Tracing the Fate of Central Asian Fighters in Syria: Remainers, Repatriates, Returnees, and Relocators

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Abstract

This article presents a preliminary set of empirical findings and observations on the current status of Central Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq, with a specific focus on the question of where and how they might be leaving the battlefield after concluding their active fighting roles. Drawing on data collected exclusively from local online sources as well as regional events covering the subject, the article develops common profiles of the known contingent and identifies overall patterns in their movements. In order to help with analysis, the entire contingent is grouped into four distinct categories, or the 4 "Rs": "Remainers", "Repatriates", "Returnees", and "Relocators". This typological framework allows a closer study of the characteristics as well as the impact of each category, which could also be employed when looking at other FTF cohorts.

Keywords: Central Asia, Syria, IS, HTS, KTJ, KIB, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), remainers, repatriates, returnees, and relocators

Introduction

Today, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) represent a security concern for many countries and regions in the world, including the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.[1] Especially after the fall of Baghouz——the last holdout of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria—in March 2019, concerns have grown about potential threats associated with jihadists (including Central Asians) who might leave the Syrian battlefield for their home countries or a third country after concluding their experience as active foreign fighters.

Blowback from Central Asian foreign fighters has already been observed. From 2016 to 2020, there was an unprecedented surge in terrorist attacks committed by, or attributed to, Central Asians around the world. These attacks included the June 2016 airport attack in Istanbul (Turkey),[2] the August 2016 suicide car bomb attack at the Chinese embassy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), the January 2017 nightclub shooting in Istanbul (Turkey), the April 2017 truck-ramming attack in Stockholm (Sweden), the April 2017 suicide bombing at a metro station in Saint Petersburg (Russia), the October 2017 vehicular attack in New York (US), the July 2018 car-and-knife attack in Khatlon (Tajikistan), and the April 2020 terror plot by a Tajik IS cell to attack US and NATO military bases in Germany, among others.

The perpetrators of the attacks listed above were either Syria-trained jihadists belonging to IS (cases in Turkey)[3] and Al Qaeda-linked groups (the incidents in Kyrgyzstan and in Russia)[4] or self-radicalized individuals inspired by IS (cases in Sweden, US, and Tajikistan).[5]

Mobilization to Syria and Iraq

Most recent official estimates from Central Asia indicate that as many as 5,650 fighters and their dependents (wives and children) from the region went to Syria and Iraq to join various jihadist groups fighting there.[6] The distribution is uneven across the region, in part due to varying levels of reporting and differences in local radicalization patterns and factors. It is also worth noting that children born in Syria and Iraq to Central Asian citizens may not be reflected in the overall number. Of the total reported numbers, 2,000 are reported to be nationals of Tajikistan,[7] 2,000 of Uzbekistan,[8] 850 of Kyrgyzstan,[9] and 800 of Kazakhstan.[10] Although a number of foreign media reports and international NGOs have suggested the involvement of Turkmen citizens in the Syrian conflict, Turkmen authorities have abstained from officially commenting

on issues related to foreign terrorist fighters. They preferred to remain silent even when Syria's Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassun made a sensational claim in October 2013 that 360 Turkmen nationals might have been fighting alongside jihadist forces.[11]

Given the ferocity and scope of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, there is good reason to believe that many IS's adult fighters have been killed on the battlefield. According to authorities in Central Asia, at least 1,633 fighters (29 percent of the total) from the region—260 Kazakhs,[13] 200 Kyrgyz,[14] 1,000 Tajiks,[15] and 173 Uzbeks[16]—have been killed while fighting. Absence of up-to-date data for some relevant countries means that the actual number of cases of death might now be higher than reported. All of these figures are of course impossible to corroborate independently, but provide some idea of the scale of the problem that is faced in these countries.

Following IS's territorial collapse, at least 2,220 Central Asians (39 percent of the reported total), mostly women and children, have been captured (or surrendered) and placed in detention facilities across Syria and Iraq.

Furthermore, there are a considerable number of Central Asians who remain engaged in active fighting, particularly in the ranks of ethnically based Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB) combat units. According to United Nations reports, operating under the umbrella of the Al Qaeda–linked Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) jihadist alliance, KIB and KTJ retain at least 720 fighters.[17]

While according to the above-mentioned figures there is a degree of certainty regarding the proportion of FTFs and their dependents who have died, been imprisoned, or remain engaged in active fighting in Syria (see Table 1), the size, fate, and location of those who departed from the Syrian conflict zone remain largely unknown. This is mostly due to the clandestine and cross-border nature of their movements, meaning that reporting on them is limited.

Table 1: An Overview of the Reported Status of Central Asian Fighters in Syria and Iraq.[12]

	Traveled to Syria and Iraq	*Killed on the battlefield*	*Detained in Syria and Iraq*
Kazakhstan	800	260	607
Kyrgyzstan	850	200	400
Tajikistan	2,000	1,000	682
Turkmenistan	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Uzbekistan	2,000	173	531
TOTAL:	5,650 (100%)	1,633 (29%)	2,220 (39%)

FTF is an old phenomenon, but conceptual studies on the foreign jihadi fighters started to evolve particularly with their unprecedented involvement in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts.[18] Cerwyn Moore, in his article entitled "Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and Beyond" argues that the term "transnational activist" rather than foreign fighter better reflects the different roles foreign individuals take on within conflict zones. In contrast, David Malet has proposed the term "transnational jihadists", defining them as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict."[19]

Scholars and experts have attempted to assess the severity and scope of potential threats from returning FTFs and suggested response strategies. The 2015 study conducted by Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, based on a data set on FTF returnees in Western Europe, North America, and Australia from January 2011 to June 2015, concluded that the rate of attacks by returnees was 1 in 360, indicating higher risk of plots by homegrown terrorists than by returnees.[20] David Malet and Rachel Hayes, after examining profiles of 230 returnee fighters in the West, found that the median lag time between return and plot or arrest is less than six months for most returnees, and thus it is important to implement urgent security and resocialization measures within this critical six-month period to effectively prevent potential risks.[21] Others like Daniel Byman pointed out that returning FTFs may influence others to radicalize.[22]

There have also been debates how to deal with FTFs and those of their dependents who ended up in detention facilities or refugee camps in Syria and Iraq. Brian Jenkins's essay from 2019 explores the pros and cons of various options in dealing with those detainees.[23] An article published by Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan in 2020 identified four main options in response to the issue and assessed potential implications of those options.[24] To date, a number of studies have explored various aspects of the involvement of Central Asian fighters in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq. A substantial proportion of these studies have looked at the militant groups that Central Asian fighters have joined and their roles and networks on the ground as well as trying to assess security risks deriving from them.[25] In addition, there is an expanding range of scholarly work on Central Asian countries' policy approaches in dealing with detained IS fighters and their families who ended up in the Syrian and Iraqi detention facilities following the military defeat of IS in March 2019.[26]

However, due to data scarcity, certain aspects of the subject, especially the issue of returning and relocating Central Asian fighters, have received very little coverage in the existing literature. The article published by Thomas F. Lynch III and a group of other scholars in October 2016 was one of the earliest attempts to assess the prospect of Central Asian jihadists' exit from the conflict zone and its potential domestic and international implications. By looking at initial instances of such departures, that article came to some preliminary conclusions and suggested that, with "little evidence of Central Asian fighters returning in significant numbers," as of mid-2016, the risk was "not dramatic".[27]

A joint publication of *Russia Matters* and *the US-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism* that was published in December 2018 provides more recent and detailed coverage of Central Asian returning fighters in one of its relevant sections. In assessing what might be the next move of surviving militants, the authors of the article (Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova, and William Tobey) referred to a group-centric assessment method.[28] This method suggests that the fate of fighters on the ground largely depends on the ability of their affiliated groups to survive and hold territory. While admitting that it was excessively difficult to precisely forecast FTFs' future movements even through such a group-centric assessment approach, the authors have identified three general trajectories for those who manage to leave the battlefield: to migrate to other conflict zones (with Afghanistan being the likeliest destination); return home, which they thought did not seem to be appealing for many due to existing security constraints in their native countries; or move to a third country to settle down peacefully or continue militant activities.[29] As part of qualitative research to find out their motives for traveling to, remaining in, and exiting from Syria, the three authors have also used the data obtained through interviews with ex-fighters. They have also cited from some Russian-language online sources. However, there is not much reference to local Central Asian sources and the actual cases of returned fighters as data points.

A May 2021 report by a Kyrgyzstan-based Research Center for Religious Studies (RCRS) and the UAE's *Hedayah* is one of the latest studies on Kyrgyz FTF returnees.[30] Based on in-depth interviews with 38 imprisoned FTF returnees, 20 of their relatives, and eight more interviews with experts from various fields, the report contains a good qualitative analysis of the factors and causes for the radicalization and recruitment of Kyrgyz citizens to fight in Syria and Iraq and the return to their home country. The study conducts detailed examination of the reasons for the interviewed FTFs to return and the deradicalization approaches implemented by the Kyrgyz government to rehabilitate former FTFs. However, it does not discuss in any detail the process of their return and questions such as when and how they returned nor the state-organized repatriation of Kyrgyz children from Iraq.

Erlan Karin's book "Operation: Jusan: A Story of Rescue and Repatriation from Islamic State" from 2020 reviewed Kazakhstan's approaches to repatriating detained IS Kazakh fighters and their dependents from Syria. Drawing on the author's experience with interviewing repatriates, the book provides valuable insights into the motives of those individuals to migrate to the conflict zone and return home while also assessing potential risks associated with their return.

As part of ethnographic research for her book entitled *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups*, Vera Mironova conducted more than 600 interviews with members of various jihadist groups, including some IS- and HTS-affiliated Central Asian individuals. Her book examines in detail human

and financial resources, leadership issues, and the management of non-state actors as well as motivations for fighters to join or leave particular groups. However, there is not much discussion on the fate of FTFs after leaving the group.[31]

This article, while expanding on the scope of data with the most recent empirical evidence, sheds light on the current status of Central Asian FTFs in Syria and Iraq. The findings are generated largely from the data set collected and compiled by the author from local newspaper reports in Russian, Uzbek, and English as well as from expert discussions at events covering the subject. The research involves a thorough examination of the known FTFs contingent with the help of a typological framework that might also be employed when looking at other FTF contingents. Drawing on available information, this article sketches what has happened to Central Asians in Syria and Iraq, with a specific focus on the question of where and how Central Asians might be leaving the battlefield.

The 4 "Rs" from the Battlefield

For the purpose of this analysis, Central Asian fighters in and exiting from Syria are grouped into four distinct categories, or the 4 "Rs": *Remainers, Repatriates, Returnees*, and *Relocators*. The first category, of course, has not exited the battlefield but provides a backdrop to account for the fighters still in Syria.

The idea of this framework is to catagorize the contingent of FTFs to enable closer analysis and assess the impact of each group. The definitions are as follows:

> *Remainers* are surviving fighters who are still at large in the conflict zone and continue pursuing active fighting roles.
>
> *Repatriates* are those who were brought or sent back, or are in the process of transfer, to their home countries through government-managed programs exiting from prisons and displacement camps in Syria and Iraq. In the post-IS period, states and international organizations have widely used the term "repatriation" to describe such transfer initiatives. Numbers for these individuals are not specifically captured in the current data set as they are part of larger and publicly reported national contingents.
>
> *Returnees* are FTFs who return from the conflict zone to their home countries by themselves. Independent return can be public or secretive.
>
> *Relocators* are FTFs who fled the Syrian and Iraqi battlefield and moved to third countries, or other conflict zones, instead of returning to their countries of origin.

The categories of "returnees" and "relocators" have been borrowed from the United Nation's CTED Trends Report, but the present author has offered his own definitions and subcategories to them.[32] The data set gathered by the author focuses on these two groups.

The author created his data set on returnee and relocating fighters using original information collected exclusively from newspaper and media reports in Russian and Uzbek. The data set includes profiles of 63 Central Asians—13 Kazakh, 23 Kyrgyz, 18 Tajik, and nine Uzbek citizens.

Classification between groups of relocators and returnees is not always clear-cut. For example, there are fighters who are known terrorist suspects and subject to a national or international arrest warrant. Such fighters often face detention upon their entry to a foreign country (at airports or any other border checkpoint) and are subsequently deported to their home countries. However, it is sometimes unclear whether they are seeking to enter that particular country to reside in it (temporarily or permanently) or just transiting on their way back to home from the conflict zone as there is often an absence of relevant details in both press and police reports. When it is impossible to establish the true intentions of such fighters, this article categorizes them as relocators.

Based on this criterion, 28 individuals (nearly half of them) fall into the category of returnees, while the remainder are relocators. As this data set only includes identifiable individuals, it is very unlikely to represent the entire extent of the movement of Central Asian FTFs.[33] However, it enables at least some preliminary

findings and observations to be drawn in terms of the patterns of movement of those who have left the battlefield behind.

By studying the profiles of listed individuals in detail, several observations can be made. At the time of their detection, two-thirds of the total contingent of returnees and relocators were in the 27–35 age bracket, although the overall age range spans from 21 to 45 years. The youngest individual featured in the data set is a Kyrgyz national, "Sh.Sh.", who was arrested upon his return to Kyrgyzstan on 25 July 2018. Kyrgyz authorities revealed that, while in Syria, the fighter was trained for suicide bombing operations.[34] By contrast, the eldest combatant is 45-year-old Gulmurod Khalimov, Tajikistan's former special operations colonel who defected to IS in May 2015. He had replaced Abu Omar al-Shishani (killed in July 2016) as the group's "war minister". Khalimov is now believed to be in Afghanistan.[35]

Remainers

Remainers are fighters who continue staying in the conflict zone for a variety of reasons. In Syria, Central Asian nationals have joined both IS and its rival HTS, a successor entity to al-Nusra Front. While many of IS's Central Asian fighters were killed in action, some managed to survive and remain in Syria, biding their time to reorganize themselves. In contrast, a larger contingent of those Central Asian fighters who have aligned themselves with Al Qaeda–linked groups are still active on the battlefield, largely thanks to the support and protection provided by HTS.

Many of those who headed for Syria and Iraq believed that they were on a "one-way journey" and did not plan to return. A number of video clips have featured IS's Central Asian militants burning their passports in a symbolic renunciation of their former national identities.[36]

There are also highly motivated fighters among them who are committed to fighting until the end. In November and December 2019, it came to be known that Kurdish forces had managed to capture three notorious IS militants from Tajikistan after a long fight in Afrin and Deir ez-Zor. They were put in jail. The three men, who are identified as Tojiddin Nazarov (a.k.a. Abu Osama Noraki), Kori Usmon, and Abu Ayub Kulobi, are suspected by Swedish authorities of being part of a Syria-based IS attack network that orchestrated the 2017 Stockholm truck attack.[37]

Some surviving IS combatants have switched allegiance to other groups or movements with different goals. For instance, a fighter from Turkmenistan, who identified himself as "Kakajan", joined, together with other Turkmen fighters, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) after their attempts to return to Turkmenistan via Turkey had failed in July 2019.[38]

Al Qaeda–linked groups have been equally successful in attracting Central Asian recruits. A majority of these fighters are members of combat units, known as Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB). While operating under the auspices of HTS, KTJ and KIB are among the strongest foreign militant factions that have actively taken part in hostilities against Syrian government forces.

United Nations reports, which were issued respectively in July 2019 and January 2020, revealed that the two groups have at least 720 fighters, the majority being Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek nationals.[39] The northwest Idlib province has become a safe haven for these fighters and their dependents.

Repatriates

Following the demise of IS in Syria in March 2019, a cohort of 13,000 to 15,000 foreign fighters and their families ended up being caught and interned by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[40] Another 1,400 foreigners remained detained in Iraq.[41] Amongst those detainees in Syria and Iraq were more than 2,220 Central Asians, mostly women and children.

Countries in Central Asia, unlike many other states, have generally taken a proactive stance to tackle the

FTF issue. Since 2019, four Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—have separately brought back from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq a total of 1,301 nationals including 607 Kazakhs,[42] 531 Uzbeks,[43] 84 Tajiks,[44] and 79 Kyrgyz[45] (see Table 2).

Table 2: Number of Repatriates

	Repatriates
Kazakhstan	*607*
Kyrgyzstan	*79*
Tajikistan	*84*
Turkmenistan	*N.A.*
Uzbekistan	*531*
TOTAL:	1,301

In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, these states only repatriated children. Beyond the groups reported so far, the authorities in Tajikistan have publicly committed themselves to bring back a remaining group of nearly 600 Tajik citizens still residing in Syria and Iraq.[46] According to Tajik authorities, however, the military situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq and the COVID-19 pandemic have complicated these repatriation plans.

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have adopted similar approaches in managing repatriates. Each has framed these initiatives, mainly involving women and children, as "humanitarian rescue operations". In their public messaging, authorities have highlighted the plight of women and children left in limbo in overcrowded makeshift camps and detention facilities in Syria.

Studies conducted by various local research centers, NGOs, and international organizations have shown nearly similar tendencies in terms of female radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization to and from Syria. A large proportion of Central Asian women claimed that they were duped by their husbands or other male family members under false pretexts to travel to the conflict zone.[47] While some natural skepticism around these claims is warranted, and some women have been incarcerated upon their return, it does seem that the experience of Central Asian women who went to live in Syria/Iraq was different to many women from Western countries. In Central Asian media and press, repatriated children have been described as innocent victims of the conflict, while women have been mostly regarded as being 'misled' or 'misguided'. In contrast, many Western governments have looked at women departing from Europe as active participants and the children as innocents and consequently allowed humanitarian repatriation in fewer cases.

The Central Asian approach to women and children repatriations centers around preemptive security concerns. The involvement of women and children in jihadist networks can have an intergenerational impact. Women who adhere to IS's ideology may seek to radicalize their children as well as others. Child recruits ensure a militant group's long-term operational and ideological viability, given the fact that they are the potential fighters and leaders of tomorrow. In Central Asia, such security considerations are relevant, given suggestions that Al Qaeda–linked groups in Syria have expressed interest in taking over the guardianship of detainees held in Syria.

Post-repatriation individuals were put through a short "adaptation" process, during which they received medical and psychological assistance, legal and material support, and religious counseling. Upon completion of the short adaptation phase, they were sent to their hometowns to be reunited with their families and respective communities. As part of these reintegration programs, they have continued to receive socioeconomic and psychological support and religious counseling.

On the other hand, repatriated adult males have by and large faced immediate arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. Some women returnees, regarded as a security threat, have also been convicted. For instance, in Kazakhstan, from a group of 55 repatriated adult returnees, all of the 37 repatriated men and 18 women were

subsequently sentenced to prison terms.[48]

Among the Uzbek repatriates, there was one adult male combatant, but his fate after arrival remains unknown.[49] It is likely that, as in Kazakhstan, the Uzbek adult fighter might have faced criminal sanctions. Although repatriated women were not imprisoned in Uzbekistan, court restrictions have been placed on their freedom of movement for a period of up to five years, depending on their roles and the length of their stay in Syria.[50] In all three countries, the process of resocialization is expected to last years and is closely monitored by local authorities and law enforcement officials.

Returnees

FTFs return as battle-trained veterans, used to violence and experienced in the use of arms and explosives. While on the battlefield, they would have been exposed to and have embraced tactics like suicide bombings and beheadings. Finally, they are likely to have a strong international network of connections with like-minded militants from across the world. The mean age of identified returnees in the author's data set was 27.

Surrendering Returnees

Surrendering returnees are a category of fighters who disengage from militant activities and return, or seek to return, home voluntarily and submit themselves to the appropriate authorities. The available data suggest that 11 out of the 28 identified cases involved voluntary returns—two in Kyrgyzstan, four in Kazakhstan, five in Tajikistan. While repentant FTFs have spent an average of 11 months in Syria, the median length of stay of secret returnees in Syria was four years. Turkey has served an easy exit point from Syria for both returning and relocating Central Asian fighters, as suggested by its geographic proximity and the routes used by other FTF returnees.

There are pull and push factors that motivate surviving FTFs to give up fighting and return home. According to testimonies from surrendering fighters and their family members, some of them decided to flee the conflict and return after they had become disillusioned with the realities on the ground in Syria. Aziza Azmametova, a Kazakh national who came back from Syria with her husband and daughter in January 2014, described their life with an Al Qaeda–aligned group as "horror and chaos!"[51] Bobojon Qaraboev, a former fighter from Tajikistan who voluntarily returned home in 2016, said that he realized his "grave mistake" when he saw IS's atrocities against not only its enemies but also its own members.[52]

Pull factors include the initiatives that countries in the region have taken to encourage terrorist disengagement and return. For instance, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have offered conditional forgiveness to those who seek to return home on their own accord and genuinely repent having joined militant groups. Selection for forgiveness depends on factors such as commitment and sincerity, as well as an evaluation of their criminal histories during their association with terrorist groups. As a result of this initiative, by November 2018, 163 repentant individuals have returned and surrendered to authorities in Tajikistan.[53] As of January 2018, 125 fighters similarly returned to Kazakhstan; 57 of them were subsequently imprisoned.[54]

Out of the identified 28 returnees, as few as two (seven percent) are women. Both accompanied their husbands to Syria and Iraq and came back from there. The first case involved the above-mentioned Aziza Azmametova and her husband who voluntarily came back home from Syria with their child. Upon return, Aziza's husband was arrested and imprisoned, but she was allowed to remain free.[55] In the second case, a Tajik man and his wife who returned home with their two small children after spending a year and a half in IS-controlled territories in Iraq were granted conditional forgiveness by the state as they had voluntarily surrendered and convinced the authorities that they sincerely repented having traveled to the conflict zone and could credibly show that they did not participate in violence.[56]

Secret Returnees

Secret returnees include those who return home to continue militant activities, by promoting jihadist ideologies, radicalizing and recruiting new members, raising funds, and even plotting terrorist attacks. In Central Asia,

most instances of clandestine returnees have been registered in Kyrgyzstan—15 out of a total of 17 cases. The other two included a Kazakh and an Uzbek citizen, both of whom were linked to IS.

Official statements suggest that most secret returnees in Kyrgyzstan came back tasked by their associated groups in Syria to plot attacks at home. Authorities have revealed only one secret returnee's organizational affiliation (in this case, the returnee was a member of KTJ),[57] but have left the other 14 individuals' state of affiliation unspecified. It is also important to point out that, although the allegation of returning to plot an attack was an essential element of criminal charges made against these returnees, it was often issued as part of pretrial criminal/investigation process. Thus, this specific accusation might not necessarily have been true in every relevant case, unless it has been robustly verified in a court of law. However, final verdicts of courts on these cases have not been publicly available.

Interviews that the aforementioned Research Center for Religious Studies (RCRS) conducted with imprisoned Kyrgyz FTFs suggest a lower rate of plots by returnees than reported by the media, with only two of the 38 FTF prisoners admitting returning home with the intention to carry out attacks. Both said that they were part of a death squad sent by Abu Saloh, KTJ's former commander in Syria, to assassinate the leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the southern province of Osh.[58] However, it is possible that there were some other plotters among the interviewed prisoners who might have chosen not to reveal their true intentions in the interviews.

Identity fraud is a common tactic used by FTFs to facilitate surreptitious movements on their way home. Credible fake documents enable them to hide their true identities while giving them a seemingly clean record to avoid detection and access potential target locations. At least two of the 16 identified cases of secret returns involved the use of fake passports. In February 2018, a court in Uzbekistan sentenced Akhror Kasymov, who operated as a recruiter for IS networks in Turkey, to 10 years of imprisonment. The court revealed that Kasymov was arrested when attempting to enter the country with a Russian passport given to Gadzhimurad Gaydarov.[59] This indicated that Kasymov was traveling under a false identity but with a real/valid passport, which he had apparently obtained illegally elsewhere and then altered the content and photo before heading home.

In the second case, which took place in February 2019, Kyrgyz authorities arrested a local militant who used a forged Kyrgyz passport for traveling to and from Syria.[60] Fraudulent Kyrgyz passports are found both in and out of Kyrgyzstan. Inside the country, such documents have been supplied on the black market mostly through existing local corruption schemes, which have reportedly involved government employees in charge of issuing passports to citizens.[61] There have also been several reports about the use of fake Kyrgyz passports by criminal and terrorist individuals abroad. The fact that Kyrgyz citizens are still using non-biometric passports for their international travel has made the counterfeiting process much easier. With the ongoing plans to issue biometric citizenship passports starting in 2021 and the recent introduction of stricter penalties for forging and using forged documents, the Kyrgyz government is hoping to reduce cases of document fraud and meet international standards for passport security.[62]

There is also a precedent for the use of fraudulent identity documentation by terrorist operatives to carry out an attack in Central Asia. Izzatillo Sattybaev, the Kyrgyz citizen who was sent by KTJ to organize the suicide car bomb attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, arrived from Turkey with a Tajik passport in the name of Firdavs Bobojonov and managed to leave the country safely after the attack with the same passport.[63]

Relocators

After departing from Syria, Central Asian FTFs have traveled to several regions and countries as far as Afghanistan; Germany, and Greece in Europe; and the Central African Republic, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, and the Sudan in Africa. FTFs who choose to relocate to a third country fall into three major categories: those who seek to hide or settle down in a third place; those who choose to move to other conflict zones; and those who relocate to plot attacks.

Turkey remains not only an accessible exit and transit point for foreign fighters looking to return home or pass

through to a third country—it is also a favorite destination for those who want to move somewhere else and set up a new home. The data set shows that 21 individuals, or 60 percent of the overall 35 relocators, moved to Turkey. This included one woman and five children—all of whom were Tajik citizens—who relocated to Turkey.[64] The female relocator, her Tajik husband, and her children were residing in Istanbul after allegedly arriving from Syria. In December 2017, the husband was arrested by Turkish authorities on charges of terrorism and his wife and children were sent to a refugee camp. However, the Tajik man denied the charges of fighting for IS in Syria.

Next to Turkey, the Ukraine has played a special role for Central Asian militants as it is both a transit and destination country. With reported cases involving four individuals, the country has been the second-most-common destination for Central Asia's relocating fighters. The ability to enter without visa and use of Russian as the common language have made Ukraine a practical choice for militants.

Another important factor that has made the Ukraine attractive for FTFs relates to the opportunity to acquire original and counterfeit Ukrainian passports through criminal schemes that are produced on the black market.[65] According to Ukrainian media, prices on the black market for such documents range from US $2,000 to $5,000.[66] A case in point is the disruption of an IS cell by Ukrainian security agencies in early 2015 in the city of Kharkiv.[67] The cell, being led by two Azeri citizens, was a critical part of IS's facilitation network that was in charge of organizing the journeys of many IS-linked Caucasian and Central Asian militants to, and from, Syria and Iraq through the Ukraine, providing them with temporary housing, financial assistance, and fake documents. For instance, in 2014, Dmitry Nikolayev, a Kazakh militant who was transiting through the Ukraine on his way back to Kazakhstan from Syria, met up with the Azeri cell members in Kharkiv and received money and fake documents before making his way to his home country. Soon after his arrival in Kazakhstan, Nikolayev was arrested and then jailed as the court found him and his Kyrgyz accomplice guilty of plotting attacks against a military base and a police station in the country.[68]

Another relevant case that made the headlines involved an unnamed Kazakh former-IS fighter who was arrested in the Ukraine in March 2019. The militant, while being on the Interpol's international wanted list, managed to obtain an ID card and Ukrainian citizenship by submitting fake documents that allowed him to move freely in that country.[69] At the time of his arrest, he was residing in the province of Odessa.

As many Central Asian FTFs leaving the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq may continue seeing Turkey and Ukraine as final-destination and transit countries, there is need for cross-border cooperation between them and Central Asian countries. It is important to collect biometric data of actual and potential fighters as a means to detect and disrupt their movements. Otherwise, some ex-fighters may be able to mask their true identities while pretending to be nonthreatening individuals.

A United Nations report issued on 20 January 2020 reported the departure of Central Asian fighters from Syria to African destinations, specifically to the Central African Republic, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, and the Sudan, apparently with the intention to lie low in any of these places. The UN report suggested that they might be transiting these countries to join IS affiliates in West Africa and the Sahel region.[70] However, this report provided no further details. It should be noted that parts of West Africa and the Sahel have recently seen a sharp rise in terrorist offensives involving local jihadist groups affiliated with both IS and Al Qaeda.[71] Central Asian militants might have been drawn into this new theater of jihad through the connections that they had formed in Syria.

There were also cases where some Central Asian IS core members have relocated to Afghanistan. Security authorities in Tajikistan assume that Gulmurod Khalimov and some of his associates had relocated to Afghanistan in early 2019. From there he might be planning to make incursions into southern Tajik provinces through the long-joined border.[72] Later in March, a Turkmen NGO claimed that some surviving Turkmen militants had migrated from Syria to Afghanistan following IS's territorial defeat in Baghouz.[73] However, it has been impossible to verify this from an official source.

Battle-hardened Central Asian militants have also traveled to Europe posing as refugees after fighting in Syria.

A case in point was the arrest of Mukhamadsaid Saidov, a Tajik citizen, by the German authorities in North Rhine Westphalia in June 2016.[74] Although Saidov, who had migrated from Syria to Germany, was not implicated in any specific attack plot in Germany, federal prosecutors considered him to be a close associate of Gulmurod Khalimov.[75] In July 2017, the Higher Regional Court of Düsseldorf sentenced Saidov to five years of imprisonment for fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria.[76] On 2 October 2018, Greek authorities extradited a 26-year-old Kazakh citizen, Dastan Khaisin, to his home country after arresting him under an international arrest warrant issued by Interpol in 2015 for his participation in militant activities in Syria.[77] However, no other details about his arrest and extradition were revealed by either Greek or Kazakh authorities. Similar arrests of other FTFs in Greece in the past have suggested that Dastan Khaisin probably entered this country through the well-functioning illegal refugee route from Turkey, by pretending to be an asylum seeker.[78]

In July 2020, Cypriot authorities reported to the United Nations that they had captured a Turkmenistani national amongst a group of individuals "linked to either ISIL- or Al-Qaida–affiliated groups".[79] The arrests in Germany, Greece, and Cyprus, alongside recent terrorist attacks and disrupted plots by Central Asians in Europe, highlight the potential security risk that bogus Central Asian asylum seekers can pose in Europe.

This author's data set also features at least three instances of the movement of citizens of one Central Asian county to another. As part of two separate counterterrorism operations conducted in 2013 and 2015, two Kazakh fighters had been arrested in Kyrgyzstan after their arrival from Syria, allegedly to plot attacks.[80] In 2015, Kazakh security agencies arrested a Kyrgyz citizen in the southern city of Shymkent; reportedly he had undergone bomb-making training in Syria.[81]

Impact of FTF Mobilizations

Instabilities in the Iraq-Syria and Afghanistan conflict theaters continue to provide conditions which FTFs can exploit. Central Asian militants who remain in the active conflict zone are likely to continue fighting to further the agendas of IS and HTS, since they are part of these militant extremist movements.

Surviving IS Central Asian fighters in Syria are likely to find a dwindling support network on the ground, leading them to scatter further or risk being captured or killed. Although IS had sent Central Asian operatives from Syria to carry out attacks outside the conflict zone, such as in Turkey, its ability to mobilize experienced fighters to execute attacks will likely be limited in the foreseeable future. Its military defeat in Syria and the change of leadership following the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 have left IS with little external operational capabilities.[82] However, with IS Core calling for revenge attacks for the lost "caliphate", it could seek to invest in "inspired-attacks", particularly by self-radicalized individuals and a base of clandestine supporters and sympathizers (similar to the vehicular attacks in Sweden and the United States in 2017 and the car-and-knife attack in Tajikistan in 2018), with no experience from the battlefield, wherever and whenever possible.

As long as HTS survives, it is likely that KTJ and KIB will stay in Syria and fight to ensure their own survival. In this regard, it is unlikely that these militant groups will divert the focus of their activities from the core conflict zones to international operations in the near future. In their recent propaganda outreach, both groups have repeatedly called on their supporters and sympathizers to join them on the battlefield and raise funds for militant activities there. However, if HTS's jihadist alliance loses territorial control over Idlib, facing overwhelming political and military pressure exerted by Syria and Russia, it could trigger a broader outflow of Central Asian fighters from Syria and also lead to new cohorts of detained fighters and their families in Syria, particularly among those who had aligned with KIB and KTJ.

The fate of the detained IS fighters and their families in Syria and Iraq will have far-reaching implications for the future trajectory of global counterterrorism efforts. There is a risk of re-radicalization of those who have been repatriated. Therefore, for the countries, which have already transferred large numbers of their citizens from Syria and Iraq, it is crucial to place the repatriated individuals in comprehensive deradicalization and social reintegration programs. Countries like Kyrgyzstan should remain committed to bringing back their

citizens who remain stranded in detention and displacement camps in Syria and Iraq.

As of now, Central Asian countries have seen no massive exodus of their fighters from the Syria-Iraqi theaters home. Most fighters do not seem willing to turn to domestic terrorist operations. However, as recent returnee cases in Kyrgyzstan have suggested, some fighters may come back with such missions and be found plotting. The Chinese Embassy bombing in Bishkek has shown that battle-hardened fighters can be dangerous operatives. The role of returnees and relocators is not confined to plotting attacks. They may also engage in radical preaching, recruitment, fundraising, and training activities.

There is no perfect mechanism of measurement to precisely assess how fighters will behave upon return, particularly in the long term. The risk of violence associated with secret returnees depends on a combination of organizational intent, the degree to which the returnee remains committed to his associated group, and the capacity of governments to timely detect and prevent violent activities of such former fighters. It is important to offer rehabilitation and social reintegration programs to both voluntary (if convicted, at prisons; if not, upon their reunion with the local society) and secret returnees (at prisons after their identification and imprisonment).

As available data indicate, those FTFs who do not want to return to their countries of origin but wish to migrate elsewhere will seek to go to places where they can find some contacts who will help them to settle down and survive in a new social environment. Traveling to totally unknown destinations brings considerable risks for them, as it involves crossing international borders, navigating unfamiliar territory, language barriers, and dealing with alien people. Without reliable contacts, relocating FTFs can easily and quickly get detected, arrested, and ultimately extradited to their home countries.

As such, foreign countries with Central Asian diaspora communities, especially Turkey and the Ukraine, and potentially some West and South European countries, may continue to serve as destination of choice for FTFs. One example of this pattern is provided by the arrest in Germany (in June 2016) of Mukhamadsaid Saidov, a Tajik fighter who fought with IS in Syria. In Europe, with about 5,600 Tajiks, Germany is among the top destination countries for Tajik migrants.[83] On the other hand, cases in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have demonstrated that some former fighters may choose to move to neighboring countries in Central Asia, as it is relatively easy for them to lie low and survive in such culturally similar communities.

There are facilitation networks (illegal refugee routes, fake documentation, and human smuggling channels), which serve as a mechanism connecting conflict zones and preferred destination countries. However, such service comes with considerable costs, which not many former fighters can afford. Therefore, only rich and well-connected former fighters may be able to relocate to countries such as the Ukraine.

As the January 2020 UN report has suggested, some Central Asian FTFs might have moved to some regions as distant as West Africa and the Sahel, in the hope to continue their fight in new theaters of jihadist conflicts. If such mobilization is actually taking place, it is very likely that Central Asians have been pulled into these conflicts through connections with local jihadists whom they met in Syria. Therefore, national counterterrorism agencies should have a very clear understanding of the network dynamics of militant groups appearing on their radars. Although some experts, including Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova, and William Tobey, have viewed Afghanistan as the "likeliest destination" for Central Asian militants to move on to pursue their combat operations, the scale of the movement from Syria to Afghanistan has so far been much lower. As such some Central Asian FTFs exiting Syria may choose to migrate not only to Afghanistan, but also to other conflict frontlines, including the above-mentioned regions and countries.

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Notes

[1] For the purposes of this analysis, the author uses "foreign fighters" and "foreign terrorist fighters" or "FTFs" interchangeably. He defines them as foreign individuals who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for IS, Al Qaeda, and other militant groups.

[2] While the local media did report a Central Asian was involved in the 2016 Istanbul airport attack, eventually this allegation was not proven to be true. See: 'Trial begins over IS attack on Istanbul airport,' *The Associated Press*, 13 November 2017, URL: https://apnews.com/article/6a20adfa95cc46e0b7645cece42bb1d8.

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[8] This figure, offered by a counterterrorism officer from Uzbekistan during an Interpol's regional experts meeting held in Tbilisi, Georgia in September 2018, where the author attended as a speaker, refers to the total number of Uzbek militants fighting in armed conflicts abroad, including the Iraqi-Syrian and Afghanistan theaters.

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[12] This table has been created by the author, based on a data set collected and compiled from various online sources in Russian, Uzbek, and English as well as from expert discussions at events covering the subject. Appropriate citations will be provided for each figure when discussed in detail in the relevant sections of this article.

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