

# Russia, Afghanistan, and the Islamic State Threat to Central Asia



**By Lucas Webber**

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# Introduction

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For years now, Russia has been warning of the threat posed to Central Asian stability by Islamic State (IS) guerillas operating out of northern Afghanistan. Russia is a traditional security guarantor in the region and is working with Afghanistan's neighbors to bolster border defenses and improve counter-terrorism capabilities while also pursuing diplomatic relations with the Taliban. Such measures serve both to mitigate the regional IS threat to Russian interests, as well as to reinforce Moscow's political influence in Central Asia. Russia's historical experience with jihadism in Afghanistan informs Moscow's vigilance regarding associated militant threats to Central Asian states and even to the Russian homeland.

Afghanistan looms distinctly in Russian strategic consciousness through haunting memories of the Soviet superpower's decisive defeat in the late 1980s at the hands of Islamist insurgents. Compounding this is the recollection of jihadi-fueled conflict and militant incursions into Central Asia in the 1990s. With the Taliban back in power in Afghanistan as of August 2021, and the American-led coalition gone, there is risk of jihadis in the region turning their attention to Afghanistan's neighbors or perhaps even towards Russia itself. Russia views Central Asia as a critical sphere of influence and seeks to take measures to prevent spillover and contain emanating threats.

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# Soviet-Afghan War

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From the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), Russia learned in the most intimate way that prolonged conflicts involving jihadi insurgents can have globe-spanning and long-lasting security implications. The international reverberations of the Red Army's defeat and its resultant developments can provide insight into the kinds of things Moscow is now preparing for in the wake of the Taliban's return to power and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The conflict was a fundamentally transformative event, one which Thomas Hegghammer aptly describes as the “Big Bang in the globalization of jihadism”, the “world's first truly global foreign-fighter mobilization”, and the “cradle of today's jihadi movement.”<sup>1</sup>

The war cemented the legend of figures like Abdallah Azzam and enabled others like Osama bin Laden to cut their teeth in combat. Al-Qaeda's current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, added to his Islamist pedigree during his time in “Af-Pak,” and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founding father of the Islamic State movement, had a formative experience in Afghanistan around the time that the Red Army left. In the decades since and in multiple countries, Russia has engaged in direct armed conflict with movements formed by these men, breakaway factions that spun off from them, and groups that pledged allegiance to them.

Foreign fighters from all over the Islamic world received training, gained battlefield experience, formed personal connections, and were influenced by the ideological currents of that place and time. Some of these veteran militants then went on to continue their jihad in places as far apart as the Philippines in the Pacific and France on the Atlantic, and virtually everywhere in between, including Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

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# The Airstan Incident and the Taliban's Recognition of Chechen Independence

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In terms of security, Afghanistan is not only an incubation hub and exporter of jihadis, but it is also a land of risk and unpredictability. Even after the Red Army's withdrawal and the dissolution of the USSR, Afghanistan continued to be a source of problems for Moscow. The Airstan incident and the Taliban's support for Chechen independence have not been forgotten, likely factoring into Moscow's uneasy disposition towards the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

In early August 1995, Taliban-controlled aircraft forced a plane with seven Russian nationals onboard to land in Taliban-controlled Kandahar, causing an international crisis. Russian officials attempted to negotiate with the Taliban but had no success. After a year in captivity, the crew managed to escape during a ploy maintenance session, flying their plane to an airport in Sharjah near Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to this incident, Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's founder and former leader, pursued diplomatic ties with the self-declared republic of Chechnya-Ichkeria, formally recognizing its sovereignty in January of 2000.<sup>3</sup> Prior to this, the Taliban had welcomed Chechen delegates to Kabul, and Chechen Foreign Minister Movladi Udugov had announced that they officially acknowledged the Taliban government. At the time, Russia criticized Taliban-Chechnya ties as leading to the formation of a "[bandit international](#)."

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<sup>2</sup> [Associated Press](#), "Russian Air Crew, Held in Afghanistan, Escapes to UAE," August 17, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> [The Jamestown Foundation](#), "The Taliban Formally Recognizes Chechnya," January 18, 2000.

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# Jihadism in Central Asia

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Central Asian jihadi movements gained notable momentum in the 1990s, stoking pockets of instability and launching cross-border incursions from Afghanistan. The Russian security establishment looks to avoid a repeat of this era as the Islamic State darkens the doorstep of Central Asian state territories.

In Central Asia, jihadi movements have deep historical ties to Afghanistan, and contingents of foreign fighters from what now comprise the ‘Stans’ joined guerrilla resistance forces against the Red Army, while some who fought in the Soviet Army side even went on to join groups like the IMU and its predecessors.<sup>4</sup>

The Adolat (Justice) group sought to create an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, and, in 1991-1992, the militants reportedly seized a patch of Uzbek territory, taking the town of Namangan, and attacking secular authority figures.<sup>5</sup> Elements of the movement later found haven in Tajikistan where they became active belligerents in the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997) alongside various other jihadi actors — some of which were based out of Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

On September 27, 1996, more than 300 Tajik militants launched a raid from Afghanistan into Tajikistan where they battled fiercely with security forces.<sup>7</sup> The armed clashes lasted into early October, and at least four Russian troops were killed in the fighting.<sup>8</sup>

Some former leadership figures from the Adolat joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which was officially established in the summer of 1998 and conducted armed incursions and terror attacks across Central Asia. The IMU was blamed for a series of bombings that rocked the Uzbek capital of Tashkent in February 1999, but uncertainties

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Rashid, “They’re Only Sleeping: Why militant Islamists in Central Asia aren’t going to go away,” [The New Yorker](#), January 14, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Mariya Omelicheva, “Terrorism in Central Asia: Dynamics, Dimensions, and Sources,” [Association for Asian Studies](#), 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, “Central Asia and Afghanistan: Old Fears, Old Actors, New Games,” [RUSI](#), July 27, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> [UPI](#), “Tajik rebels clash with Russian troops,” September 28, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Pannier, “Central Asia and the Taliban: The Difference Between a Restive Border and a Quiet One,” [RFERL](#), December 14, 2021.

remain about who exactly was responsible.<sup>9</sup> However, in the wake of the Tashkent attacks, the IMU did, in fact, execute a series of raids into the Batken region of southern Kyrgyzstan and, between 2002 and 2004, carried out a bombing campaign in the Kyrgyz cities of Bishkek and Osh.<sup>10 11</sup>

The IMU was not the only group active in Central Asia during this period. In Tashkent, on July 30, 2004, three nearly simultaneous suicide bombings targeted the American and Israeli embassies as well as the office of Uzbekistan's chief prosecutor. The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), a breakaway faction of the IMU, ultimately claimed responsibility for the attacks.<sup>12</sup> And, later, in 2011, the Afghan-based Kazakh group, Jund al-Khalifah, said they carried out two attacks in Kazakhstan, but some believe they were simply capitalizing on these incidents to gain notoriety.<sup>13</sup>

The next few years saw militant attacks take place in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and China's Xinjiang region.<sup>14</sup> With one of the most notable incidents being the August 30, 2016, suicide vehicle bombing at the Chinese embassy on the outskirts of Kyrgyzstan's capital of Bishkek, allegedly carried out by a Uyghur jihadi with connections to Syria, further demonstrating the wide range of militants capable of striking throughout the region.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Uzbekistan: Security Service Rebuts Charges It Knew of Tashkent Bombings in Advance," [RFERL](#), November 28, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Pannier, "The Summer of 1999 and the IMU in Kyrgyzstan," [RFERL](#), September 24, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Mariya Omelicheva, "Terrorism in Central Asia: Dynamics, Dimensions, and Sources," [Association for Asian Studies](#), 2013.

<sup>12</sup> [United Nations Security Council](#), "Islamic Jihad Group," September 7, 2010; Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Germany: Authorities Say Uzbekistan-Based Group Behind Terrorist Plot," [RFERL](#), September 6, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia," [Wilson Center](#), December 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Putz, "3 Convicted for Chinese Embassy Attack in Bishkek," [The Diplomat](#), June 30, 2017; Thomas M. Sanderson, Daniel Kimmage, and David A. Gordon, "From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists," [CSIS](#), March 2010.

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## Islamic State Leaders Declare War on Russia, Incite Violence Against Russians

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Since the caliphate's early hours in June 2014, Russia has been considered a primary enemy of the Islamic State and a top tier target for IS militants. Leveraging their prominence and authority, the Islamic State's high leadership has quite frequently declared war on Russia and called for attacks against Russian nationals.

In the newly appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's first speech following the founding of the caliphate, he declared that the world is divided into two opposing camps: the "Muslims and the mujahidin" and the "Jews, the crusaders, [and] their allies". This latter group, he said, is "led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the Jews."<sup>16</sup>

The Islamic State movement, which has its organizational roots in 1990s Afghanistan, markedly increased its anti-Russia messaging after the founding of the caliphate and significantly intensified criticism and threats toward Moscow with the overt Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015. IS's media operatives quickly exploited the military campaign, portraying Russia as an invader and occupier of Muslim lands, as well as the strongest supporter of Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad — very potent propaganda narratives.

Top Islamic State leaders like spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani decried the "Russian ... massacres each day against the Muslims" and the "Russian destruction of hospitals and residential zones".<sup>17</sup> Likewise, IS caliph Al-Baghdadi spoke about how Idlib was being "bombarded by the Russians ... who intend to invade it".<sup>18</sup>

Al-Adnani, speaking to the faithful, thundered about how "neither America, nor Europe, nor Russia, nor China, nor Iran will be able to stand before [the Islamic State's] legions" and that "its soldiers will demolish their thrones".<sup>19</sup> The hostile rhetoric continued with Al-Adnani's successor as IS spokesman, Abu Hasan al-Muhajir, who called upon Muslims to arm themselves and carry out attacks inside of Russia.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan, July 1, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "That They Live by Proof," May 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "And Give Glad Tidings to Those Who Are Patient," August 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "So They Kill and are Killed," March 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Abu Hasan al-Muhajir, "And When the Believers Saw the Confederates," June 2017.

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# Islamic State Media Warfare Against Russia

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The Islamic State declared Russia the leader of the “Crusader East”, and, in stated retaliation to Russian airstrikes against IS in Syria, the group encouraged its followers to conduct attacks inside of Russia and against its interests around the world.<sup>21</sup> Following the September 2015 military intervention in Syria, IS increasingly framed Russia as an aggressor, invader, and occupier in its propaganda materials.<sup>22</sup> The Islamic State also criticized Russia for its domestic policies targeting Muslims, accusing the state of oppressing and imprisoning Muslims in the Caucasus and throughout the country.

This hostility transcends the realm of propaganda as the Islamic State has been fighting Russia in Syria, has launched attacks in the Caucasus and elsewhere on Russian soil, has fought the Russian private military company, Wagner Group, in Mozambique, and the IS Sinai branch has blown a Russian passenger plane out of the sky above Egypt.

To reach IS supporters inside of Russia with this messaging and incite violence, the group produced targeted Russian-language propaganda content. IS’s official Al-Hayat Media Center published the *Istok* magazine series and provided translations of its video and print materials.



*Islamic State fighters in the Caucasus*

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<sup>21</sup> Lucas Webber, “Arson and Incitement in Islamic State Propaganda,” [Militant Wire](#), October 26, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Lucas Webber, “The Islamic State’s Anti-Russia Propaganda Campaign and Criticism of Taliban-Russian Relations,” [The Jamestown Foundation](#), January 14, 2022.

Following the establishment of the caliphate, jihadi groups in Russia began publicly pledging allegiance to caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and, in response, the Islamic State produced videos celebrating and encouraging IS militants in Chechnya and elsewhere in the country.



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# Official and Unofficial Islamic State Russian-Language Media

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For years, the Islamic State has devoted part of its official media apparatus to translating materials into various languages to reach a diverse range of target market segments. IS launched a Russian-language campaign named “Iznutri” in late 2015, which was then subsumed into a new outlet called “Irshad” in July 2018.<sup>23</sup> These media organs have traditionally been purposed to inform readers of the latest news about IS attacks around the world, translate articles from the IS’s *Al-Naba* newsletter, as well as audio statements, and infographics.

One researcher noted:

“Irshad published more than a dozen audio speeches recorded by a Russian-speaking IS fighter, mainly discussing the current state of the Muslim community in Russia and the world, the necessity of the armed struggle against the enemies, and religious contemplations.”<sup>24</sup>

The Islamic State’s Russian-speaking propagandists have even developed a mobile application for their audience.

In addition, Russian Islamic State militants have founded their own private channels on messaging applications. One example is a channel named “Lamankho” that is owned by a member of the Islamic State Caucasus Province (ISCP) and has hundreds of subscribers.<sup>25</sup> There are also Russian pro-IS media groups such as “Katibat” and “Soffat” that provide translation and create original propaganda. This type of media serves as regional and local Russian-oriented propaganda to bolster IS in the Caucasus and is weaponized against the Russian state.

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<sup>23</sup> Artem S., “Overview of the current state of Russian speaking ISIS-affiliated media on Telegram,” [The Chronicle of Fanatics: Extremism and Violence in Eastern Europe](#), January 21, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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## Islamic State Khurasan Province Criticism of the Taliban

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The Islamic State's expansion into Afghanistan brought the group into direct conflict with the Taliban and government forces alike. Not long after the Islamic State Khurasan Province's (ISKP) official founding in January 2015, the IS leadership in the caliphate that then-spanned Iraq and Syria, and its central media organs, made coordinated efforts to ordain Afghanistan as an important region to the organization's global strategy.

IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani devoted part of his 'Die in Your Rage' speech to exalting the Khurasan cause, saying that, despite coming under severe military pressure in Iraq and Syria, "we bring the mujahidin the good news of the Islamic State's expansion to Khurasan".<sup>26</sup> The Islamic State's official Al-Hayat media branch likewise bolstered the Afghanistan campaign by featuring an interview with ISKP's leader in issue thirteen of its *Dabiq* magazine series.<sup>27</sup>

ISKP's regional campaign includes a significant media warfare component purposed to discredit and delegitimize the Taliban as a religious movement and political authority. The Taliban are portrayed as a secular, Pashtun, ethno-nationalist group — and sometimes as Hanafi-centric and politically democratic. ISKP draws a generational contrast between the early leadership of Mullah Omar and the Taliban's current commanders, framing the new iteration as religiously and morally corrupt.

The Islamic State in Afghanistan has also impugned the Taliban by accusing them of being puppets of foreign governments, most commonly linking them to regional powers like Pakistan and Iran, as well as great powers such as Russia, the United States, and China.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Die in Your Rage," January 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Issue 13 of Islamic State's *Dabiq* Magazine Series, "Interview With: The Wali of Khurasan," January 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas Webber, "A History of the Islamic State's Media Warfare Against China," [Militant Wire](#), September 27, 2021; Riccardo Valle, Islamic State in Khorasan Province's Campaign against Afghan Women, [The Jamestown Foundation](#), September 7, 2021.



*The cover of an ISKP book*

ISKP and its supporters claim that the Taliban is inviting greater Russian influence into the country through trade, investment, foreign aid, and security coordination. They perceive the Taliban and Russia to be allies working together to fight the Islamic State, and their militants have explicitly threatened Russia in multiple videos.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lucas Webber, "The Islamic State's Anti-Russia Propaganda Campaign and Criticism of Taliban-Russian Relations," [The Jamestown Foundation](#), January 14, 2022.

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# ISKP and the IS Threat to Central Asia

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The Islamic State Khurasan Province has been very active in northern Afghanistan, and, accordingly, bordering states have sought to strengthen their defences to cross-border incursion attempts.

These fears are not unfounded as, in November 2019, Islamic State insurgents clashed with security forces on the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan frontier.<sup>30</sup> Tajikistan's National Security Committee reported that fifteen jihadis, a border guard, and a policeman were killed in the attack and the ensuing firefight. The Islamic State's official media organ, *Amaq*, released a statement taking responsibility, claiming to have killed ten Tajik security forces personnel. *Amaq* also released a video on Telegram of masked militants claiming to be the attackers and pledging allegiance to the Islamic State's new leader at the time, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, since the month before, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been killed by US forces in a raid.

The Islamic State has had some limited success in striking deeper into Central Asia. On July 29, 2018, in Tajikistan, an IS militant drove a car into a group of cyclists; after which, the passengers exited the vehicle and continued the assault using firearms and knives.<sup>31</sup> In total, seven cyclists were hit and four were killed, including an American, a Dutchman, and a Swiss national. *Amaq* released a statement claiming responsibility for the assault on July 30, declaring that the attackers "were soldiers of the Islamic State and carried out the attack in response to calls to target the citizens of the coalition countries."

Islamic State members are said to have been involved in multiple prison riots in Tajikistan. In November 2018, an IS-linked prison riot in the northern Tajikistan city of Khujand reportedly killed twenty-three inmates and two prison guards, and in May 2019, unrest in a facility located east of Dushanbe killed three prison guards and twenty-nine inmates, including three opposition politicians.<sup>32</sup> IS has also targeted infrastructure such as

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<sup>30</sup> [Reuters](#), "Islamic State claims Tajik-Uzbek border attack," November 8, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> [RFERL](#), "Islamic State Claims Attack That Killed Four Foreign Cyclists in Tajikistan," July 30, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Mullorajab Yusufzoda, "Lengthy Prison Terms Handed To Inmates In Deadly Tajik Prison Riot," [RFERL](#), September 13, 2009.

powerlines used to provide electricity from Central Asian states to Afghanistan as part of its “economic warfare” campaign.<sup>33</sup>



*Uzbek militants pledging allegiance to the Islamic State*

## Radicalization

Since its founding in early 2015, ISKP has attracted members to its ranks from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and China’s Xinjiang region. Later in 2015, ISKP incorporated the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into its regional network.<sup>34</sup> Adding to this web of connectivity between the Islamic State and Central Asia, the IS network in Iraq and Syria has also drawn high numbers of foreign fighters from these countries.

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<sup>33</sup> Lucas Webber, “The Islamic State’s Global Campaign of “Economic War” Targeting Infrastructure: An Interview with Jihad Analytics,” [Militant Wire](#), December 8, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Lucas Webber, “Islamic State continues anti-Taliban PR push, with Tashkent in crosshairs,” [Eurasianet](#), December 9, 2021.

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## Russia's Security Concerns About Central Asia

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Afghanistan is a hub of jihadi connectivity with various militant transport routes running in and out of the country. Moscow's security concerns include potential foreign fighter pipelines running to Syria, where Russia is waging a military campaign, into Central Asia, where it has key politico-economic interests, and through Central Asia into the Caucasus.

Speaking on these security woes, Raffaello Pantucci notes:

“[I]n many ways Moscow considers the region to be a strategic buffer between itself and the trouble in Afghanistan. Consequently, if trouble erupts there, it is something which they worry will ultimately come back to them. Given the relatively free movement in the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] space, which encompasses the region, this means that it is relatively easy for trouble in the region to flow into Russia — be that jihadists, narcotics, or other criminality ... Given a few million [people from Central Asia] work and live in Russia as migrant labourers (and radicalisation does occur amongst them), this gives Russia a very intimate link to the problem.”<sup>35</sup>

Russia looks to secure said borderlands to prevent ISKP operatives from infiltrating Central Asian state territories, and one aspect of Moscow's multipronged approach is to work with the Taliban.

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<sup>35</sup> Personal interview with Raffaello Pantucci, January 2022.

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# Russia-Taliban Relations

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Russia has pursued communication links with the Taliban for quite some time now, [despite](#) pledging support for the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, labelling the group a terrorist organization in 2003, and opening up Russian airspace to the Americans to conduct operations against the Taliban in 2009.<sup>36</sup>

Moscow's efforts to connect with the Taliban date back at least as far back as 2007 when the two parties reportedly held clandestine talks about the issue of cross-border drug trafficking from Afghanistan into Central Asia.<sup>37</sup> However, communications then seem to have faltered somewhat until 2015 when the Islamic State emerged on the scene in Afghanistan as a common enemy.

Russia has expressed its concerns over the IS presence in Afghanistan since 2015 and hedged in raising the issue with both the Afghan government and the Taliban before the latter took power. Now, Russia desires some semblance of stability in Afghanistan and would prefer that the Taliban govern well enough to avoid greater volatility. Moscow has supported, for instance, the unfreezing of Afghan assets, with Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova publicly calling for the release of \$1.5 billion to support with reconstruction and help stabilize the economy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the Taliban: Prospective Partners?", [RUSI](#), September 14, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Masood Saifullah, "Why is Russia so interested in Afghanistan all of a sudden?", [DW](#), January 3, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> [TASS Russian News Agency](#), "Russia calls for unfreezing all assets from Afghanistan Reconstruction Fund," December 9, 2021.

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## Russia's Threat Mitigation Efforts in Central Asia

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Although Moscow would ideally prefer that the Taliban effectively act as a bulwark against the Islamic State Khurasan Province's spread from northern Afghanistan into Central Asia, Russia is not naïve to the precarious security situation. Special Russian Presidential Representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, recently issued a warning about the possibility of large-scale militant resistance to Taliban rule in the spring, saying that inter-ethnic protests may potentially escalate into large-scale unrest.<sup>39</sup>

In part because of Moscow's lack of confidence in the Taliban to achieve stability, Russia is proactively covering all its bases and working with Central Asian states to bolster their border defences and security capacities.

Russia knows what happens in Afghanistan does not always stay in Afghanistan. Conscious of the history of Central Asian jihadism, Moscow is deeply aware of the kind of mayhem regional jihadi groups can produce and how many militant actors from the region have links to Afghanistan.

As Aaron Zelin notes,

“[Although] there's not really an active insurgency in the Caucasus now ... Russia is afraid Afghanistan could provide a platform for locals from the Caucasus to go to Afghanistan, get training, and return home to rebooster an insurgency or maybe conduct a terrorist attack in Russian cities.”<sup>40</sup>

This has prompted Russia to help Central Asian states to enhance barriers to cross-border attacks and reduce the ability of Islamists in Afghanistan to link up with local elements up north or even transit to the Caucasus. Moscow has been applying pressure on Central Asian state governments to close their borders to inflows of displaced persons from Afghanistan.

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<sup>39</sup> [TASS Russian News Agency](#), “Russian envoy points to probability of large-scale resistance to Taliban in spring,” January 31, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Personal interview with Aaron Zelin, January 2022.

Russia also has a comparatively significant security footprint in the region, with bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and can respond quickly in the event of a crisis, as was most recently demonstrated during the unrest in Kazakhstan.<sup>41</sup>

As the Taliban moved closer to taking power, Russia ramped up training activity with its Central Asian partners. A July 2021 report stated that Russia was helping the Tajik government build a security outpost near the border with Afghanistan and was sending additional military hardware to its base in Tajikistan.<sup>42</sup>

Shortly afterwards, in early August, just before the Taliban seized Kabul, 1,500 Russian and Uzbek troops performed joint military drills near Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> Days later, 2,500 Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek troops held joint military exercises fifteen miles from Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. Russia's Central Military District commander, Colonel General Alexander Lapin, said "the exercise was conducted against the background of the aggravation of the situation and the threat of penetration of radical terrorist groups into the border countries of the Central Asian region."<sup>44</sup> Then, in late August, after the Afghan government had collapsed, 500 Russian motorized infantry troops conducted drills in the mountains of Tajikistan.<sup>45</sup>

In late summer 2021, Russia also held training activities with China involving ground troops and combat aircraft in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region east of Xinjiang. Xinhua cited Chinese and Russian officials as saying the exercises were meant to "deepen the joint anti-terrorism operations between the Chinese and Russian militaries and demonstrate the firm determination and strength of the two countries to jointly safeguard international and regional security and stability."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kinga Szálkai, "Russia's Recent Military Buildup in Central Asia," [CSIS](#), September 25, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> [Reuters](#), "Russia to help Tajikistan build outpost on Afghan border," July 23, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> [Reuters](#), "Russian and Uzbek militaries begin joint Afghan border drills," August 2, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> [RFERL](#), "Russia Wraps Up Drills with Uzbek and Tajik Troops Near Afghan Border," August 11, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> [AlArabiya News](#), "Around 500 Russian motorized troops in drills near Afghanistan, says report," August 30, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> [Los Angeles Times](#), "Chinese and Russian militaries hold drills amid uncertainty over Afghanistan," August 10, 2021.

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# Conclusion

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From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to Russia's military campaigns in Chechnya and Syria, the Russian state has come to be perceived as a leading foe and high-priority enemy of the global jihadi movement. The Islamic State movement is immensely hostile towards Russia and continues to make clear that they intend to attack Russian nationals and interests around the world. Russia is viewed as an invader and occupier of Muslim lands and as an oppressive force against Muslims at home.

The Islamic State now also views Russia as an ally to the Taliban, ISKP's foremost enemy in Afghanistan. IS emphasizes the cordial relations between the two countries in their propaganda content. There is some risk of the Islamic State striking the limited Russian diplomatic and commercial targets in Afghanistan, given how ISKP videos have included explicit threats towards Russia.

IS and ISKP also pose a threat to Russian interests, nationals, and diaspora communities located in Central Asia. This is indicated by the 2019 battle with security forces in the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan borderlands, the IS-linked prison riots in Tajikistan in 2018 and 2019, and the attack against cyclists in Tajikistan in 2018. Finally, the Islamic State in Afghanistan and aligned elements in Central Asia could possibly reach Russian territory to support insurgents or launch terror attacks inside of its cities.

Russia is pursuing diplomatic relations with the Taliban and coordinating security responses with Central Asian states as well as other countries in Afghanistan's neighborhood such as China, Pakistan, Iran, and India to try and mitigate the transnational ISKP threat. Russia also has military personnel and hardware stationed in Central Asia that can be used to take direct action if necessary.

Yet, the limitations of the Taliban's governing capacity and counter-insurgency capabilities, the differing approaches of Central Asian states towards Afghanistan's new government, and the growth of ISKP create difficulties for Moscow's regional efforts to contain the group.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> [United Nations Security Council](#), February 3, 2021.