan. Since August 2021, the Herat Security Dialogue (HSD) has been hosted twice in Dushanbe. At the most recent summit, in November 2023, members of the former political leadership of the Afghan Republic and "resistance" leaders of all ethnicities in Afghanistan called for a unified action plan to fight the Taliban.^{xxxiii}

Tajikistan's confrontationist approach makes it an enemy of the Taliban and target of frequent retributive attacks by the Taliban using cadres of the Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) and the TTT.

Terror attacks against Tajikistan

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA), 31 terrorist actions were prevented in Tajikistan in 2022. The MoIA stated that it arrested 365 members of terrorist or "extremist" organizations in 2022. The MoIA stated that many members of terrorist or "extremist" organizations were arrested abroad and returned to Tajikistan, without specifying a number.^{xxxiv}

The terror infiltration from Afghanistan to Tajikistan (September 2023)

According to the Tajik State Committee for National Security on September 5, 2023, they effectively thwarted the efforts of three JA operatives attempting a cross-border raid into Tajikistan. Tajik security forces raided a hideout of the Jamaat Ansarullah group in Darvoz District, in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, in central-southern Tajikistan, where three militants who infiltrated from Afghanistan had taken refuge. Among the items recovered during the raid were American and Russian weapons, estimated to originate from the Afghan Taliban.^{xxxv}

The terror infiltration from Afghanistan to Tajikistan (April 2023)

Tajik authorities said two suspected militants sneaked across the border from Afghanistan on April 26, 2023 and were shot dead in a counterterrorism operation in the village of Dashti Yazgulom, Vanj district, which turned up a stash of weapons, ammunition and explosives. The militants had planned to destabilize the internal political situation in Tajikistan and to conduct terror attacks.^{xxxvi} Shortly after this, Jamaat Ansarullah released a 13 minutes video in which one of its militants called on the domestic audience, urging Tajik Muslims to rise up and struggle against the 'Taghut' (idolater) government without fear of terrorism charges. He emphasized that Afghanistan is governed by Mujahideen of Allah and suggested that the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is on the verge of seizing power in Pakistan.^{xxxvii}

Rocket attacks against Tajikistan (April – July 2022)

In April 2022, ISIS-K militants claimed that they had fired missiles into Tajikistan. The Tajik government denied the group's announcement. ISIS-K publicly claimed that it fired seven Katyusha rockets from Afghanistan's Takhar province on May 7, 2022, and struck Tajik military facilities across the border.^{xxxviii} But in a statement, Tajikistan said that "bullets, not rockets", were fired "accidentally" into Tajik territory during a firefight on the Afghan side of the border between Taliban forces and IS militants.^{xxxix}

On July 17, 2022, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that Afghan government special forces had attacked an ISIS-K cell in the Imam Sahib District of Kunduz Province. Three ISIS-K

members were killed and five were captured in the raid. The terror cell was allegedly responsible for rocketing Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.^{xi}

Tajikistan's counter terror policy

Amid the long-standing hostility between the Tajik government and the Taliban, and the TTT's deployment along the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Tajikistan stepped up the deployment of its armed forces and conducted military drills near the Tajik-Afghan border. Ties came under further strain in May 2022 when missiles launched from Afghanistan fell on Tajikistan's side of the border.^{xli} The potential instability emanating from Afghanistan toward Tajikistan has sufficiently unsettled the international community. The United States, Russia and China have all offered assistance to upgrade Tajikistan's border security along its border with the Islamic Emirate.^{xlii} In Tajikistan, U.S. assistance largely focused on building capacity to secure the 843-mile border with Afghanistan through technical assistance and equipment. In 2022 the U.S. government continued assistance to renovate and build border outposts and checkpoints along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border and provided equipment and training to enhance Tajikistan's border security and counterterrorism capabilities.

Tajikistan conducted more than 50 bilateral engagements with the U.S. Department of Defense during 2022. The country participated in exercises with the United States and regional partners, including the U.S. Central Command-sponsored annual security exercise Regional Cooperation that Tajikistan hosted in August 2022. Tajikistan also took part in CT-focused exercises with Russia, other Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states, and the PRC. The authorities implemented a new Law on Combating Terrorism, which was enacted in December 2021 and established the legal and organizational basis for counterterrorism operations in Tajikistan.^{xliii} Tajikistan's government supports the C5+1, a diplomatic platform for coordination among the five Central Asian states plus the United States (the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, plus the United States) and serves as co-chair of the C5+1 Security Working Group.^{xliv} Tajikistan hosted a UN High-Level Counterterrorism Conference in October 2022, which focused on international border security and management. Tajikistani law enforcement authorities are implementing a Law on Combating Terrorism, which was enacted in December 2021 and established the legal and organizational basis for CT operations in Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan

The Uzbek approach to Afghanistan is driven by both security and economic interests. Of the three Central Asian States that share a border with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan's border is the shortest and generally regarded to be the best-protected while still being the most open to trade and the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan has established contacts with Afghanistan to minimize security risks and as the Taliban conquered Kabul, Uzbekistan ensured the continuing flow of humanitarian aid and electricity across the border. Subsequently, the town of Termez, on the Uzbek side of the border with Afghanistan, developed into a major trade and humanitarian hub. Strategically among the most important projects, not only for Uzbekistan, but also for Central Asia more generally, is the construction of the trans-Afghan railway corridor from Termez in Uzbekistan via Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul in Afghanistan to Peshawar in Pakistan, where it would connect to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative. The completion of this project, which depends on both security and stability in Afghanistan and the availability of financing, is also important for Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. The general Uzbek approach of focusing on economic engagement with Afghanistan, however, does not mean that the relations between the two countries are free from security concerns and the Taliban continue to be seen as a potential threat to domestic stability in Uzbekistan. The main terrorist group of concern for Uzbekistan is ISIS-K, with additional concerns regarding Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari and the Islamic Jihad Union. President Mirziyoyev publicly called on the Taliban to cut ties with terrorist groups.

At least one attempted rocket attack on Uzbekistan from the territory of Afghanistan heightened Uzbekistan's concerns about the potential spillover of terrorist activity from its neighbors and this undermines Taliban claims to the movement's ability to provide security and stability in Afghanistan. In addition, ISIS-K also has a sizeable number of ethnic Uzbek members, some of whom have prior combat experience with the group in Iraq and Syria, as well as with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Concerns continue also over terrorism and violent extremism linked to Uzbek terrorists returning from Syria and Iraq.

Uzbek terrorist groups operating against Uzbekistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is an extremist organization that formed in the late 1990s and is currently based in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The US State Department in September 2000 designated the IMU a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The IMU seeks to overthrow the government in Uzbekistan and establish a radical Islamist caliphate in all of "Turkestan," which it considers to be the Central Asian region between the Caspian Sea and Xinjiang in western China.^{xlv}

The IMU has become increasingly active in the Taliban-led insurgency in northern Afghanistan, providing the IMU with a springboard for future operations in Central Asia. According to U.N. member states, IMU has somewhat rebounded under the leadership of a new emir, Mamasoli Samatov, and now has anywhere from 150 to 550 fighters.^{xlvi} A known IMU spokesperson in a video message delivered to Radio Liberty's Tajik service claimed responsibility for a September 2010 ambush against a military convoy in Tajikistan.^{xlvii} The IMU in June 2014 joined Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan fighters in a deadly siege of Karachi International Airport that killed 37.

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)

The Islamic Jihad Group (IJU) is a terrorist organization that has been active in Central Asia. IJU was formed in the early 2000s when it broke away from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). IJU was founded and led by Najmiddin Kamolitdinovich Jalolov (deceased) and Suhayl Fatilloevich Buranov (deceased).^{xlviii} The US State Department in June 2005 designated the IJU a Foreign Terrorist Organization.^{xlix} The IJU, which is committed to toppling the government in Uzbekistan, conducted two attacks there in 2004 and one in 2009. The group has had particular success in recruiting German nationals and achieved international notoriety following the 2007 disruption of an IJU plot by the so-called Sauerland Cell to attack various targets in Germany.¹

Khatiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihadⁱⁱ

Khatiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (formerly known as Jannat Oshiklari) is a terrorist organization operating under the umbrella of the international terrorist organization Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant. The group mainly operates in the provinces of Hama, Idlib and Ladhqiyyah, in the Syrian Arab Republic, and also conduct operations in Turkey, Kyrgyzstan,

Uzbekistan, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Ukraine. The number of fighters of KTJ is about 500. KTJ also cooperates with such terrorist organizations as Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari and the Islamic Jihad Group .

Khatiba Imam Al-Buhari (KIB)

Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) was established in 2011 in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border area by fighters who had split from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Since March 2015, the group has been actively collaborating with Jabhat al-Nusrah, listed as Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant and its successor armed groups. As of March 2018, KIB was based in Khan-Shaykhun (53 km south of Idlib), the Syrian Arab Republic, and its operational zone spread across the Syrian provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Khama.^{lii} KIB commanded up to 500 foreign terrorist fighters, most of them are nationals of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation, including Russian nationals originated from the North Caucasus region. KIB conducted recruitment mainly among nationals of Uzbekistan, including through social networks. KIB fighters supported by Jabhat Al-Nusrah committed terrorist attacks against military and civilian installations in the Syrian Arab Republic. While trying to avoid direct engagements with Syrian government forces, KIB also kidnaped civilians. KIB's arsenal included Grad multiple launch rocket systems, anti-tank missile systems, and motorcars equipped with heavy artillery guns.^{liii} The KIB group is led by Dilshod Dekhanov, a Tajik national. KIB view Afghanistan as a new staging ground to project attacks against neighboring Central Asia countries. Since 2016, KIB fighters have been redeployed from the Syrian Arab Republic to the north of Afghanistan with a view to setting up training camps and organizing special terrorist training for new recruits. According to the U.N., Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari 's numbers in Afghanistan had been growing due to the successful recruitment of locals and due to money from the Taliban and funds acquired via its leadership in Syria.^{liv}

Terror attacks

On April 18, 2022, ISIS-K claimed it fired 10 rockets from Afghanistan at an Uzbekistani military base in Termez, Surkhandarya, in southern Uzbekistan. Media suggested the group fired 10 rockets from the Afghan border town of Hairatan. The Government of Uzbekistan (GOU)

refuted the reports and refused to categorize the incident as an attempted attack on Uzbekistan. No injuries were reported.^{lv}

On July 5, 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported five rockets were fired from Afghanistan toward Termez in the Surkhandarya region. The attack damaged a small amount of residential infrastructure; no people were injured.

On July 17, 2022, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that Afghan government special forces had attacked an ISIS-K cell in the Imam Sahib District of Kunduz Province. Three ISIS-K members were killed and five were captured in the raid. The terror cell was allegedly responsible for rocketing Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.^{lvi}

Uzbekistan's counter terror policy

The government began implementing its first national CT strategy and national Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Financing of Terrorism strategy and continued rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of repatriated FTF-associated family members. Uzbekistan continued active regional security cooperation, including through the C5+1 diplomatic platform. Uzbekistani ministries, agencies, civil society, and NGOs coordinated with the U.S. Departments of Energy, Defense, Justice, and State as well as USAID on various CT and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism initiatives. In April 2022, Uzbekistan hosted ministerial meetings with Afghanistan's neighbors to address the growing cross-border security threat.^{lvii}

Law enforcement detained several groups and cells allegedly recruiting members and financing terrorist groups — mainly ISIS and KTJ. Several citizens were detained on VE charges after returning from Syria, and courts tried at least 40 citizens for planning to join terrorist groups in Syria. Uzbekistani and Turkish authorities coordinated on the arrest and deportation of an Uzbekistani national accused of plotting a terrorist attack in Istanbul.

The government and non-governmental organizations continued to use advertisements, counter messaging campaigns, and training to prevent radicalization to violence and terrorist radicalization of at-risk nationals and labor migrants. Law enforcement shut down channels for spreading VE propaganda and promoting terrorism on social media, particularly on the popular Telegram messaging application. The government continued to restrict certain forms of political and religious expression in the name of countering broadly defined “extremism.”

Summary

Under the "Doha accord", the Taliban guaranteed that Afghanistan would not become a haven for terrorist groups threatening the US or its allies. A United Nations sanctions monitoring team, warned in a report in June 2023 that the Taliban “have not delivered on the counter-terrorism provisions” in the Doha Accords and two years after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan the country is again devolving into a hotbed of terrorism activity that is already beginning to affect the region. The report warned that about 20 terrorist groups have greater freedom of maneuver under the Taliban and various groups “are making good use of this.” The report added that “The threat of terrorism is rising in both Afghanistan and the region.”^{lviii} The attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the first occasion when the ISIS - K has explicitly targeted Central Asian countries. If in the past, the group used hostile rhetoric to target the Central Asian governments, it has now escalated this to violent aggression and ISIS - K poses a clear danger to the national security of these countries. The attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also indicate that the Taliban regime does not have total control over Afghan territory and the terror attacks have undermined regional confidence in the Taliban regime’s capacity to play the role of a regional security provider. Empowering the Taliban is not the preferred choice for Central Asian countries but the alternative in which Afghanistan is rife with competing militant groups would be much worse and instability and chaos in Afghanistan could spill into bordering countries. Most of the Central Asian countries remained suspicious of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but they adopted a pragmatic policy of strengthening the defense of their borders with Afghanistan on the one hand and negotiating with the Taliban regime on the other.

ISIS - K will likely continue to plan and conduct attacks as well as expand recruitment efforts.

Recent ISIS – K activities highlight the importance of maintaining robust regional counterterrorism in the Central Asian region.

The ethnic groups (the Shia Hazara and Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups) are already under pressure in Taliban controlled Afghanistan and these groups that in the 1990s formed the "Northern Alliance" that fought against the Taliban, are organizing to defend themselves against Islamic State attacks and Taliban persecution and in the future could become a significantly armed opposition to the Taliban regime.

The support of Afghanistan's neighbors Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for the activities of the ethnic minorities (Tajiks and Uzbeks) against the Taliban, and the Taliban's support for Tajik and

Uzbek terrorist organizations against the regimes in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan could lead to a crisis in relations between the Taliban regime and these countries and even to a violent conflict between them.

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