Russia's Counterproductive Counter-Terrorism

An Overview and Assessment of Trends in Russia's Counterterrorism Policy and Moscow's Efforts to Promote It Internationally

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Testimony of Dr. Mariya Y. Omelicheva[1]
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In the decade that followed the 9/11 attacks on the United States, Russia became one of the top ten countries most afflicted by terrorism. The Russian government diverted considerable public resources to counterterrorism efforts and invested lavishly in counterterrorism cooperation with the neighboring states. Despite the Kremlin's frequent tributes to Russia's security and military forces for keeping Russian citizens safe from terrorism, the Russian counterterrorism measures have been clouded by a mixed record of dubious accomplishments and glaring contradictions.

Two trends, in particular, have been characteristic of Russia's counterterrorism policy. First, the Russian government has always favored military-style operations as a tactic of counterterrorism. These extreme measures, however, have done little to address the underlying factors of violent radicalization. On the contrary, the indiscriminate use of force and flagrant disregard for individual freedoms have contributed to individuals' radicalization and bolstered the terrorist propaganda appealing to the Russian government's crimes as a justification for new violent attacks.

Second, the Russian government has instrumentalized counterterrorism for achieving various auxiliary benefits for the ruling administration. Domestically, the Russian President Vladimir Putin has built its legitimacy and mandate of power on claims of stability and security for the Russian population. In Central Asia, Moscow has used the banner of counterterrorism policy for reasserting its regional domination. Internationally, high-profile counterterrorism efforts have helped Russia to establish itself as a more prominent global player capable of frustrating the US efforts. The superficial and cosmetic gains made by Russia in geopolitics and counterterrorism have come at the expense of practical and sustainable outcomes in domestic, regional, and global affairs.[2]

In the remainder of this testimony, I provide a brief historical overview of Russia's policies against terrorism highlighting the primacy of the heavy-handed responses and politicization of

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[1] The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the National Defense University or the U.S. Department of Defense.

[2] Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Russia's Regional and Global Counterterrorism Strategies: How Moscow's Vision of the New Global Order Affects its Approach to Terrorism", in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* Studies, edited by Roger Kanet (Routledge, 2019), pp. 266-276.

counterterrorism as the two factors that have limited the effectiveness of the Russian counterterrorism responses. I assess Moscow's efforts to promote its counterterrorism approach through regional institutions under the Russian leadership and more broadly through the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). I end with the assessment of implications and consequences of Russia's counterterrorism policy for U.S. counterterrorism efforts. The primary conclusions that follow from this report are that Russia's counterterrorism policy raises many concerns about its viability as a partner in counterterrorism. Russia's political goals and associated measures unrelated to the fight against terrorism have complicated the overall efforts to fight terrorism worldwide.

Russia's Policies Against Terrorism and Extremism: Historical Evolution and Assessment of Effectiveness

Russia's counterterrorism policies have been shaped by the Kremlin's experiences with fighting the Chechen nationalist resistance and countering Islamist insurgencies in other republics of the North Caucasus, particularly, Ingushetia and Dagestan. Faced with the threat of ethno-national disintegration, the first Russian government led by President Boris Yeltsin waged a brutal and disastrous war in Chechnya (1994-96), which primary purpose was to preserve the integrity of the Russian state. Russia's poorly trained and demoralized troops waged this war using overwhelming manpower, weaponry, and air offensives in their indiscriminate attacks on the Chechen villages and towns, in addition to committing a long list of breaches of the humanitarian law.

The troops of Russia's Defense and Interior Ministries continued to be at the forefront of the second Chechen war (1999-2009), rebranded as a counterterrorism campaign. Russia's military was assisted by the secret service task teams assembled for liquidating terrorists and insurgents. The use of the military in counterterrorism, although quite common in Russia's practice, was only legalized in 2006 with the passage of a law "On Counteraction to Terrorism," which further expanded the participation of combat forces in counterterrorism missions in Russia and abroad. The new law also allowed for the establishment of a special regime of counterterrorism operation, which grants enormous surveillance powers to the regime and effectively strips individuals of many rights and judicial protections. The military strategies quickly expanded outside the Chechen republic, the initial site of a counterterrorism operation, and the presence of Russia's combat troops in the North Caucasus substantially increased.[3]

In 2007, the Chechen rebel leader, Doku Umarov (known as Russia's "Osama bin Laden"), announced the creation of the Caucasus Emirate that united multiple regional militant organizations and signified the expansion of Islamic resistance to the broader North Caucasus. Despite the spread of Islamist insurgency, the Russian government announced the end of the counterterrorism operation in 2009. Yet, the following year marked the highest number of terrorist attacks in Russia's modern history. The heightened terrorist activity in the North

[3] Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Russia's Counterterrorism Policy: Variations on an Imperial Theme", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*, edited by Scott Romaniuk, et. al. (Palgrave, 2017), pp. 515-534.

Caucasus amplified international concerns expressed at the 119th Session of the International Olympics Committee that selected Russia's Sochi as the site for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. Major international sporting events have always served as convenient "soft" targets for terrorists, and the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate made their intentions clear calling on the followers to "use maximum force" to disrupt the Olympics.[4] With Russia's international reputation and Vladimir Putin's personal standing at stake, the Kremlin redoubled its "preventive" hardline measures to ensure the safety of the Winter Olympics. While the all-out military operations were reduced, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) engaged in an extensive terrorist leadership decapitation campaign that liquidated many Caucasus Emirate's commanders. The special forces and security agents engaged in the mop-up operations, including the door-to-door searches of neighborhoods and towns in the North Caucasus to identify and neutralize suspected insurgents and terrorists.[5] These mop-up operations involved arrests of hundreds of non-violent religious activists and relatives of alleged jihadists.

With the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq, which launched a new offensive in Iraq in 2012-2013, Russia's secret service became implicated in an unprecedented campaign of assisting the Russian militants from the North Caucasus in leaving Russia for Iraq and, later, Syria. While experts' estimates vary, a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded that over 10,000 radicalized individuals left the North Caucasus before the 2014 Olympics and at least 6,000 of them made their way to Iraq and Syria.[6] While the FSB strategy seemed to achieve its desired end – no terrorist attack took place at the Sochi Olympics – the counterterrorism tactics that Russia employed in advance of the Olympic games changed the dynamics of militancy and terrorism in Russia and the landscape of the global jihadist movement. The prospects of the battle-hardened militants returning to Russia to pursue their jihadist cause by violent means have become a major concern for the Russian regime. Although the Caucasus Emirate was fragmented and fractured, not least due to the defection of a number of its senior leaders to ISIS, multiple jihadist cells autonomous from the Caucasus Emirate popped up in different parts of Russia.

To be sure, the Russian government understands that the use of force alone cannot defeat terrorism. Subsequently, Moscow's authorities have supplemented repressive tactics with limited concessions to local authorities and socio-economic measures. In Chechnya, for example, the Kremlin developed a strategy, which included the fracturing of local elites and co-opting those who were willing to work with the central government. On one hand, this strategy

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[4] Thomas Grove, "Islamist Rebel Vows 'Maximum Force' To Stop Sochi Olympics," Reuters, July 3, 2013. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-olympics-militants/islamist-rebel-vows-maximum-force-to-stop-sochi-olympics-idUSBRE96207T20130703 (accessed 6 June 2018).

[5] International Crisis Group, "The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?" ICG Europe report N. 238, 16 March 2016. Available at https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/238-the-north-caucasus-insurgency-and-syria-an-exported-jihad.pdf (accessed 6 June 2018).

[6] Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia," CSIS Transnational Threats Situation Report Series, December 2017. Available at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-speaking-foreign-fighters-iraq-and-syria (accessed 6 June 2018).

deprived the population of leadership basis for mobilizing for future insurgency and created alternative seats of authority speaking on behalf of Islam. On the other hand, the strategy entrenched the power of the Kadyrov clan and changed the conflict into an internal strife between the rival Chechen factions.[7] Importantly, the strategy created dependency of the Kremlin on local rulers who promise stability in their republics and subordination to the federal center in exchange for immunity for power abuses. Billions of dollars invested into various socio-economic development schemes and infrastructure projects in the North Caucasus were lost to local corruption. Subsequently, Russia's socio-economic initiatives were compromised from the start by pervasive inefficiencies in the implementation of the government programs and graft.[8]

The Global and Regional Dimensions of Russia's Counterterrorism Policy

The global and regional dimensions of Russia's counterterrorism policy developed concurrently with its domestic counterterrorism efforts and were part of the Russian government's military and security policy. Upon ascending to power in 2000, Putin insisted on the operational ties of the Chechen fighters with Al Qaeda and presented Russia's counterterrorism operation in Chechnya as part of the international war against terrorism. He repeatedly raised alarm over the linkages between the militant and criminal groups in Afghanistan and Eurasia and those in Europe and other parts of the world.

Central Asia became the primary theatre of Russia's regional counterterrorism efforts. Since 1999, the Russian authorities have poured out warnings about the imminent threat of Islamist insurgency powered by the Afghan opioids in these Muslim-majority countries. To address these threats, the Russian leadership spearheaded the adoption of a series of regional policies and joint measures for combating international terrorism in the region. These included the creation of the Anti-Terrorist Centre (ATC) of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 2000 with a structural subdivision in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations (SCO) established in 2004 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In 2001, Russia launched the Central Asian Regional Collective Rapid Deployment Force staged at the Kant military base in Kyrgyzstan and the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan. In 2009, Moscow stood up a more powerful and mobile Collective Rapid Reaction Force, a joint combined arms task force consisting of independent military units from the member-states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The main purpose of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force was to fight terrorism and drug trafficking, and counter a limited military aggression against the CSTO members.[9]

The establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in the occupied parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014 elevated the threat of transnational terrorism for the Kremlin. Using the pretext of

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[7] Younkyoo Kim and Stephen Blank, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Russia: Contending Paradigms and Current Perspectives," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36.11(2013): 917-932.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia* (Routledge, 2011).

combating the terrorist threat in Syria, Russia launched a military intervention in the Syrian civil war in September 2015, the first military operation in Moscow's post-Soviet history carried out outside of Eurasia. President Putin used various international forums to emphasize the counterterrorism purpose of Russia's air strikes in Syria and expressed interest in forging an international coalition for defeating terrorist threats in the Middle East.[10]

Russia's regional and global counterterrorism efforts have also predominantly relied on the military *modus operandi*. Whether in Central Asia, Syria, or other parts of the world, Russia's actions have been limited to military force and threats of force.[11] Joint counterterrorism operations and security drills held under the auspices of the CSTO and SCO have become a regular feature of Russia-Central Asia counterterrorism cooperation.[12] In Syria, the singular focus of the military campaign has been the physical liquidation of the insurgents and purported terrorists.

This singular military-centred focus of Russia's counterterrorism has had limited effects in its domestic and international counterterrorism operations. Domestically, the brutality of the Russian military response to the Chechen insurrection was precisely the reason for the emergence of the jihadi elements. The use of force and simplistic military-bureaucratic solutions employed in the second Chechen war contributed to the transformation of the localized struggles into a region-wide religious war and a theater of operations in the global Islamist jihad. In Central Asia, Russia's counterterrorism initiatives designed to prevent the spill-over of Islamist insurgency from Afghanistan to Central Asia has diverted attention from the chief causes of anti-state violence in the region. Russia's airstrikes in Syria and the backing of the repressive regime of Bashar Al-Assad have also contributed to radicalization of the Syrian population.

Russia's Efforts to Promote Its Counterterrorism Approach Internationally

Russia's heavily securitized counterterrorism measures and agenda have profoundly affected counterterrorism strategies of the neighboring republics and had a bearing on counterterrorism policies of a number of regional and global institutions that the Kremlin has used for pursuing its political aims. Russia-led regional organizations – CIS, CSTO, and SCO – now share a gloomier worldview stressing the growing threat of terrorism and Islamist insurgency. They embrace a punitive approach to fighting terrorism as can be evidenced in the lack of emphasis placed on the countering violent extremism measures and prioritization of joint security drills and counterterrorism exercises held under the auspices of the CSTO and SCO. Aa a consequence of this security cooperation, the counterterrorism policies as well as the structure and authority of counterterrorism institutions established by the member-states of CSTO bear a clear sign of

[10] Pavel Baev, "From Chechnya to Syria: The Evolution of Russia's Counter-Terrorist Policy", Notes de L'Ifri: Russie.Nei.Visions, 107, 2018, pp. 1–32.
[11] For instance, in Georgia, Russia threatened a military intervention in pursuit of the Chechen rebels in 2002. More recently in Ukraine, Moscow deployed its special operations forces in Crimea purportedly to prevent the recruitment of Crimeans for terrorist networks and possible attacks on the Russian population.
[12] Omelicheva, 2011.

Russia's influence. Security forces of these states, for example, play a major role in combating terrorism. The punitive aspects of the fight against terrorism constitute the core of their counterterrorism programs. The member-states of CSTO and SCO share the databases of terrorist and extremist organizations and the leaders and rank-and-file members of terrorist groups. The stated reason for creating these rosters of terrorist and extremist suspects is to facilitate information exchange between security agencies of the member-states. There is, however, a risk that the participating governments add the names of their political opponents to these "watch lists" and use these terrorist rosters for prosecuting individuals perceived as threats by the governing regimes.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Russian government expressed interest in forging a counterterrorism partnership with the West. Yet, in the decade that followed, considerable differences in the Russian and Western counterterrorism practices, disagreements over the issues of good governance and mutual distrust stood in the way of practical counterterrorism cooperation between Russia and the West. Subsequently, Russia began seeking greater influence within the counterterrorism entities of the United Nations in an effort to shape global counterterrorism agenda. These efforts culminated in the institution of a UN Counterterrorism Office in June 2018 and the appointment of Vladimir Voronkov of the Russian Federation as the first Under-Secretary-General for this new agency. As a Head of the UN Counterterrorism Office, Mr. Voronkov received a broad mandate to provide strategic leadership for the complex counterterrorism architecture within the UN with the aim of strengthening coordination and improving efficiency of the UN counterterrorism system.[13]

While the UN Counterterrorism Office and the Under-Secretary General are supposed to be politically neutral, the critics of the new agency and its head have warned about possible Russia's influence on the institution. Russia's efforts may compel the UN to take a tougher line on fighting terrorism while undercutting human rights protections. Russia is among the largest donors of the UN Counterterrorism Office. The Kremlin contributed $2 million in 2018 and promised to allocate $500,000 to the new agency each year thereafter.[14] This is a non-trivial level of support for an organization that depends on the member-states' donations. Meanwhile, the US withdrew its $2 million pledge for the new agency in response to Mr. Voronkov's decision to close parts of the inaugural conference for the UN Counterterrorism Office to non-governmental groups.[15] This early decision by the Under-Secretary General demonstrates important differences in the Russian and US views on the counterterrorism

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[13] United Nations Secretary-General, "Secretary-General Appoints Vladimir Ivanovich Voronkov of Russian Federation Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office," SG/A/1741-BIO/4976, 21 June 2017. Available at: https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sga1741.doc.htm.

[14] Statement by Mr. Alexander Lukashevich, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, at the 1196th Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, 4 October 2018. Available at: https://www.osce.org/permanent-council/399548?download=true

[15] Michelle Nichols, "U.S. Pulls Funding for U.N. Counterterrorism Office Headed by Russian," Reuters 27 June 2018, Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-extremists-usa/u-s-pulls-funding-for-u-n-counterterrorism-office-headed-by-russian-idUSKBN1JN0EB

intelligence sharing and, probably, reflect Russia's deep-seated distrust of the Western civil society groups perceived as the harbingers of the Western democratic agendas.

Russia's impact on the international counterterrorism efforts can be felt in two additional areas encompassing preventive measures to counter terrorism and extremism and the regulation of the virtual space to suppress the spread of terrorist ideology. Countering the root causes of terrorism and enacting preventive measures are among the key priorities of the new UN Counterterrorism Office. So far, most of the new agency's efforts have concentrated on developing the member states' capacity for detection and suppression of terrorist acts and curbing the flow of foreign fighters rather than developing and implementing measures for countering violent extremism (CVE). Notably, Russia supported the UN Global Counterterrorism agenda (2018) but blocked a UN plan of actions for preventing violent extremism adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2016 and backed by the US and European countries. According to the Russian government, the CVE efforts erode the traditional tasks of counterterrorism and open a possibility for Western countries to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Russia's limited CVE work at home has focused on enforcement mechanisms and programs implemented by the governmental agencies. The Russian government has refused to engage with independent non-governmental groups in the CVE initiatives and avoided the CVE measures in its efforts to promote regional and international counterterrorism cooperation. Whether or not the new UN Counterterrorism Office will foreground the CVE and preventive measures in the UN counterterrorism and counter-extremism programs is yet to be seen. In October 2018, the U.S. Mission to the OSCE lamented the lack of emphasis on the CVE in the UN Counterterrorism Office, particularly, its neglect to emphasize the implementation of the UN plan for preventing violent extremism in its work.[16]

The circumvention of human rights and media freedom in the name of combating terrorism has been another sticky point in Russia's relations with the Western regional organizations, including the EU and OSCE. According to the OSCE, the promotion of human rights and the rule of law should constitute a pillar of the global counterterrorism strategy. Individual rights should also be protected online. That is why the OSCE has advocated that the UN refrain from supporting Internet censorship as part of counterterrorism efforts. While Russia's official rhetoric emphasizes the rule of law as a principle of global and national counterterrorism efforts, Moscow's view of the norms of international law is limited to the resolutions of the Security Council and principles of respect for the sovereignty and equality of states and non-interference in their internal affairs. In the UN, Russia has advocated for counterterrorism initiatives to contain the spread of the terrorist ideology through the regulation of the virtual space, while the OSCE supported by the US and other Wester partners has advocated for Internet freedom and the use of online counter-messaging.

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[16] Response to the Address by the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Counter Terrorism Office, Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, as delivered by Charge d'Affaires Gregory Macris to the Permanent Council, Vienna, 4 October 2018, Available at: https://osce.usmission.gov/response-to-vladimir-voronkov-un-counter-terrorism-office-under-secretary-general/.

Implications and Consequences of Russia's Practices for the United States Interests

The United States and Russia share an interest in preventing the growth of terrorist groups and disrupting their operations. However, the Kremlin's regional and global counterterrorism policies have jeopardized one of these remaining avenues for meaningful cooperation between Russia and the West. Russia has avowed to defeat global forces of terrorism. Yet, in Syria Moscow collaborated with Iran-sponsored Shia militias and Hezbollah, while in Afghanistan it forged ties with the Taliban.[17] It called on the Western partners to engage in global counterterrorism operations, while it has been unforthcoming on the money flows in and out of Russia that is central to interdiction of financial assistance to terrorism. The inconsistencies and contradictions within Russia's counterterrorism approach make Moscow an untrustworthy partner for the US, despite the shared interest in combating terrorism. The Russian and American counterterrorism practices diverge over a range of issues ranging from approaches to governance and human rights to the use of the military in kinetic operations. Geopolitical considerations have further decreased the likelihood that the US and Russia can deconflict their policies of combating terrorism.

In Washington, national security priorities have recently shifted from combating terrorism to great power competition. The American retrenchment from the many volatile areas of the world conducive to political instability and the emergence of terrorist heavens have opened up the space for actors like Russia to fill in. In Central Asia, for example, the UN and OSCE have been pursuing a series of CVE programs to address the sources of radicalization that are often rooted in the local problems. These are the issues that Russia is unwilling and disinterested to address. It is not that the Russian leadership does not take the risk of transnational terrorism seriously. Russia's National Security Concept of 2015 names the threat of international terrorism among the top threats to state and public safety, second only to the threat of subversive activities by foreign actors. However, the Kremlin places regional influence and counteraction of the American hegemony as a greater priority than fighting terrorism. It is easier to maintain geopolitical loyalty of weaker states threatened with political instability and dependent in Russia. As a result, it is in Russia's interest to ignore the states' internal dynamics conducive to political instability and terrorism. Not only have Russia's counterterrorism efforts in the region failed to effectively address the problems of radicalization, drug trafficking and terrorism, the Kremlin has invested resources into institutions and programs that strengthen the coercive mechanisms of the governing administrations.

In these circumstances, the US engagement with the Central Asian republics or the institutions offering development and CVE assistance to them, such as the UN and OSCE, is particularly important. Rather than increasing general security assistance that the US has long provided to the region in recognition of the Central Asian republics' support for American efforts in Afghanistan, Washington should pursue limited counterterrorism assistance. This assistance needs to be focused on border security intelligence, physical capacity enhancements and personnel training, coupled with increased funding for CVE and civil society building. The latter

[17] Baev 2018

should include programs and initiatives aimed at skill training and information literacy of the Central Asian labor migrants before they depart the region for Russia. The Central Asians constitute the third largest category of the foreign fighters and the majority of them are radicalized in Russia.[18] Since the U.S. Agency for International Development was banned in Russia, the work that it would have carried out with the labor migrants in the Russian Federation should be undertaken in the Central Asian states. The immediate results of these measures will not be immediately visible, but the long-term benefits exceed the costs of these programs. In addition, for the CVE and socio-economic and political programs to be effective in the face of the likely Central Asian governments' resistance, they will need to be reinforced by the firm, if flexible, pressure by the senior leaders from the U.S.[19]

Not engaging with Russia on counterterrorism would also be counterproductive, if not detrimental, for American counterterrorism efforts. Russia's presence in Syria and Afghanistan necessitates basic counterterrorism collaboration. This collaboration must be rooted in an agreed upon principles for sharing intelligence information, military-to-military coordination, and the selection of targets. The US should call on the Russian leadership to agree to the minimal principles concerning the mitigation of collateral damage during the kinetic operations and the prohibition of collective punishments and other personal integrity rights' violations as the tactics of counterterrorism that undermine its very intent. The US should continue supporting the global and regional institutions promoting CVE measures and work with the UN Counterterrorism Office directly or through the OSCE. This engagement should seek building synergies between the OSCE and the UN Counterterrorism Office with the goal of promoting rule of law-compliant responses to terrorism and CVE while engaging civil society and protecting individual freedoms.

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[18] Edward Lemon, Ver Mironova, and William Tobey,"Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?" Russia Matters, 7 December 2018. Available at: https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/jihadists-ex-soviet-central-asia-where-are-they-why-did-they-radicalize-what-next

[19] Thomas F. Lynch III, Michael Bouffard, Kelsey King, and Graham Vickowski, "The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism," Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Perspective No. 21 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2016). Available at: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-21.pdf