

Central Asia in the Transnational Networks of ISKP: Responses, Counter-Extremism and Challenges

Hannes Meissner and Johannes Leitner

Introduction

The post-Soviet states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – have attracted increasing public and academic interest in recent years. The reason lies in the current global geopolitical changes, crises, and wars. The region is being discussed as a new flash-point for competing geopolitical and geoeconomic interests between Russia, China, and Europe. Particular attention is being paid to China's New Silk Road¹ and the issue of the region serving as a hub for sanctions evasion.²

In addition to that, Russia's war against Ukraine has sparked fears that Moscow might also attack other post-Soviet states if they attempt to break away from its declared sphere of influence, the so-called Russian "Near Abroad." In this regard, particular attention has been paid to Kazakhstan, where a large Russian population resides in the north of the country.³ The debate over Russian attempts to destabilize countries in its neighbourhood also refers to covert or open interventions in local conflicts, which are escalated or frozen

-
- ¹ Azhar Serikkaliyeva, "The Role of the Central Asian Region in China's New Silk Road Economic Belt Project," *Eurasian Research Journal* 1, no.1, 2019, <https://scispace.com/pdf/the-role-of-the-central-asian-region-in-china-s-new-silk-5fedlj0zk4.pdf>; Martin Russell, "Connectivity in Central Asia," *European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)*, 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)637891_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI(2019)637891_EN.pdf).
- ² Kate O'Riordan, "From Silk Roads to Backdoors: EU Sanctions Evasion in Central Asia," *Brussels Institute for Geopolitics*, December 18, 2025, <https://big-europe.eu/publications/2025-12-18-from-silk-roads-to-backdoors-eu-sanctions-evasion-in-central-asia>; Alexander Thompson, "EU Imposes 'Anti-Circumvention' Sanctions on Kyrgyzstan for Assisting Russia," *Eurasianet*, April 27, 2026, <https://eurasianet.org/eu-imposes-anti-circumvention-sanctions-on-kyrgyzstan-for-assisting-russia>.
- ³ Adil Komen, "Russian Separatism and Irredentism in Kazakhstan: An Analytical Approach and Solutions for Stability," Bachelor's thesis, Brno: Masaryk University, 2025, https://is.muni.cz/th/yz5bk/Bachelor_s_Thesis_Adil_Komen_531420.pdf.

as needed. This strategy of destabilization and “divide and rule” has been observable since the 1990s and has been particularly evident in Moldova (Transnistria), Eastern Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk before 2022), Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), as well as previously between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. For a long time, frozen conflicts served as a kind of guarantee for Moscow that the affected states would not be integrated into competing power and security structures, such as the EU and NATO.⁴

However, for various reasons, but mainly due to its geographical distance from Europe, the relative loyalty of the ruling elites to Moscow, and shared political and economic interests with Russia, Central Asian states have been less affected by this Russian strategy. With the recent attempts by Central Asian governments to emancipate themselves from Russia, however, the risk is rising. For example, there was some discussion as to whether the uprising in Karakalpakstan in July 2022 was also instigated by Russia to teach a lesson to the Uzbek reformist forces led by President Mirziyoyev, whose interests and policies have increasingly been aligned with the European Union.⁵

Apart from such isolated and temporary crises, the threat has not materialized further to date. One reason for this might be that Moscow can hardly be interested in additional wars in its neighbourhood, given the challenges it faces with the war in Ukraine. At the same time, however, Moscow has a core interest in stability in Central Asia, albeit under its own narrowly defined conditions. Moscow is supporting the countries in the region with concrete stabilization measures, with the aim of creating what Russia views as an ideal scenario: pro-Russian authoritarian governments, backed by Russia, would uphold the state’s monopoly on the use of force and secure the country’s external borders, while containing the Islamist threat.

The issue of stability in Central Asia once again came to the fore during the height of the war in Iran, in particular because of diplomatic and economic

⁴ Andrew Sprague, “Russian Meddling in Its Near Abroad,” *IBEI Student Paper Series* 28, Institut Barcelona d’Estudis Internacionals, 2016, https://www.ibe.org/ibe_studentpaper28_71440.pdf.

⁵ Kevin Schulte, „Warum Putin von Usbekistan-Unruhen profitiert,” *ntn.de*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Podcast-Wieder-was-gelernt-Wie-Proteste-in-Usbekistan-Putin-in-die-Haende-spielen-article23466147.htm>.

ties of the Central Asian states to Iran that had been strengthened in recent years.⁶ However, the risk of being directly drawn into the conflict is low. Iran's strategy of seeking to exert as broad an influence as possible in the region leaves the post-Soviet states of Central Asia out of scope. In addition to economic and diplomatic ties with Iran, these countries do not host any U.S. bases, and attacks would constitute a clear violation of Russian security interests in the region.

A far greater threat to long-term stability comes from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has evolved in recent years from a regional IS offshoot in Central Asia into a global terrorist organization. Its regional strategy of a cell-based, decentralized organization is aimed at carrying out terrorist attacks. At the same time, the goal is to destabilize the states in the region and fill the power vacuum with its own forces. In this regard, the terrorist organization is likely to be following events in Iran very closely, even though the Iranian regime appears to be stable and is still able to maintain a monopoly on the use of force throughout Iran's territory. In addition, citizens of Central Asian countries have joined the terrorist organization, primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks. "As is so often the case, the organization's social base determines its operational focus. Since ISPK consists primarily of Pakistanis, Afghans, and Central Asians (Tajiks, Uzbeks), IS Khorasan operates mainly where these groups live. In Europe, it relies primarily on Central Asians and Caucasians ("Chechens")."⁷

A critical juncture was the so-called "Crocus City Hall Attack", which took place on the evening of March 22, 2024, when several armed individuals stormed the Crocus City Hall event venue in Krasnogorsk, a suburb northwest of Moscow, and killed 149 people. "Court testimony, investigative find-

⁶ Alexander Grinberg, "How the War in Iran Affects Central Asia," *Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS)*, April 27, 2026, <https://jiss.org.il/en/grinberg-how-the-war-in-iran-affects-central-asia/>; Syed Fazl-e Haider: Iran Conflict Disrupts Central Asian Trade Routes. *Jamestown Foundation: Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 24, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/iran-conflict-disrupts-central-asian-trade-routes/>.

⁷ Guido Steinberg, „Islamischer Staat – Provinz Khorasan (ISPK): Hintergründe und aktuelle Entwicklungen für Europa“ Vortrag, Demokratiezentrum Land Bremen, December 9, 2024, <https://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/material/islamischer-staat-provinz-khorasan-ispk-hintergruende-und-aktuelle-entwicklungen-fuer-europa-fachvortrag>.

ings, and repeated IS claims confirm that the Crocus City Hall attack was executed by pro-ISKP Tajik Islamists, despite persistent attempts by Russian authorities to attribute responsibility to Ukraine.”⁸

ISKP also poses a direct threat to the Central Asian states themselves. The terrorist organization 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 ISKP 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.”⁹

This chapter focuses specifically on these threats posed by ISKP in Central Asia, diving into the situation of the five Central Asian post-Soviet republics. It analyses challenges, responses, and counter-extremism strategies along four key dimensions of resilience. More specifically, the following section (section two) deals with the strengthening of the states’ monopoly on the use of force and the securing of external borders. Today, all five countries can be classified as authoritarian states providing a high degree of stability. Section three unveils that in this context, cooperation through joint intelligence activities plays a decisive role. This takes place under Russia’s leadership. Authoritarianism and intelligence activities address not only, but especially religious movements in the countries themselves, which are rigorously suppressed – a strategy to which section four is dedicated to. Section five analyses a regional political and economic approach the countries take concerning cautious cooperation with the Taliban for security reasons and economic development. This unveils that the Taliban are regarded as less of a threat compared to ISKP.

⁸ Uran Botobekov, “Crocus City Hall Terrorism Trial Exposes Russian Counterterrorism Gaps,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, April 3, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/crocus-city-hall-terrorism-trial-exposes-russian-counterterrorism-gaps/>.

⁹ Shaul Shay, “Afghanistan and the Terror Threat in Central Asia,” *Security Science Journal* 5, no. 1, 2024, 138 https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/Portals/0/SecurityScienceJournal/SSJ%205_1_9.PDF, 138; Hannes Meissner, “Political Risks in the Post-Soviet Region: Geopolitical Risks, Country Risks, and Business Management Strategies,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk*, C.E. Sottolotta et al., 2025, 219-237, 220ff.

The individual sections will show that political systems, law-and-order policies, and counter-extremism strategies are heavily influenced by the Soviet legacy of the region.¹⁰ According to widespread academic opinion, Moscow has lost influence in the region in recent years.¹¹ This contribution will not address the question of how extensive this loss of influence is, and how rapidly it is progressing. However, it shows that Russia's influence in the region remains strong, and that regional governments maintain a pragmatic approach towards Moscow.

Strengthening the state's monopoly on the use of force/external borders

A key resilience strategy aims at strengthening the states' monopoly on the use of force and securing their external borders. In this regard, all five Central Asian states have one thing in common: a high degree of security and stability in public order. In fact, the so-called "primacy of stability and development" is a key element of the legitimacy of authoritarian post-Soviet states. The state rejects experiments in social liberalism and democratization that are alleged to cause chaos. In return, the state guarantees every citizen physical safety even in the most remote regions. Even if such a promise of security can never be fully met at any time, these states do succeed in maintaining public order to a large extent and to a degree that is exceptionally high for the region. The consolidation of state power is strongly associated with "the consolidation of the Central Asian ruling elite's political power". In this context, Soviet legacy has played a crucial role. The ruling elites "were in control of the transformation and nation-building processes in these new states from the very beginning. This enabled them to bring together political, economic,

¹⁰ Cf. Florence Ertel and Julian Plottka, "A Political Risk Analysis of Kazakhstan: Recent Changes in the Internal and External Context of a Central Asian State." *The Routledge Handbook of Political Risk*, C.E. Sottolotta et al., 2025, 238-253, 250.

¹¹ Kassie Corelli, "Russian Position Weakening in Central Asia," *Jamestown Foundation*, April 13, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/russian-position-weakening-in-central-asia/>; Claudia Eggart, "The End of the Post-Soviet," *Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien (ZOiS)*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-end-of-the-post-soviet>; Stefan Meister, „Das Ende der Hegemonie: Russlands Einflussverlust im postsowjetischen Raum,“ *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, June 8, 2026, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/233506/das-ende-der-hegemonie-russlands-einflussverlust-im-postsowjetischen-raum/>.

military and normative resources to form an unusually extensive range of powers.”¹² In the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia, governing systems are based on neo-patrimonial structures that still have their roots in the Soviet past, even though certain transformations of these structures have taken place as a result of generational shifts and realignments within the clientelist structures. The elites who led the transformation process following the dissolution of the Soviet Union had their formal roots in the Soviet party apparatus, the Republican parties of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, many of them with connections and experience in the security apparatus and state-owned enterprises. This provided them with a power base that continues to shape the state- and nation-building process to this day.¹³ Today’s approach to the security risks posed by the ISKP must also be understood within this broader post-Soviet context.

However, this does not mean that stability is not at risk. On the contrary, corruption, social, economic, and environmental crises, and a lack of trust between Central Asia’s ruling elites, “their authoritarian and repressive religious policies” are eroding the regimes’ legitimacy to a certain degree.¹⁴ Crisis situations, in turn, provide fertile ground for ISKP, which directly threatens stability in Central Asia. ISKP is “characterised by its objective of establishing a Salafist state (caliphate) and abolishing ‘artificial’ international borders, which it claims were drawn with the aim of ‘dividing the Islamic community’.” In this regard, the terrorist organisation “predominantly attacks weak states with a strong potential for internal conflicts, religious polarisation and state failure.”¹⁵

However, all five countries are countering these risks with a massive deployment of their security and repression apparatus. The most extreme example is Turkmenistan, which ranks among the most authoritarian states in the world. Any movement – whether terrorist, religious, or opposition-based – that might theoretically challenge the ruling elite’s power is systematically tracked down and ruthlessly eliminated, by “pervasive persecution by the se-

¹² Arne C. Seifert, *Preventing the ‘Islamic State’ in Central Asia: Conditions, Risks and Peace Policy Requirements*, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik Working Paper, 2016.

¹³ For more detail cf. Meissner, “Political Risks in the Post-Soviet Region,” 220f.

¹⁴ Seifert, *Preventing the “Islamic State”*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

curity and police forces and the omnipotence of the president and his closest confidants. As a result, they have no opportunity to develop”.¹⁶

While Kyrgyzstan has seen stability reach a level characteristic of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia in recent years, alongside the consolidation of an increasingly authoritarian regime,¹⁷ Kazakhstan is an example how quickly and unexpectedly stability of authoritarian regimes can erode, in case they lack broad legitimacy among the population due to various crisis symptoms. The January 2022 civil unrest, known as Bloody January, had no religious background. The incidents were rather triggered by the socio-economic crisis and a lack of prospects, which particularly affect the younger generation. The incidents lasted from January 2 to January 11, 2022, and resulted in a temporary loss of government control over the former capital, Almaty, and several provinces. At that time, security and public order could only be restored through about 2,500 predominantly Russian “peacekeepers” as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)¹⁸ who entered the country at Kazakhstan’s request. No major incident of this nature has occurred since, and the central government controls most of Kazakhstan’s territory. It relies on a powerful security and law enforcement apparatus to maintain law and order. The authorities conduct regular arrests of suspected members of terrorist and extremist organizations. In January 2022 alone, more than 10,000 people were arrested, often on terrorism charges.¹⁹

Uzbekistan also follows a similar pattern. The shared border with Afghanistan is the best protected and the state’s monopoly of force is established

¹⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Turkmenistan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_TKM.pdf, 7.

¹⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kyrgyzstan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_KGZ.pdf, 8.

¹⁸ The CSTO is a military alliance established in 2002 among several former Soviet republics, led by Russia.

¹⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kazakhstan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_KAZ.pdf, 8.

nationwide. “The state has always demonstrated its readiness to quell any riot. Law enforcement agencies always stand ready to prevent potential disturbances and suspicious activity.” As in other post-Soviet countries, the security apparatus is also misused for political purposes. Allegations of Islamist threats are often used as a means to an end. “This use of force has often led to abuses. In 2024, Uzbekistan’s security forces arrested several young men accused of planning to join the Islamic State (IS) group.”²⁰

However, there are certain security risks and threats posed by religious extremism in the Ferghana Valley, due to complex and disputed borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,²¹ “overpopulation, scarcity of land and water, reductions in agricultural subsidies, unemployment, corruption, drug trafficking, juvenile delinquency, border disputes and strong underground Islamist groups.”²² The valley covers an area of 22,000 square kilometres with a population of eleven million people of different nationalities. The IS has interpreted the borders in the region as “artificial”.²³

Besides Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is also particularly vulnerable to Islamist terrorism, although the country is one of the most authoritarian states in the world, maintaining complete monopoly on the use of force across its entire territory. “Terrorism incidents are relatively uncommon compared to global standards. In recent years, the Islamic State in Khorasan has emerged as the most prolific terrorist organization; however, it has not yet challenged internal security.”²⁴ In Tajikistan, too, scenarios involving Islamist threats are partly invoked for political purposes. “While the authorities often highlight the risk posed by militant Islamic groups, these groups have not demonstrated the ability to pose a substantial challenge to the state, and the threat is likely greatly exaggerated.” In recent years, operational capacity of security

²⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Uzbekistan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_UB.pdf, 6.

²¹ Shay, “Afghanistan and the Terror Threat,” 145.

²² Seifert, Preventing the “Islamic State”.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Tajikistan*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026, https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2026_TJK.pdf, 7.

forces has been improved by “significant assistance in training and equipment from China, Russia and the United States.”²⁵

All three of Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours feel threatened by militant Islamism and the incursion of terrorist groups from Afghanistan. This is particularly true for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, although the threat does not come solely from ISKP. Terrorist groups active in Afghanistan and allied with the Taliban, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or the ethnic Tajik-dominated Jamaat Ansarullah, openly declare their intention to overthrow the governments in Tashkent and Dushanbe and replace them with a caliphate or emirate, respectively. For this reason, the Tajik border with Afghanistan has been massively reinforced since 2021, and demonstrative military manoeuvres have been held within the framework of the CSTO. One of the few security-relevant incidents occurred in 2023, when a small group of Jamaat Ansarullah fighters allegedly attempted to cross the Panj River into the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) but were repelled or arrested by Tajik border guards. However, even in this case, some observers assumed it was a staged incident for political purposes.²⁶

Besides CSTO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation²⁷ has taken military and security measures aimed at preventing IS from entering the region.²⁸ In this context, it becomes clear that the fight against the Islamist threat is not confined solely to post-Soviet mechanisms. Shay (2024) provides an overview of Tajikistan’s cooperation within broad international structures. The country has also received US assistance to build capacity to secure the border to Afghanistan through technical assistance and equipment. In 2022, the US supported Dushanbe to renovate and build border outposts and checkpoints and provided equipment and training to enhance Tajikistan’s border security and counterterrorism capabilities. Tajikistan has conducted more than 50 bi-

²⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Tajikistan*, 7.

²⁶ Katja Mielke, “Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung? Die Afghanistan-Politik von Usbekistan, Turkmenistan und Tadschikistan drei Jahre nach der erneuten Machtergreifung der Taliban,” *Zentralasien-Analysen*, no. 166, December 9, 2024, <https://laenderanalysen.de/zentralasienanalysen/166/zentralasienanalysen166.pdf>, 4.

²⁷ The “Shanghai Cooperation Organization” is an international organization headquartered in Beijing. Founded in 2001, it is today a key cooperative body between the Central Asian states, Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Belarus.

²⁸ Seifert, “Preventing the ‘Islamic State’”.

lateral engagements with the US Department of Defence during 2022. Besides US cooperation, Tajikistan also took part in counterterrorism measures with Russia, other CSTO member states, and China. In 2021, Dushanbe implemented a new Law on Combating Terrorism, which established the basis for counterterrorism operations in Tajikistan. In addition to that, the 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.²⁹

Cooperation through joint intelligence activities under Russia's leadership

Aside from the above-mentioned international cooperation schemes going beyond post-Soviet structures, national and regional intelligence activities heavily rely on post-Soviet networks, with Russia's FSB playing a leading role in the region. This is primarily carried out through the "Council of Heads of Intelligence and Special Services of the CIS Member States (SORB)." Another cooperative body is the "Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." In addition to that, the countries cooperate closely with special services of states that are – in the words of the Russian government – regarded as "friendly countries", in particular with those of Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.³⁰

Vice versa, international cooperation in the field of intelligence activities is significantly hampered by the hybrid war with Western countries. For example, there is some evidence that a US intelligence warning to Moscow two weeks ahead of the Crocus City Hall concert venue was dismissed as "provocative statements by the West".³¹ In any case, the mistrust runs much deeper. In Russia, there is a widespread belief that Western actors are actively

²⁹ Shay, "Afghanistan and the Terror Threat", 144.

³⁰ Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (RATS SCO), *Direktor FSB Rossii A. Bortnikov o situatsii v sfere borby s terrorizmom*, RATS SCO, October 17, 2025, https://ecrats.org/ru/security_situation/situation/19751/.

³¹ "U.S. Warning To Russia Reportedly Named Crocus Concert Hall", *RFE*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-us-intelligence-crocus/32889127.html>.

strengthening ISKP in Central Asia to weaken Russia.³² However, it remains unclear at this point where officials stand on such views. Alexander Bortnikov is Director of the FSB of Russia and Chairman of SORB. At the 57th SORB meeting in Samarkand (Uzbekistan), he stated that ISKP is receiving support from “foreign special services” and “external players”, without explaining exactly whom he means by that. According to Bortnikov, “the strengthening of the Khorasan Province is beneficial to external players, on the one hand, to undermine the power of the Taliban, and on the other hand, to create a long-term hotbed of terrorist threats near the southern borders of the CIS.”³³

Russia has been playing a key role in supplying the Central Asian states with information, guidance, and resources in intelligence activities due to its security-first approach in the region. “While China seeks stability in Afghanistan to secure trade routes under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and prevent extremism near Xinjiang, Russia focuses on managing the security risks spilling over into its Central Asian sphere.”³⁴ Recent counter strategies comprise several measures.

Firstly, intelligence activities aim at countering internet propaganda in Tajik, Uzbek, Kirgiz, and recently also in Kazakh. According to a statement of Bortnikov, after the military escalation by Israel, there was a multiple increase in the number of online communities promoting jihadist ideology.³⁵

³² Andreev 2025 states: “The Americans, together with the Turks and the British, continue to actively use the Islamist factor to destabilize the situation in Central Asia and direct its destructive energy to the north, towards the CIS and the Russian Federation. (...) The CIA and MI6 are re-establishing their intelligence presence in a number of key provinces in Afghanistan. Their main efforts are focused on the formation of a “belt of instability” on the southern borders of the CIS. To this end, the recruitment of militants from international terrorist organizations operating in Iraq, Syria, and a number of other Asian and African countries, as well as their transfer to the north of Afghanistan, continue.”

³³ Executive Committee of RATS SCO, “Direktor FSB Rossii.”

³⁴ Aigerim Turgunbaeva and Fayazuddin Ghiasi, “The Taliban’s Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia,” *Analytical Articles*, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13850-the-new-russia-iran-treaty-implications-for-the-south-caucasus-region.html>.

³⁵ Executive Committee of RATS SCO, “Direktor FSB Rossii.”

Secondly, Russian and Central Asian intelligence services aim at establishing full-scale cooperation with the Afghan special agencies not only for anti-terrorist measures, but also within the framework of the fight against drug trafficking. In this regard, Bortnikov highlights that intelligence services “record the emergence of new production facilities, cross-border channels and methods of transporting “synthetics” to the territory of the CIS.”³⁶ In fact, ISKP has expanded its drug trafficking operations, particularly involving methamphetamine which has enabled the group to significantly increase its financial profits.³⁷

Thirdly, according to Bortnikov, a key objective is the detection of militants (primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks) within Central Asian countries, but especially among the vast number of migrant workers who emigrate to Russia. In addition to that, Bortnikov claims that “operations have become more frequent to transfer terrorist fighters from the Middle East to Afghanistan.” In this context, the ISKP’s strategy aims at ensuring that Islamist terrorists remain under the radar of security services by maintaining a low profile.³⁸

Fourthly, in this overall context, containment must respond to the successful shift of ISKP to a cell-based underground terrorist structure.³⁹ The organization’s vertical organizational structure was abandoned and replaced by a horizontal organization of underground cells spread across Afghanistan.⁴⁰

Sharifi (2024) concludes that Central Asia is of interest to ISKP in two respects: as a base of operations for attacks and as a source of recruits for attacks outside the region. In the first regard, even though ISKP has been relatively inactive in Central Asia so far, the recruitment of militant supporters among Central Asian diaspora groups poses a real threat to the region. In the latter regard, the organization finds its greatest support not in Central Asia itself, but particularly among Central Asian diaspora communities abroad, among whom Tajik migrants are especially marginalized.⁴¹ This particularly holds true for Russia, where around 10 million people from Central

³⁶ Executive Committee of RATS SCO, “Direktor FSB Rossii.”

³⁷ Sharifi, “Der Islamische Staat – Khorasan-Provinz,” 8.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁴¹ Ibid, 11.

Asia have emigrated. Most of them work in precarious work relations, although some of them have vocational training and speak Russian fluently. The vast majority end up in low-wage jobs on construction sites or as truck drivers. Most of them live in precarious conditions, isolated from the rest of Russian society.⁴²

The situation is worsening as a result of the war in Ukraine, the downturn in the Russian economy, and the attack on Crocus City Hall. “Human rights organizations report instances of racial profiling by the Russian police, and violent raids on housing for Central Asian migrant workers occur regularly.” This goes along with “coercive migration enforcement and restrictive religious policies widely perceived as hostile toward Islamic practices”, which create “conditions conducive to further radicalization.”⁴³

Surveillance and repression of religious movements

The third strategy is based on surveillance and suppression of religious movements. This basically applies to any opposition, but religious movements are monitored particularly closely. All five Central Asian states rigorously defend the authoritarian and secular models of governance they inherited from the Soviet Union. In doing so, these states face the challenge that Islam is deeply rooted among the population. However, differences also emerge in this regard. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are among the most authoritarian states in the world, with the state regulating religious life in society rigorously. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have particularly strong Islamic traditions, and religion has visibly gained in importance in Uzbek public life in recent years. In contrast, in Turkmenistan, Islam is traditionally less strictly practiced due to pre-Soviet nomadic traditions influenced by Sufi and shamanistic elements (Ochs 1997).

In general, Islam has grown in importance since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. “A total of 52.8 million – or 92.6 percent – of Central Asia’s popula-

⁴² Marta Ahmedov, „Gesucht: Junge Männer für Terror,“ *Die Zeit*, March 27, 2024, <https://www.zeit.de/zett/politik/2024-03/islamismus-is-moskau-radikalisierung-zentralasien>.

⁴³ Uran Botobekov, “Crocus City Hall Terrorism Trial Exposes Russian Counterterrorism Gaps,” *Jamestown*, March 4, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/crocus-city-hall-terrorism-trial-exposes-russian-counterterrorism-gaps/>.

tion of 57 million are Muslims. (...) Islam has essentially become nationalised, with the effect that its social foundations have outgrown those of the secular political regime.”⁴⁴ The ruling elites play a dual role in this regard. On the one hand, they strengthen the secular political systems and systematically suppress independent religious movements. On the other hand, they respect Islam in society and guide it through strict state control and supervision.⁴⁵

When dealing with Central Asia, it is important to understand that the effects of repressive secularization in Soviet times still have a major impact today. Soviet communist ideology was directed at society as such and had the goal of transforming it into a new ideal. Religion must no longer play a role in this. Even though the goal was not achieved, liberal forms of religiosity, openness, and tolerance continue to dominate public life to this day, particularly in urban regions. In this regard, travellers immediately notice the differences between Tajikistan and Afghanistan that date back to the colonial era. In contrast to Kabul (ethnic Tajiks form one of the three largest ethnic groups in the Afghan capital), Dushanbe is today a modern capital where religion plays a rather modest role in public life, at least on the surface.

This deprives ISIS of a key source of legitimacy and support in Central Asia. “The ruling political elites, the clergy and the majority of the population are not interested in (...) a caliphate.”⁴⁶ Even though this conclusion is already ten years old and religion has continued to gain importance in recent years, the overall picture has not changed significantly. The problem is rather that a growing minority of people may nevertheless be receptive to terrorist activities, although these individuals are more likely to be found among migrant workers in Russia than in the Central Asian states themselves.

⁴⁴ Seifert, “Preventing the ‘Islamic State’”.

⁴⁵ Ahmedov, “Gesucht: Junge Männer für Terror.”

⁴⁶ Seifert, “Preventing the ‘Islamic State’”; Seifert (2016) refers to a study published by the Pew Research Center, according to which only 12 percent of Muslims in Central Asia support the introduction of the sharia system as official law, and contradiction between Islam and the modern world. 70 percent support granting women the right to file for divorce, and 73 percent support the right of women to choose to wear the veil. Suicide attacks are seen as irresponsible by 82 percent in Kyrgyzstan, by 85 percent in Tajikistan and by 95 percent in Kazakhstan. 92 percent support complete religious freedom. Moreover, IS is faced with a good level of education in Central Asia, with an illiteracy rate of only 2 percent among the population of an age of over 15 years.

At the same time, the fact that religion has gained in importance in recent years has prompted some Central Asian governments to further tighten their repressive and surveillance measures. In Uzbekistan, “Islamic teachings and ideology have acquired a stable public profile.” However, until today, the state is secular and “religious dogma has no noteworthy influence on the legal order or political institutions. All religious institutions and congregations in the country are strictly controlled by the state, which forbids religious dogma from influencing state institutions or society.”⁴⁷ Likewise, Kazakhstan “remains fundamentally a secular state, and the influence of religion on state politics is heavily constrained”. In practice, the government has shown “cautious efforts to regulate religion”. However, this “should not obscure its readiness to respond vigorously to potentially destructive religious movements (...). Authorities remain prepared to defend the secular nature of the Kazakhstani polity against possible encroachments by religious dogmas.”⁴⁸ The Kyrgyz Republic “remains a secular state by constitutional definition and in practice”, even though the ruling elite treats Islam with respect in public discourse. In fact, the government has introduced “a series of new restrictions and regulations on religious practice and institutions (e.g., mandatory registration, prohibition of unregistered activities, regulation of religious attire, and oversight of religious materials and education), further reinforcing Kyrgyzstan’s secular nature.”⁴⁹

Turkmenistan is again a typical example of a post-Soviet state with Muslim culture. “For most of the population, Islam is part of national culture and history and serves to uphold moral values, customs and traditions. A large segment of the urban population is only formally religious.” At the same time, “the president instrumentalizes Islam as a pillar of his authoritarian rule. Imams are appointed, monitored and routinely consulted by the state to gauge public sentiment on political and social issues.” Moreover, all religious activities “are subject to state censorship and oversight through the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA).” In doing so, the government is interfering significantly in people’s private lives. “Believers who practice faith beyond what is accepted by the state face severe penalties.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Uzbekistan*, 7.

⁴⁸ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kazakhstan*, 7/8.

⁴⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Kyrgyzstan*, 8.

⁵⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Turkmenistan*, 8.

Tajikistan is a secular state, and “the law forbids any religious involvement in political matters. However, in the past decade, the state has “imposed strict control over religious affairs and integrated Islam into its authoritarian identity politics. The government actively interferes in the internal affairs of religious communities and evaluates religious dogmas.” One example of the tougher stance toward religious movements is the outlawing of the moderately Islamist opposition party IRPT in 2015. As a legacy of the post-civil war peace process, the regime initially allowed the party to operate legally. In the meantime, the party has been declared a terrorist movement.⁵¹

Cautious cooperation with the Taliban for security and economic reasons

For a long time, Central Asian states opposed the Taliban. When the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) entered Afghanistan after 9/11, Central Asian states supported the US by providing military support, road access, and airspace. Later, however, some countries moved to a more neutral approach and during the Doha process, delegations from Central Asian countries had meetings with the negotiating team of the Taliban. When the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, the Central Asian states had “to reassess their approach, balancing security risks with economic and geopolitical interests”.⁵² From the beginning, the Taliban showed interest in cooperation, amid “a financial crisis due to sanctions, frozen assets, reduced foreign aid, a water crisis, and a lack of international recognition, pursued an economic-oriented foreign policy.”⁵³

The Central Asian states’ foreign policy toward Afghanistan has to a high degree been characterized by continuity. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had already established unofficial ties with the Taliban years before the fall of Kabul. Only Tajikistan initially kept hostile rhetoric toward the Taliban following the fall of Kabul. In the meantime, however, hostile rhetoric is slowly giving way to a pragmatic approach opening room for cooperation and dialogue.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2026 Country Report: Tajikistan*, 9.

⁵² Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, “The Taliban’s Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia”.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mielke, “Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?” 2.

The cooperation is largely driven by security and economic interests. Both dimensions are closely interlinked, as Central Asian leaders have recognized that socioeconomic grievances and a lack of perspectives are a breeding ground for ISKP ideology. Research has revealed that IS ideology is particularly attractive for the post-Soviet generations born after 1991. “These generations grew up in a period characterized by the lack of a convincing state ideology, declining levels of education, the breakdown of social ties and families as well as a lack of employment, money and possibilities for social advancement”, a constellation that “largely determines the sociopolitical developments throughout Central Asia” until today.⁵⁵ The aim of the cooperation with the Taliban is therefore to improve living conditions for the population and create socioeconomic opportunities, thereby depriving terrorist groups of their recruitment base leading to more regional security.⁵⁶

Of all the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been the most open to cooperation with Afghanistan. As a result of the economic liberalization and reform policies that have been implemented since President Mirziyoyev took office in 2016, the country has engaged in cooperation in the areas of security, the economy, humanitarian exchanges, culture, and education. In September 2021, Uzbek authorities hosted a Taliban delegation for the first time.⁵⁷ A major goal of Uzbekistan is infrastructure development driven by the vision to connect Uzbekistan to Iranian and Pakistani seaports on the Indian Ocean via Afghan territory. The need for alternative transportation routes has grown due to the Russian war against Ukraine and trade blockades resulting thereof. The most important project involves the planned construction of a 600-kilometer-long trans-Afghan railway line from Termez via Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul to Peshawar. Another key element of Uzbekistan’s relations with Afghanistan is electricity exports.⁵⁸

Relations between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are not without tensions, due to the Afghan side’s use of water. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan has adopted a cooperative approach aimed at resolving conflicts by involving the Taliban in its own economic and infrastructure projects. This aligns with the

⁵⁵ Seifert, Preventing the “Islamic State”.

⁵⁶ Mielke, “Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?” 6.

⁵⁷ Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, “The Taliban’s Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia”.

⁵⁸ Mielke, “Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?” 2/3.

efforts of President Serdar Berdimukhamedov, who has been in office since 2022, to overcome Turkmenistan's three-decade-long self-imposed isolation. Turkmenistan is highly dependent on natural gas exports. The country is therefore aiming to expand cross-border energy infrastructure to diversify its natural gas sales markets and reduce its high dependence on China, which is by far its most important customer. The most important project in this context is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, which has been in the planning stages since 1995 and is now finally set to be realized.⁵⁹ In 2024, top Taliban officials met Turkmen leaders to resume work on TAPI, sign MoUs worth \$200 million, and explore oil and gas transit routes linking Russia to South Asia via Afghanistan.⁶⁰ In addition, the export of electricity and textiles to Afghanistan is of great importance. Furthermore, the construction of two logistics centres is planned at the border crossings, partly in cooperation with Kazakhstan.⁶¹

Kazakhstan exports significant volumes of wheat, flour, and edible oil to Afghanistan. Both sides have strengthened diplomatic ties and three business forums in Astana, Almaty, and Kabul have taken place since 2023, facilitating agreements worth \$1.5 billion. The two countries have been exploring investments in the chemical, mining, and metallurgical industries.⁶² The economic relations between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan have been focusing on trade and transit discussions. Kyrgyzstan serves as a transit route for Afghan goods to China and plays a key role in the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project.⁶³

Tajikistan, too, is increasingly pursuing economic and infrastructure interests in Afghanistan, such as the CASA-1000 project and the expansion of its electricity market. Open hostility has given way to nuanced pragmatism since 2023.⁶⁴ As Mielke (2024) concludes, "Dushanbe seems to be increasingly

⁵⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁶⁰ Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

⁶¹ Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 3.

⁶² Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

⁶³ Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi, "The Taliban's Diplomatic and Economic Expansion in Central Asia".

⁶⁴ Mielke, "Kontinuität statt Neuausrichtung?" 5.

aware that the spread of militant Islamism cannot be halted solely by strengthening borders or isolating the Taliban.” The fact that ISKP attracts young Tajiks stems from their disillusionment with their own government. “This connection makes it clear that the causes of instability in Central Asia do not lie in Afghanistan, but in the interplay of a lack of economic prospects, social inequality, corrupt government practices, and neo-patrimonial authoritarianism.”⁶⁵

Another reason why Tajikistan is the economically weakest country in Central Asia lies in its relative geographical isolation. The repatriation of Tajik migrant workers from Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack and the drop in remittances resulting thereof have further exacerbated the precarious socioeconomic situation and the lack of prospects.⁶⁶ According to the World Bank, remittances accounted for nearly 50% of Tajikistan’s GDP in 2022, 85% of which was generated by migrant workers in Russia. In 2023, remittances fell significantly to 38.4% of GDP.⁶⁷

Conclusions

Even though ISKP’s claim to power directly refers to the Central Asian states and the terrorist organization has declared its goal to overthrow Central Asian governments and establish a pan-regional caliphate, ISKP’s prospects for success in this regard are extremely limited. This is due to the high resilience of the Central Asian states, which is significantly higher than that of the states in North Africa, the Middle East, and of Afghanistan. Resilience against Islamist terrorism has been further strengthened in recent years through various strategies. To this end, the states rely, *inter alia*, on the targeted strengthening of the state’s monopoly on the use of force and the securing of external borders, on coordinated intelligence activities, and on the suppression of religious movements.

This high level of resilience is largely determined by the post-Soviet context of these countries. Their resilience strategies are deeply rooted in their Soviet past, which continues to shape their political systems, their instruments of

⁶⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

power, and the societies as such, to this day. This is evident once again in the international cooperation frameworks that Central Asian countries rely on. While there is also targeted counterterrorism cooperation with the US and China, Russia – particularly intelligence operations coordinated with Moscow – and the CSTO play a dominant role.

Nevertheless, there are also significant security risks related to targeted terrorist attacks, with the Russian Federation being more vulnerable in this regard than the Central Asian states themselves. The massive state security and repressive apparatus also counter these risks. However, it is precisely this high level of repression, combined with corruption and social, economic, and environmental crises, that erodes the legitimacy of the Central Asian regimes to a certain extent. Against this backdrop, the importance of religion is growing in Central Asian societies, and it is reasonable to assume that a growing minority of Central Asians are available to be recruited for terrorist attacks. All five Central Asian states have recognized that socioeconomic development prospects and security are closely intertwined. In this regard, they have focused on regional infrastructure and economic initiatives, including in collaboration with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Whether this will be sufficient is questionable, as the underlying problems of authoritarian rule, clientelism, and corruption remain.