

At a glance

Up to 7,000 people from former Soviet states are thought to be fighting for IS in the Middle East and have risen to high positions

Religious organisations have filled the vacuum created by poverty, state fragility, ethnic frictions, limited employment, climate change, border and water disputes and drug trafficking

Radical Chechens and extremists from other Muslim ethnic groups have shifted their demands towards a Caucasus caliphate



Mikhail Pogosov | 123reg

Radicalisation in Central Asia

A recent Europol Report says that North Caucasians make up a powerful contingent of foreign terrorist fighters in the Middle East. But radicalised operatives from the ex-Soviet Union regions of Central Asia and the Russian Caucasus are increasingly carrying out attacks elsewhere, says **Lina Kolesnikova**, who examines some possible underlying reasons

A 17-year-old teenager was detained in Oslo, Norway, in April 2017 after a witness reported seeing him with a suspicious package and a device was discovered outside the Groenland metro station. Security services evacuated bars and restaurants and deployed a bomb squad; the small device was destroyed and there were no injuries.

According to media reports, the teenager came to Norway as a 10-year-old with his family, which had applied for asylum from the Russian Caucasus region (presumably Chechnya). The Russian embassy in Norway confirmed the boy is a Russian national.

The Norwegian authorities acknowledged that he was known to police as being part of 'extreme Islamic' circles, but they did not know whether he had been planning to carry out an attack. Police also confirmed that two members of this circle had left Norway and travelled to Syria. Security services warned of the likelihood of copycat attacks.

The incident happened a day after the Stockholm attack, carried out by Rakhmat Akilov from Uzbekistan. Akilov hijacked a beer

delivery truck and deliberately drove into crowds on Stockholm's largest shopping street, killing four pedestrians and injuring many more before crashing the vehicle into a department store.

Akilov was arrested the same day and confessed to the attack. The rejected asylum seeker was known to Swedish authorities but was not under investigation. He had arrived in Sweden on October 10, 2014, and claimed asylum, saying that the Uzbek authorities had tortured him and accused him of terrorism and treason. Sweden's Migration Board ruled there was no evidence of this, and in late 2016, Akilov was ordered to leave Sweden within four weeks. He went into hiding and could not be found for deportation.

Uzbek authorities said Akilov joined IS after moving to Sweden and encouraged friends and family in Uzbekistan to fight. An Uzbek security source also said that he had attempted to travel to Syria in 2015 to join IS, but was stopped at the Turkish-Syrian border and sent back to Sweden. The source added that two months before the attack, Uzbek authorities had placed Akilov on a wanted list of suspected religious extremists.

IS has not claimed responsibility for the

attack, but experts note that the group tends not to do so if its members are arrested.

On April 3, a terrorist attack killed 15 people on the Saint Petersburg underground between Sennaya Ploshchad and Tekhnologicheskoy Institute stations in Russia.

The bomb was in a briefcase; a second device was found and defused at the Ploshchad Vosstaniya underground station. DNA identified at the explosion site was also detected on the unexploded device.

The suicide bomber was identified as Akbarzhon Jalilov, who appears to have been known to the Kyrgyz intelligence and security services, which are now working closely with Russian authorities to identify all his possible links with IS.

Jalilov was born in Osh and moved to St Petersburg with his parents in 2011, remaining in the city after they returned to Osh. He is an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan. Osh is notoriously famous for bloody clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in 2010 and is an insecure area with high levels of drug trafficking.

The 'Central Asian' track in the last terrorist attack is worrying for the Russian authorities

because this would be the first major terror attack carried out in Russia by a person from the Central Asian republics. The number of guest workers from those states who already work in Russia, and the potentially high number of newcomers (there is no visa requirement for citizens of Central Asia entering Russia), present a challenge to the Russian intelligence and security services.

These recent attacks and terrorist plots – as well as the attacks at a night club in 2017 (the suspect is of Uzbek origin), on Istanbul Airport in 2016 (attackers were from Russian Caucasus and Central Asia), the Boston marathon bombing in 2013 (the Tsarnaev brothers are Chechens) – all show a dangerous trend of terrorist activity by people from the ex-Soviet Union regions of Central Asia, and Russian Caucasus.

Five former Soviet republics – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – are a lucrative recruiting ground for new IS members. Other areas that continue to supply recruits include the republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan, as well as Georgia and Azerbaijan. Some 5,000 to 7,000 people from former Soviet states, including Russia, are fighting alongside IS jihadists in the Middle East.

Fighters from former Soviet Union countries have risen to high positions in IS. Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov from Tajikistan is thought to be the highest-ranking former police officer to join IS from a Central Asian country. He previously commanded an elite special forces police unit and is thought to have left for Syria in 2015. In September 2016 Khalimov was appointed as the group's minister of war. He fought extremists at home, was one of the best-trained officers in the country and had received high-level counter-terrorist training in the USA and Russia. Khalimov was popular among his police co-workers and the risk of IS recruiting further high-ranking police officers is very real. His switch of allegiance was embarrassing for the Tadjik government. The Tadjik Interior Ministry issued an international arrest warrant for him in November 2016.

Georgian Tarkhan Batirashvili, known as Omar al-Shishani (Omar the Chechen), who was killed in July 2016, had been training groups of IS fighters, including those tasked with carrying out suicide operations on fronts in Syria, neighbouring countries in the region, and in the US.

The IS magazine *Dabiq* is published in Chechen and Russian to target members from Chechnya, other Russian regions and Central Asia. Radio programmes are broadcast in Chechen and Russian, pointing to the importance of former Soviet Union countries as a crucial base of support for IS. The group is very active on Russian Twitter, Facebook and Vkontakte (a Russian-speaking social network).

On June 23, 2015, IS announced the formation of its Caucasus Province (Vilayat al-Kavkaz) in Northern Caucasus territory.

Islam has become a central factor in Central

Asia's public life since the end of the Soviet era. Religious organisations have filled the vacuum created by corruption, poverty, state fragility and ethnic frictions. Limited employment opportunities, climate change realities, disputes over water usage and borders and drug trafficking are other factors. Many local people associate faith with identity. Local authorities say that youths are most likely to see Islam as an alternative political identity and potential ruling system.

The region is experiencing high population growth. The UN predicts a staggering growth of 119 per cent between 2015 and 2100 in Tajikistan, swelling the population from 8,482,000 to 18,559,000. Kyrgyzstan boasts an impressive projected growth of 52 per cent. Uzbekistan will retain the region's largest population, followed by Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

Other countries are financing a growing number of mosques and the region is seeing the rise of non-traditional Islam, along with a skyrocketing increase in the number of Islamic civil organisations, which are often substitutes for the state in providing services to impoverished populations.

Social pressure

Unfortunately, the social elevator is practically non-existent for young people. Health and education are outdated and the current situation is particularly painful for women and girls, who have little or no prospect of improving their lot. Attending prayer or study group can offer vital support and, for some women, is the only way to do anything independent of the home. They may also use religion to disassociate from difficult family circumstances, domestic violence or strong social pressure in traditional communities.

Some of these organisations are relatively non-political, but a few are politically active. Meanwhile, the common and disturbing picture in Central Asia is that instability and religious radicalisation are deepening, and Islam and politics are increasingly intersecting.

All of the Central Asian governments are concerned with the growing number of people leaving to fight for IS and Central Asian fighters have also formed their own groups in IS.

A disturbing external factor is Afghanistan. As foreign militants join the Taliban's fight against government forces in this country, Central Asian nations are increasingly worried about the danger of Islamic fighters infiltrating the region. There is a long legacy of cross-border crime and violence, much of it fuelled by the drug trade, and such unrest ratchets up tensions. Although the Taliban has repeatedly stated it has no ambitions beyond reclaiming control over Afghanistan, foreign Islamist groups operating in Afghanistan, such as IS or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), have a much broader agenda.

Militants forced to flee Afghanistan could represent a threat to the Central Asian member

of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The CIS Anti-Terrorism Centre says that the situation is unlikely to stabilise in the medium term. "We should accept that pushing militants from eastern districts of Afghanistan will result in their further relocation to the north and could create a potential threat, primarily to the Central Asian CIS member states," Colonel General of Police Andrey Novikov observed in May.

Real intelligence is lacking, and it is worrying that the security services use shoot-to-kill tactics in many operations. Confidence in the police and courts is low.

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan struggle with socioeconomic factors such as massive labour migration to Russia. This has helped the economy, but has destroyed the family as an institution, as women and children are left behind. Labour migrants work for much lower salaries than Russians and experience various forms of humiliation by the Russian authorities. Many Russians resent the large number of guest workers from Central Asia, and everyday racism and police checks are facts of life. This pushes people to situations where they are radicalised and recruited by terrorist groups. According to some analysts there is a growing number of Tadjik people acting as suicide bombers.

In the 1990s and early 2000s Russia was hit by waves of separatist terror mainly linked to demands for Chechen independence. Now, radical Chechens and extremists from other Muslim ethnic groups in the region (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria) have shifted their demands towards the establishment of a Caucasus emirate. And many of them are fighting in Syria with IS or other groups.

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