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Testimony :: Jennifer Leonard

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"Wanted: Foreign Fighters -The Escalating Threat of ISIL in Central Asia" Wednesday, June 10, 2:00PM Rayburn House Office Building Room 2175 International Crisis Group Jennifer Leonard, Deputy Director Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Helsinki Commission today. My organization, the International Crisis Group, values the Commission's sustained focus on Central Asia. As an international conflict prevention organization, our approach is grounded in field-based research. We have teams of political analysts located within or near countries vulnerable to violent conflict and based on our research and analysis, we develop policy recommendations to prevent and resolve it. We have covered Central Asia for over 15 years. From our current base in Bishkek, we conduct frequent visits throughout the region exploring the challenges and opportunities facing it, with particular focus on the interplay of democratic repression, threat of radicalization, and the decay of the economy and infrastructure.

In January 2015 we published, *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, which addresses the very topic of today's discussion.

INTRODUCTION: The Islamic State (IS) is attracting a coalition of Central Asian jihadis and sympathisers and fostering a network of links within the region. Prompted in part by political marginalisation and bleak economic prospects, in the past three years IS has beckoned roughly 2K-4K Central Asian citizens. While the phenomenon has a disproportionate impact on security perceptions at home, the region supplies only a small fraction of IS fighters in Syria, however, if enough return, they could present a risk to regional security and stability.

This presents a complex problem to the five CA governments, each of whom suffers from its own brand of poor governance, poverty, and corruption and has struggled to accommodate the growth of religion and religious organisations. The belief that Syrian-trained jihadis plan to establish a caliphate in the region has shaped the security debate and response in each - including increased surveillance, harassment and detentions -- and provides additional justification for ever-stricter laws on religious practice and expression that may be counterproductive.

Meanwhile, the call of IS - which says it wants not just fighters but also facilitators, e.g. teachers, nurses, engineers - can appear to offer an attractive alternative for those alienated, marginalized, or discriminated against, who are inspired by the belief that an Islamic state is a meaningful alternative to post-Soviet life.

PROFILE. There is no single profile of an IS supporter from Central Asia: rich/poor, young/old, men/women, educated or not. There are seventeen-year-old hairdressers, established businessmen, 1 Official Central Asian governments' estimates of several hundred are conservative. Western officials suggest the number is 2,000, and it may be as many as 4,000. Western officials estimate that about 400 fighters from each of the five Central Asian countries have travelled to join the Islamic State. A Russian official put the total regional figure at 4,000. Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, October 2014; Astana, November 2014.

women abandoned by husbands who have taken second wives in Russia, families who believe their children will have better prospects in a caliphate, young men, school dropouts and university students. The largest single group is reportedly Uzbek, both citizens of Uzbekistan and ethnic Uzbeks from the Fergana Valley, including Osh, Kyrgyzstan's southern city, where

risks have amplified since the violence in 2010 that killed over 400 ethnic Uzbeks.¹ While Tashkent estimates 500 of its citizens are in Syria, they could exceed 2,500.³ With the exodus that began in the Valley in 2011, perhaps 1,000 men and women [including 500 ethnic Kyrgyz and others from Osh] have left to fight for or provide humanitarian assistance to IS.⁴ In northern Kyrgyzstan there could be another 300 unreported cases.

In Kazakhstan, IS supporters tend to come from the west and south of the country, but not exclusively. Some 150 people made headlines when a video showing them in Syria appeared on YouTube in October 2013.

In Tajikistan, recruitment is nationwide but appears strongest in two particular provinces. At least twenty people left from just one village in September 2014⁸ and recent revelations that a senior Tajik security official, who disappeared only to resurface in an IS propaganda video calling for violent jihad, has rattled the region. [It is worth noting that estimates vary among local, national, Russian and Western security sources, underlining significant information gaps which in turn complicate efforts to create prevention and rehabilitation policies.]

RECRUITMENT: Recruitment of these individuals is happening at local levels, by word-of-mouth.

Some are recruited at home - in mosques and prayer rooms. Others are radicalised abroad, often as 2 Many ethnic Uzbeks have retreated from engaging with the Kyrgyz authorities for fear of harassment and extortion. Many men have migrated to Russia to find work and escape discrimination. Unlike ethnic Kyrgyz elsewhere in the country, Uzbek families are unlikely to report or seek help regarding the radicalisation of relatives since it invites at best state surveillance, at worst detentions, beatings or demands for cash. Inter-ethnic tensions in southern Kyrgyzstan have gone unresolved, and the political and economic marginalisation of the Uzbek community contributes to the appeal of radical groups, particularly Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the jihadi cause in general.

³ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, September 2014, who also said there were 2,500 Russian citizens fighting in Syria.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, July 2014; senior police officer, southern Kyrgyzstan, August 2014; Uzbek opposition activist, Turkey, September 2014.

⁵ 20 former residents from just one medium-sized town are reported to have travelled to Turkey in 2013 with the intention of going on to Syria; Crisis Group interview, Kyrgyz security official, Chui province, Kyrgyzstan, May 2014.

⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Kazakh security expert, Astana, October 2014.

⁷ "Astana probes video allegedly showing Kazakh 'jihad' family in Syria", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 21 October 2013.

⁸ Masum Mukhammadradjab, "Yopki Hill JOK: ponna 20 yqachthkOB CnpnicKofi soJmhi" ["Chorqishloq: Birthplace of 20 participants in the Syrian war"], Radio Ozodi, 25 September 2014.

⁹ Col. Khalimov was an intimate of the elite - the head of Tajikistan's Special Assignment Police Unit (OMON), a key element in the security apparatus, he has trained in Russia and the US. His defection is a blow to Rahman's regime on many levels, as he speaks to the parts of the elite not yet bought off and to the alienation of a substantial segment of society.

migrant workers [where dislocation can lead them into the arms of jihadi recruiters].¹⁰ The internet and social media play a critical but not definitive role.

While groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat play a peripheral role in so far as both men and women may be radicalised as they graduate toward their teachings, these groups do not appear to be directly involved with recruiting to Syria, though they are sometimes unwittingly staging posts in the journey [to extremist violence]."

More worrying for the regional security climate is the way Syria appears to have primed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its offshoots with a renewed sense of purpose. While the IMU and Afghan Taliban have long-established links, for a while the IMU and IS kept a polite but admiring distance from one another. However, in March 2015

the IMU released an IS style-beheading video [shot in northern Afghanistan] to declare their allegiance to the organisation.

MOTIVATIONS: Socio-economic factors play a role but economic reward is not a motivation. Rather it is the idea of holy struggle to advance Islam. Frustrated and excluded, people who would not have considered fighting with the longer-established IMU or Taliban perceive IS as the creator of a novel political order, a more universal purpose: the creation of a caliphate. An imam from southern Kyrgyzstan compared it to Afghanistan, told us that "Syria is about principles, not colonialism". And not all who go to Syria want to engage in violence, but accept that others will do it for them in pursuit of the ordained cause.

For women, the traditional and state-approved Muslim community's relative disinterest in their role allows underground groups to fill a need. Radical Islam also gives some a framework to distance themselves from marital and family circumstances. For other women, it is the call of a devout life, or an Islamic environment for their children. Still others follow fighters or family members who have established contacts in Turkey or IS-controlled territory.

RISK OF RETURN: While the numbers of Central Asians receiving combat training and progressing through IS command structures is increasing, so far, returning jihadis are a danger to be prepared for rather than an immediate threat. For the time being, Central Asia is fortunate that Syria is relatively distant, no major attacks have yet occurred", and the risks posed by returning jihadis are still in relative infancy. In fact, many will not return because they will die in Syria.

In the meantime and though keenly aware of the dangers returning fighters could pose, beyond instituting measures criminalizing fighting abroad³, Central Asian governments have done little to help. Its Federal Migration Service estimates there are some 3.95 million Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek citizens working in Russia. See ["There are more than 550 thousand Kyrgyz citizens in Russia"], Radio Azattyk, 20 November 2014. Tablighi Jamaat, a non-violent organisation founded in 1926 in India, is banned in every Central Asian state but Kyrgyzstan. Hizb ut-Tahrir, a non-violent organisation that seeks to establish a caliphate, is banned in all five Central Asian states. ¹² Alleged plots included bomb attacks in Bishkek and Dushanbe and on strategic road tunnels through the Tajik mountains. ¹³ Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have introduced laws criminalizing fighting abroad, the former coming into effect in July 2014, the latter on 1 January 2015. Uzbekistan banned terrorism training without reference to location in January 2014, but the law was widely interpreted as directed against foreign-trained fighters. The law states that persons with no previous convictions who turn themselves in will not be held criminally liable (no such provision in the legislation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,) but doubt surrounds Uzbekistan's actual willingness to rehabilitate returning fighters. Kyrgyz parliament approved criminal code amendments address the reasons why such a diverse cross-section of their citizens seek to participate in IS, nor have they contemplated how the dynamic might relate to broader societal demands. Prevention of extremism and rehabilitation of jihadis are not high on the agenda and female radicalisation, in particular, is largely ignored [by religious leaders].

CONCLUSION: These dynamics risk gathering pace and purpose, blindsiding governments ill-prepared to respond to such a complex security threat and tempted to exploit it to crack down on dissent. These governments must assess accurately the long-term danger jihadism poses to the region and take effective preventive action now. This does not mean: labeling unfamiliar interpretations of Islam as extremist, adopting increasingly severe laws to limit freedom of conscience and association, or promoting intrusive security practices, etc.

Rather, effective prevention means responding to an unmet demand for increased democratic space, reversing discriminatory laws and policies, implementing outreach programs, creating jobs at home for disadvantaged youth, ensuring better coordination between security agencies, and tackling police reform, starting with the most basic matter of how they are perceived by the communities they serve. For its part, the U.S. and other regional partners should recognise that Central Asia is a growing source of foreign fighters and consider prioritising police reform and a more tolerant attitude to religion, in its bilateral engagements and programming. Indeed, there are lessons to be gleaned [from places like Denmark and Indonesia⁴], but the capacity of Central Asian governments to absorb and implement these lessons are undermined by weak state structures and lack of political will.

amendments suggesting sentences of eight to fifteen years for taking part in conflicts, military operations or terrorist- or extremist-training in a foreign state in September 2014, but these have yet to be signed into law. ¹⁴ In Denmark, effective rehabilitation programs are based on trust built up between the authorities and the families of fighters. In Indonesia, police forces develop responses to radicalisation in terms of improved intelligence-gathering techniques and building community relations, as well as rehabilitation.