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ISLAMIC STATE AND JIHADIST MEDIA STRATEGIES IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION

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Abstract

The Syrian war is the first of the modern Islamist “jihad” conflicts to have attracted large numbers of recruits from Central Asia and the post-Soviet region. Some 9,000 men and women from the post-Soviet republics travelled to Syria, including 4,000-7,000 Central Asians, many of them recruited in Russia. Why did the Islamic State’s caliphate attract such large numbers? Information manipulation was central to IS strategic planning and a primary factor in its unprecedented global recruiting success. IS produced Russian-language media content to build support among post-Soviet Muslims. At the same time, emerging communications networks are building ties between “Russian-speaking” Muslims and the Middle East. Jihadist media engagement in Russian and in Central Asian languages, exploiting these new networks, was a key factor in attracting Central Asians to support the caliphate.

Keywords—*strategic communications, strategic communication, Islamic State, violent extremism, radicalism, jihad, disinformation, Central Asia, Caucasus, Russia, post-Soviet.*

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Introduction

The former Soviet region was among the most significant suppliers of foreign fighters for the Islamic State (IS) during its rise and brief ascendancy in Syria and Iraq. The group attracted worldwide attention with its sudden expansion in 2014–15. By 2017, a total of as many as 8,700 fighters had travelled to Syria and Iraq from post-Soviet states, including Russia, the Caucasus, and the Central Asian republics.¹ While estimates vary, some 4,200 of this number were citizens of the Central Asian republics, both men and women, who travelled to the Middle East to support jihadist organisations.² Other estimates put the total of Central Asian citizens between 6,000 and 7,000, including women and children.³ Some thousands more attempted to go but were detained in Turkey.⁴ The reasons for this largescale adoption of an extremist cause by citizens of the ex-Soviet region are poorly understood, but many experts in the region suggest that Islamic State and other jihadist propaganda played a key role in attracting thousands of recruits from across this vast region, which had little previous history of involvement in jihadist campaigns.

Central Asia⁵ often escapes international attention, but the region came into sudden prominence in 2017, when a series of terrorist attacks took place, carried out by ethnic Uzbeks from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. A New Year's Eve shooting in an Istanbul nightclub was followed by a metro bombing in St Petersburg and a truck attack in Stockholm in April, and finally another truck

1 Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, (New York: The Soufan Center, October 2017), p.11.

2 Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*, see table, p. 12–13.

3 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2019), p. 20–21.

4 Noah Tucker, Edward Lemon, and Alex Zito, *Central Asia Secure and Stable States: Identifying Communities Vulnerable to Mobilization to Violent Extremism in Central Asia*, Navanti Group, internal report, 11 March 2019.

5 'Central Asia' here refers to the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

attack in New York in October. Four years earlier, in 2013, the Boston Marathon bombing had been carried out by two brothers of Chechen background with Kyrgyzstan links, an early reminder that jihadist attitudes have been spreading among Muslims from the former Soviet region, just as they have in Western Europe and America.

This study argues that, with the Syrian conflict, radical Islamism in Central Asia and the post-Soviet region has become more widespread than is generally acknowledged. Why is it that Syria became the first modern ‘jihad’ to attract such large numbers from this region? Specifically, this study will focus on two questions:

- How did jihadist Russian-language media operations expand from an early handful of Chechen websites to a regional media operation?
- How influential was this media operation in the massive expansion of Central Asian recruitment to Islamic State and other jihadist groups?

For Islamic State, information manipulation was central to its strategic planning, and a primary factor in its unprecedented global recruiting success. In addition to its messaging in English and other European languages, IS produced Russian-language media content to build support among Muslims across the post-Soviet region. It will be argued that the emergence of networks of Muslim contacts across the post-Soviet region, and their growing links to the Middle East, combined with media engagement in Russian and Central Asian languages to attract thousands of post-Soviet Muslims to support the IS caliphate.

Methodology

This question will be addressed by reference to a range of primary and secondary sources, including individual interviews, social media content, and contemporary press coverage from the region. While a number of datasets exist of IS media content in Arabic and in English, there are few systematic surveys of jihadist media in Russian and Central Asian languages. (The author is aware of only one such survey, described below.) In the absence of broader surveys, this paper will examine four issues of an Islamic State Russian-language online magazine to illustrate key ideological messaging aimed at Russian-speaking IS fighters. The study is an attempt to pull together information from a variety

of disparate sources to examine how a small number of Chechen webpages grew into a significant regional media operation, which then exercised a decisive influence in the recruiting of thousands of post-Soviet Muslims to violent jihadist organisations.

Torok has outlined a framework for considering the impact of social media on the process of radicalisation, drawing on the analytical framework of Michel Foucault, with a focus on power relationships as expressed through language and discourse.⁶ Torok posits that the online environment acts as an effective social institution which isolates individuals in their ideological processes; and that this online environment is a critical mechanism used by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) to alter thoughts and behaviours with the aim of recruiting supporters.⁷ Jihadist propagandists consistently deploy specific discursive schemas in social media—such as martyrdom, the victimisation of Muslims, or the ‘glory of Islam’—as a tool to shape the thinking of audiences and potential recruits.⁸

In particular, Torok argues that targeting the affective dimension is crucial for inciting extremist views.⁹ In such a setting, extreme beliefs can be reframed as the ‘normal’ beliefs of true Muslims.¹⁰ IS’s most significant media innovation was in fact the extensive use of emotive visual imagery, exploiting one of the basic principles of behavioural economics, well known to the big tech companies, that mass audiences engage more readily with visual content. In this analytical framework, IS social media acted as a ‘theatre’ in which IS could present itself as the fulfilment of the ultimate jihadist fantasy. Jihadist social media content aimed at Russian-speaking audiences conformed to this analysis and proved a highly effective tool for reaching out to new audiences across the vast post-Soviet region.

The role of post-Soviet, or ‘Russian-speaking’ Muslims within Islamic State has often been overlooked in international coverage.¹¹ Russian-speakers were one

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⁶ Robyn Torok, ‘Developing an Explanatory Model for the Process of Online Radicalisation and Terrorism’, *Security Informatics*, 2013, Volume 2 № 6.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 2–3.

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Robyn Torok, ‘ISIS and the Institution of Online Terrorist Recruitment’, Middle East Institute (Washington DC) website, 29 January 2015.

¹¹ ‘Russian-speakers’, ‘Russophone’, and ‘post-Soviet’ are used here to refer to Muslims from Russia and the other ex-Soviet republics who joined in the Syrian conflict, but these terms are not ideal. Russian was a second language for many of these fighters, and among younger Central Asians in particular, the knowledge of Russian is declining.

of the largest contingents of foreign fighters, and Russian was one of the most widely spoken languages among the fighters. Two consecutive IS ‘ministers of war’—Umar ash-Shishânî and Gulmurod Khalimov—were Russian-speakers. Estimates of their numbers vary widely. Two frequently cited tallies of foreign fighters are those of the Soufan Center in New York and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London (ICSR). According to the Soufan Center in 2017, an estimated total of 8,700 people from former Soviet states had joined IS in Syria and Iraq. This included an estimated 4,200 citizens of the five Central Asian states.¹² ICSR’s tally, updated in 2019, gives an estimated range of approximately 10,700–13,200 people from the former Soviet republics joining IS, including some 4,000 women and children. Of these, approximately 5,800–7,100 were citizens of the five Central Asian republics—roughly equivalent to the estimated 6,600 Western Europeans who joined the IS jihad.¹³ Both sets of figures agree that citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were the largest contingents among Central Asian fighters.

After seven decades of Soviet-imposed atheism, the Muslim areas of the former Soviet Union were largely secular in culture when the Union collapsed in 1991. A religious revival since then has restored Islam as an important regional cultural factor, but the Muslim ex-Soviet republics have generally been seen as societies of moderate religious sensibility. A number of local conflicts have caused instability among local Muslim societies, notably the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its civil war from 1979; the Tajik civil war of 1992–97; and the Chechen conflict from 1994. While religion played a role in all three conflicts, none attracted many regional recruits from outside the affected populations. The Afghan war—the first of the modern international jihadist conflicts—attracted Arab and other Muslim fighters in the 1980s, but only small numbers from the post-Soviet region after the Soviet collapse in 1991. More recently, the Iraq war and sectarian insurgency of 2003–11 became a major focus of international jihadism, but few, if any, post-Soviet Muslims took part. The limited numbers of foreign Muslim fighters in that conflict were nearly all from Arab countries.¹⁴ Yet only a few years later, thousands of post-Soviet Muslims flocked to join the putative jihad in Syria.

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12 Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate*, p. 12–13.

13 Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II*, p. 20–21.

14 Ned Parker, ‘Saudi’s Role in Iraq Insurgency Outlined’, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 July 2007.

The response to the Islamic State and the Syrian conflict indicates a significant shift in attitudes towards Islamist political movements. The Syrian conflict has helped to build transnational ties among those espousing jihadist ideologies, strengthening regional networks linking Central Asians, Caucasians, and other Muslims among the ethnic populations across Russia. A large proportion of Central Asian fighters were recruited not in their home republics, but as migrant workers in Russia—often through interaction with Chechen recruiters¹⁵—or among the diaspora in Turkey. Post-Soviet jihadist networks have become regional, with deepening ties to the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. The long-term consequences are not yet clear, but the Syrian war may one day become for Russian-speaking jihadists what the Afghan war became for Arab fighters: a crucible of the wider jihadist movement, a formative experience that gave them their first taste of the excitement of combat, built lasting bonds of ideological brotherhood, and turned many into renegade citizens unable to reintegrate into their home societies.

What role did Islamic State propaganda play in capturing the imagination of Central Asian and other Russophone Muslims? The factors that lead individuals to join extremist groups are complex and highly personalised. It is generally the interplay of several factors that leads an individual to join such a group as a solution to personal tensions. In the extensive academic literature, however, it is generally acknowledged that IS's skilful use of new media techniques was a key factor in the group's worldwide appeal and hence in its unprecedented global recruiting success. (Between 44,000 and 53,000 men and women and children were attracted to the banner of the caliphate from more than 70 countries.)¹⁶ Personal recruiting activities, amplified by skilful media outreach, became powerful drivers in the uptake of the global jihadist message.

Data limitations

As so often with Central Asia, a shortage of reliable data presents a challenge for any regional study. IS media production in Arabic and English has been closely analysed and a number of datasets of media output are widely available, but this is not the case for content in Russian or Central Asian languages. No systematic survey was made of Russian-language media traffic at the height of Islamic

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¹⁵ Emil Nasritdinov, *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Engagement with Violent Extremist Groups in Russian Federation* (Bishkek: United Nations Development Program, 2016), p. 3.

¹⁶ Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II*, p. 5.

State; and only one survey of jihadist social media in Russian and Central Asian languages is known to the present author, carried out in late 2018, when the caliphate was nearing defeat.¹⁷

Language was a critical factor. Russian is the lingua franca of post-Soviet Islam. Few people understand Arabic, so IS's extensive Arabic-language media production was inaccessible and held little appeal. However, Russian-speaking IS commanders in the field—often Chechens—began producing videos and social media content in Russian to publicise their campaigns. With IS backing, these early efforts developed into a full-scale Russian-language media operation. Without this, much of the Iraqi/Syrian conflict would have remained opaque to post-Soviet audiences.

Islamic State content produced for the post-Soviet region eventually included an online magazine in Russian; official press releases; Arabic-language videos dubbed into Russian; videos produced directly in Russian; and unofficial videos produced by individual commanders and fighters. Separate from IS content, videos and other material were also produced by two al-Qâ'eda-linked Central Asian groups (the Imom al Bukhorii Brigade and the Tavhîd va Jihod Brigade) often in Uzbek or Tajik. Social media commentary was also widely posted and reposted by individual supporters across the region.

Videos and other content were circulated widely on the main international social media sites —VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and others—during the IS heyday from 2013 to about 2016. This has now mostly been removed from mainstream English-language sites. Jihadist content has continued to circulate on new and more obscure platforms, as the jihadists play cat and mouse with the tech companies under increasing international pressure to take down extremist material.¹⁸ Telegram began to remove violent extremist content only in November 2019.¹⁹

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¹⁷ *Violent Extremism in Central Asia 2018: A preliminary survey of groups, digital dimensions and state responses*, The SecDev Group (Ottawa), and Public Foundation Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (Bishkek), 2018.

¹⁸ Natasha Lomas, 'Tech giants told to remove extremist content much faster', *TechCrunch*, 20 September 2017.

¹⁹ Counter Extremism Project press release, 'Extremist Content Online: ISIS Moves to Hoop Messenger and TamTam Following Telegram Takedowns', 10 December 2019.

Recent literature

Many studies have been written on the Islamic State's strategic use of media engagement in general,²⁰ but little on its Russian-language production. While violent extremist organisations (VEO) in the Caucasus have been studied at length, work on jihadist mobilisation in the Central Asian republics has begun to develop only recently, as a result of the IS experience. A number of general works are available on Islamist movements in Central Asia. Naumkin²¹ produced a valuable historical overview of Central Asian radical movements from a Russian perspective, while Yemelianova²² edited a comprehensive collection on emerging radical forms of Islam across the post-Soviet region. More recently a number of authors, including Central Asian academics such as Emil Nasritdinov, have written about susceptibility to radical strains of Islam in the home republics and among labour migrants in Russia. Little has been written, however, about the content of VEO strategic communications and how potential recruits engage with this content. Nasritdinov²³ and Nasritdinov et al.²⁴ have provided useful detail on youth audiences' resistance or vulnerability to extremist messaging in Kyrgyzstan. Lemon has argued that the Tajik government's response to radical Islam misunderstands the cause, and has increased insecurity for its citizens.²⁵ In an important debate, Heathershaw and Montgomery questioned whether extremism is as widespread in Central Asia as often claimed, arguing that the growth of Islamic religious sensibilities must not be equated with the spread of religious extremism.²⁶ Matveeva and Giustozzi, however, argue that extreme forms of Islam are certainly spreading across the region, and this should be recognised and addressed.²⁷

George Washington University's Central Asia Program (CAP) has focused on Islamic themes, including IS messaging. Tucker, in a series of CAP monographs, concludes that the plethora of online misinformation and disinformation

20 Miron Lakomy, 'Cracks in the Online "Caliphate": How the Islamic State is Losing Ground in the Battle for Cyberspace', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 11, № 3 (2017): 41–53, see Notes 1 and 2, p. 51.

21 Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

22 Galina Yemelianova (ed.), *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 2010).

23 Nasritdinov, *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants*.

24 Emil Nasritdinov, Zarina Urmanbetova, Kanatbek Murzakhilov and Mаметбек Мырзабаев, 'Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People in Kyrgyzstan to Radicalization, Violence and Extremism: Analysis Across Five Domains', Central Asia Program (CAP) paper № 213. (Washington: George Washington University, January 2019).

25 Edward J. Lemon, 'Daesh and Tajikistan: The Regime's (In)Security Policy', *RU/IS Journal* Volume 160, № 5 (2015): 68–76.

26 John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, 'The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics', Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, London, 14 November 2014.

27 Anna Matveeva and Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Central Asian Militants: Cannon Fodder of Global Jihadism or Revolutionary Vanguard?' *Small Wars & Insurgencies* Volume 29, № 2 (2018): 189–206.

originating from jihadist groups, Russian propaganda sources, and Central Asian governments, has created a toxic brew that has further confused both local citizens and outside observers about the extent and impact of jihadist influence in the region.²⁸

An overview of available literature leads to the conclusion that the influence of radical ideologies in Central Asia varies from republic to republic, and that the specific influence of media engagement is still poorly understood. Consequently, policy responses to address the situation have been uncertain or absent, despite the mobilisation of so many local citizens as foreign fighters in Syria.

StratComs of the Caliphate

The Islamic State has been the most innovative of recent VEOs in its exploitation of new media techniques, setting new standards that will be emulated by future extremist groups. Videos of Western hostages, of grisly beheadings and other extreme violence, captured the world's attention with their shock value and were elaborately commented upon in international media reports.

Islamic State's origins lie in an insurgent group founded in Iraq by the Jordanian, Abû Mus'ab az-Zarqâwî, in 1999. It reached its zenith in 2014–15 under his successor, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, briefly controlling an area larger than Jordan, with a population of 4–8 million.²⁹ Zarqawi himself pioneered the use of violent footage to attract attention, circulating on the internet some of the earliest beheading videos. The most intensive period of media production was in 2014–16. Kurdish and other forces, supported by US aerial bombing, eventually extinguished the territorial caliphate early in 2019, but insurgent attacks continue until today, supported by continuing propaganda activity.

As the Islamic State grew, its media strategy evolved with the development of a series of specialised media production offices, under the overall direction of a central 'information ministry'.³⁰ The earliest of these offices was Al-Furqân Media, the central propaganda bureau, which issued official caliphate statements.

28 Noah Tucker, 'Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging', Central Eurasia Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) Briefs, George Washington University, Central Asia Program, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, February 2016. № 11 (Tajikistan), № 12 (Uzbekistan), № 13 (Kazakhstan), № 14 (Kyrgyzstan), and Tucker and Rano Turaeva, № 15 (Turkmenistan); see also Tucker, 'Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia', CERIA Brief № 6, February 2015.

29 Vaughan Phillips, 'The Islamic State's Strategy: Bureaucratizing the Apocalypse through Strategic Communications', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Volume 40 № 9 (2017): 732.

30 For Islamic State's media structure, see Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts*, (West Point: US Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center, October 2016), p. 13 (diagram).

Another, Al-Hayât Media Center, produced online magazines in various languages, including the Russian-language magazine, *Istok* [The Source].³¹ An auxiliary ‘newswire’ service, the ‘A’mâq News Agency, provided day-to-day military news and propaganda,³² some of which was translated into Russian. Most Russian-language videos originated with a less well-known office, Al-Furât Media Centre, which served as the main propaganda and recruitment arm for the post-Soviet region. It seems likely that Al-Furât was developed unofficially by Chechen and other Caucasian fighters, who were active online from their earliest days in the Syrian conflict.³³

Analysis of a number of datasets of IS media output has provided an accurate picture of the group’s propaganda. These analyses refute the common perception that output was largely focused on ‘ultraviolence’. The perception in the international media was skewed by an overemphasis on English-language content, which was only a very small proportion of overall output.³⁴ IS propaganda in reality presented a range of themes, including governance, *da’wah* [proselytising], *hisbah* [moral policing], and promotion of the idealised life of the caliphate.³⁵ Winter, in his media dataset, found three recurring themes as foundations of the Islamic State brand—‘warfare’ (the military successes of the caliphate), ‘victimhood’ (the oppression of Muslims by the infidel world), and ‘utopia’ (the ideal Muslim state being built by IS).³⁶

The Islamic State’s most significant media innovation was its focus on the use of powerful visual imagery. Prior to IS, jihadist media output, primarily from al-Qâ’eda, had been largely text-based, or long theological and political disquisitions by internet ‘sheikhs’. IS exploited one of the key lessons of social media—already well known to the big tech companies—that mass audiences engage more readily with visual content. Emotive images of Muslim suffering in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan emphasised the victimhood of Muslims in the face of attacks by Western powers, Shî’a militants, and other infidels.

31 Harleen Gambhir, *The Virtual Caliphate: ISIS’s Information Warfare*, (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2016), p. 22.

32 Rukmini Callimachi, ‘A News Agency with Scoops Directly from ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity’, *The New York Times*, 14 January 2016.

33 Joanna Paraszczuk, ‘“Leave Nusra, Join IS” Uzbek Militant Urges In New IS Video’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL), 20 June 2015.

34 Aaron Y. Zelin, ‘Picture or It Didn’t Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Official Media Output’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015): 85–97 (85, 89).

35 Zelin, ‘Picture or It Didn’t Happen’, p. 90.

36 Charlie Winter, ‘The Battle for Mosul: An Analysis of Islamic State Propaganda’, in Ofer Fridman et al. (eds), *Hybrid conflicts and Information Warfare: New Labels, Old Politics*, (London: Lynne Rienner, 2019), p. 172.

The power of visual imagery, a basic principle of advertising and behavioural economics, became IS's most effective propaganda tool.

Jihadist media strategies in the post-Soviet context

While post-Soviet Muslims constituted one of Islamic State's largest contingents of foreign fighters, it is not clear how seriously the Arabic leadership of IS took the matter of outreach to their Russian-speaking audiences. Media production for Russophone audiences was driven largely by Chechen and other North Caucasian elements within IS, initially targeting their Caucasian compatriots, but their jihadist messaging then spread to widening circles of Muslims across the post-Soviet region. This ripple effect was facilitated by interlinking networks of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups across the region, which grew in step with the rapid development of new media technology taking place during the years of the Islamic State's rise. To visualise these networks, one must understand something of the makeup of post-Soviet Muslim society.

While they share a common overlay of Soviet culture, Muslims of the post-Soviet region are ethnically and culturally disparate. The Soviet Union was a multi-ethnic empire that encompassed three areas of Muslim population, each with its own long history and traditions—the Caucasus, the Volga-Urals region of Russia, and Central Asia.

Geographically the smallest of these three, the Caucasus, is the most variegated, encompassing one of the world's most complex clusters of ethnic and linguistic groups, inhabiting the valleys and plains north and south of the Caucasus mountains. The internal Russian republic of Daghestan alone has several main ethnic groups, while a variety of smaller, largely Muslim ethnicities inhabit six other internal Russian republics on the northern flanks of the Caucasus—Chechens, Ingush, Karachay, Cherkess, Kabardins, Balkars, Adyghe, and others.

With strong Sufi traditions, many Caucasians have historical and familial ties to Syria and the wider Middle East, dating from migrations there during the Ottoman period. The Chechens also have a powerful martial tradition and a long history of fighting Russia in an attempt to maintain their independence. Two Chechen wars against Moscow (1994–96 and 1999–2000) created a jihadist underground in the North Caucasus, which provided the main body of 'Russian' foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict, and which became a key conduit for the participation of other Russian-speaking Muslims.³⁷

37 Alisa Fainberg, *Spread the Word: Russia Social Media on the Service of Jihad* (Herzliya, Israel: International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Spring 2017), p. 9 and 37.

The Muslims of the Volga-Urals region are primarily Tatars and Bashkirs living in the internal Russian republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. These Turkic peoples have an Islamic tradition stretching back to the Middle Ages, when indigenous tribes converted to Islam. Closely integrated in mainstream Russian society, relatively few Tatars joined IS. Fainberg notes that Tatars and Bashkirs were largely absent from jihadist social media propaganda.³⁸

Central Asia has a distinct Islamic tradition that extends back to the east Persian intellectual flowering of the tenth century, when Bukhara rivalled Baghdad as an Islamic cultural centre. In the Timurid Renaissance of the 15th–16th centuries, Central Asian scientists made important advances in mathematics, astronomy and architecture.

In addition to this threefold cultural division, Central Asian recruits can be subdivided into two further categories—those recruited in their home republics, and those recruited outside, mostly in Russia, where some four million Central Asians, mostly men, work as labour migrants.³⁹ The Central Asian audiences most responsive to the jihadist message were in fact those working in Russia, where recruitment was substantially greater than in the Central Asian republics themselves. Lemon (2017), for example, found that over 80 percent of fighters in a dataset of Tajik IS members were recruited while working in Russia.⁴⁰ Most authorities conclude that migrants were more susceptible to Islamist proselytising because of their separation from a settled home life, the overall insecurity of their situation, and the fact that many experience racial and cultural hostility from mainstream Russian society.

Elsewhere, there has also been extensive recruitment among the large Central Asian migrant diaspora in Turkey.⁴¹ With its established networks of settled Chechen and other Russophone Muslims, Turkey became the primary access route to Syria for most of those from the ex-Soviet region.

For those Central Asians who travelled from the home republics, Olimova notes that the largest group of supporters originated in border areas which had suffered most when the Soviet breakup in 1991 imposed national borders

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³⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁹ Russian government estimate in 2014, cited in Christian Bleuer, 'To Syria, not Afghanistan: Central Asian jihadis "neglect" their neighbour', *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, 8 October 2014.

⁴⁰ Edward Lemon, 'The Varied Roads from Central Asia to the Islamic State', *Impakter.com*, 28 February 2017.

⁴¹ Author interviews with Sirojiddin Tolibov and Noah Tucker, 2019.

almost overnight between the newly independent republics.⁴² This was most evident in the densely-populated Ferghana valley, a historic and cultural centre with a long tradition of religious conservatism, whose multi-ethnic population found itself divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The new borders created barriers to trade and travel as economic policy diverged between repressive Uzbekistan, liberal Kyrgyzstan and, a Tajikistan beset by civil war. Communities and families were divided, and markets were cut off from their economic hinterland. The result has been huge and persistent social and economic hardship.

Ferghana has featured prominently in the history of Islamist movements in Central Asia. It was the home of Central Asia's first post-Soviet Salafist movement, Adolat, which emerged immediately after the collapse of Soviet power. Adolat's leaders were soon driven into exile in Afghanistan, where they resurfaced in 1998 as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). During the 1990s, the Islamist Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement spread in Ferghana, promoting its message of a revived caliphate that would abolish the borders between Muslim peoples—a message with an obvious local attraction. Hizb-ut-Tahrir was brutally suppressed, with thousands of followers ending up in Uzbek prisons. Ferghana has also been the scene of ethnic violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 1990 and again in 2010, caused in part by the region's economic stress. With such a history, it is little surprise that Ferghana became one of the main sources of regional recruits for the Syrian jihad.

Tucker, Lemon, and Zito have produced the most detailed overview of radicalisation 'hotspots' in Central Asia.⁴³ Like Olimova, they highlighted Ferghana communities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana region of southern Kyrgyzstan, many displaced by the ethnic violence of 2010, were particularly prominent among foreign fighters in Syria—70% of all Kyrgyzstan citizen recruits in 2016 were former residents of the largely Uzbek Osh region in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁴ The great majority of fighters mobilised in the republic of Kyrgyzstan were in fact ethnic Uzbeks. Relatively few ethnic Kyrgyz went to join the jihad for a variety of reasons (discussed below).

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42 Saodat Olimova, 'Угроза радикализации в странах Центральной Азии: социальное измерение (на примере Республики Таджикистан)' [Threat of Radicalisation in the Countries of Central Asia: Social Dimensions (Example of the Republic of Tajikistan)], *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 27 December 2015.

43 Tucker, Lemon, and Zito, *Central Asia Secure and Stable States*. See sections on each republic.

44 Ibid. See Kyrgyzstan – Hotspots section.

For the republic of Uzbekistan itself, little reliable data on IS or jihadist recruitment has been available from the notoriously opaque government. Ethnic Uzbeks were the biggest contingent of Central Asian fighters in Syria, but most experts agree that relatively few were recruited in Uzbekistan. Many ethnic Uzbeks came from Kyrgyzstan, as mentioned above. As for Uzbekistan citizens, one study by a Tashkent institute estimated that, of a contingent of some 1,000 Uzbekistani nationals fighting in Syria in 2018, only about 70 were recruited in Uzbekistan, while the remainder were recruited as migrants, either in Russia or Turkey, or were already radicalised fighters for extremist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such as the IMU.⁴⁵

In Kazakhstan recruitment hotspots were largely in and around the remote copper mining town of Zhezkazgan in central Kazakhstan, and the oil industry cities of Aktobe, Atyrau and Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan near the Caspian Sea.⁴⁶ These are all areas of notable inequality where newly rich investors with links to the elite have bought up old Soviet industries, but the local population have seen little benefit. In interviews local residents suggested that a sense of ‘injustice’ was a significant factor in leading recruits to travel to the IS caliphate, and that they hoped to find a more just form of governance in the presumed ideal Islamic state.⁴⁷

These recruitment patterns were reflected in social media traffic. While Russian-language IS media, dominated by Caucasians, produced relatively little content aimed specifically at Central Asian audiences, Uzbek and Tajik field commanders of two Uzbek brigades allied to al-Qâ’eda began to broadcast videos and social media commentary in Russian, Uzbek and Tajik. Relatively little material was published for Kazakh audiences, apart from some early videos in 2013. Likewise, very few recruiting videos appeared for the Kyrgyz market, a reflection of the relatively small number of ethnic Kyrgyz recruits. As for Turkmenistan citizens, little is known for certain about their involvement.⁴⁸

Who were the individuals who responded to these jihadist recruiting messages? Those who travelled to Syria were generally young adults, not naïve adolescents. Fighters in Lemon’s Tajik dataset had an average age of 28, with over half

.....
45 Ibid. See Uzbekistan – Hotspots section.

46 Ibid. See Kazakhstan section.

47 Ibid.

48 Tucker and Turaeva, CERIA Brief No 15, (Turkmenistan).

aged from 24 to 29.⁴⁹ Almost half were graduates with degrees from secular universities. Several specialists point out that recruits frequently had little religious knowledge before joining radical groups and had often lived a largely secular, even irreligious life. Yarlykapov, studying Muslim labour migrants in the Yamalo-Nenets region of Russia's far north has found the experiences of those who went to Syria 'confirm the view that recruits to Islamic State are mostly people without deep roots in Islamic tradition who have undergone rapid and superficial Islamization, which makes it easy for recruiters to manipulate them.'⁵⁰

While the vast majority of recruits were men, a substantial number of women also 'made *hijrah*' to the Caliphate, often accompanying their husbands, with varying degrees of willingness. Cook and Vale concluded that in 2018 about 13 percent of Central Asians who went to Syria/Iraq were women.⁵¹ Tucker, Lemon, and Zito cite incidences of whole family groups who travelled directly from the Central Asian republics, and also of women who travelled alone, unaccompanied by husbands or male family members.⁵²

Evolving media networks

IS's central media offices had a limited capacity to produce Russian-language products—few official press statements released by the central Al-Furqân Media office were released in Russian.⁵³ Videos, however, were the most influential media products. Most IS Russian-language videos bear the logo of Al-Furât. The origins of Al-Furât can be traced to Tarkhan Batirashvili—better known as 'Umar ash-Shîshânî ['Umar the Chechen']—an ethnic Kist Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, who became IS's top military commander in 2014.

Umar ash-Shîshânî came to Syria in late 2012 as a representative of the fading Caucasus Emirate militant group. He launched a website, FiSyria, in April 2013 to publicise the activities of Russian-speaking fighters in Syria and to connect with potential recruits in the North Caucasus.⁵⁴ Later that year he switched allegiance to IS and his website became an Islamic State propaganda site.⁵⁵

49 Lemon, 'The Varied Roads'.

50 Akhmet Yarlykapov, 'Divisions and Unity of the Novy Urengoy Muslim Community', *Problems of Post-Communism* (2019; article published online 20 August 2019), p. 6.

51 Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'* II, p. 2.

52 Tucker, Lemon, and Zito, *Central Asia Secure and Stable States*. See 'Demographic Vectors—Women' paragraphs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan sections.

53 Zelin, 'Picture or It Didn't Happen', 90.

54 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 10.

55 Joanna Paraszczuk, 'IS Boosts Russian-Language Propaganda Efforts', *RFE/RL*, 6 July 2015.

In September Shishani's men launched the first IS media page on the VKontakte social media platform in Russian under the name ShamToday.⁵⁶ Extremist content posted on VKontakte (VK) and the other major Russian platform, Odnoklassniki (OK), would become for a time the most effective method of online distribution across the post-Soviet region. ShamToday was overseen by a Chechen, Sayfullakh Shamsky (aka Ilyas Deniev), until he was killed in Iraq early in 2015.⁵⁷ Under Shamsky's direction, the site became a full-fledged media operation, gaining more than 12,000 followers in a year, expanding to YouTube and other platforms, and setting up mirror accounts. IS supporters also set up many private accounts and chat groups in 2013–14 and reposted jihadist messages.⁵⁸ These online fans—sometimes dismissed as 'armchair mujahidin' [диванные мухажиды]—became a significant factor in the vast online distribution networks of IS and jihadist propaganda.

For Central Asians, including migrants in Russia, Odnoklassniki became the key platform for Syrian news and jihadist content. Smaller than VK, OK is the most popular social media platform among Central Asians generally. For all migrants a mobile phone is essential to keep in touch with their families, and the internet and social media are the primary ways to while away time on construction camps scattered across Russia. Anvar Nazirov, a political analyst in Tashkent, interviewed in mid-2015, commented: 'All Uzbeks who joined ISIS say they became acquainted on Odnoklassniki. Not through Facebook, not through Twitter, but through Odnoklassniki.'⁵⁹ Other Central Asian specialists say that IS recruiters were active on other social networks, but OK, being the most popular among Uzbeks, became the site where many first encountered radical ideologies because social networks gave people in a repressed and highly controlled society the possibility to express their thoughts freely.⁶⁰

While most specialists writing about radicalisation in Central Asia cite the importance of online messaging in attracting individuals to jihadist groups, offline or face to face recruiting was also important. First person accounts gathered by researchers indicate that IS recruiters targeted Central Asians in construction labourers' residential compounds in Russia, both online and in

56 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 13.

57 Ibid., p. 14.

58 Ibid., p. 16–17.

59 Author's translation. Cited by Uzbek Service of RFE/RL, 'Вербовка узбеков в ряды ИГ все чаще происходит в «Одноклассниках»' [IS Recruitment of Uzbeks happens increasingly on "Odnoklassniki"], 11 June, 2015.

60 Ibid.

person.⁶¹ Other accounts speak of young migrants working in Russia who met recruiters in gyms and sports clubs. Face to face recruiting was also often dominated by Chechens. Construction companies in Russia commonly employ Chechens because many Chechen security companies provide the *krysha*—the ‘roof’, or protection from extortion—without which big companies cannot operate in Russia.⁶² Online and offline engagement thus combined to spread the jihadist message far and wide to Muslim migrants working in Russian cities and in industrial communities in the remotest parts of Russia.

IS used VKontakte and Odnoklassniki actively for a year (2013–14) before VK blocked ShamToday in September 2014 and began taking down other jihadist accounts.⁶³ OK also responded to growing pressure to close extremist accounts, but less strictly than VK. Fainberg writes that pages and groups promoting IS could still be found on OK as late as 2017.⁶⁴ By 2015, IS and other jihadists were migrating to Telegram as their favoured social platform because of its combination of open public channels with secure secret chat functions that were virtually impossible to decrypt.⁶⁵ As the social media landscape evolved, the Russophone wing of IS adapted its communications strategy, consolidating its efforts in mid-2015 by creating the Al-Furât Media office, which then became the focus for most IS Russian-language media production.

Widening post-Soviet focus

When Umar ash-Shîshânî was appointed the Islamic State’s most senior military commander in 2014—regarded by the Pentagon as its ‘minister for war’⁶⁶—the appointment strengthened the Russophone role within the group. The caliphate’s Russian media outreach was also strengthened as Al-Furât opened a website and accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. FiSyria was subsumed into Al-Furât, and the new media office significantly increased content available to Russian-speaking Muslims by subtitling and distributing existing Arabic-language IS videos.⁶⁷

61 See Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova and William Tobey, *Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?* (Cambridge, MA: Russia Matters, December 2018), p. 14.

62 Interview with Vera Mironova, 31 January 2020.

63 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 17–18.

64 Ibid., p. 22.

65 Rebecca Tan, ‘Terrorists’ love for Telegram, explained’, *Vox*, 30 June 2017.

66 Staff and agencies, ‘Isis admits “minister for war” Omar the Chechen is dead’, *The Guardian*, 13 July 2016.

67 Paraszczuk, ‘IS Boosts’.

The most prominent figure in Al-Furât was Islam Atabiev (aka Abû Jihâd), an ethnic Karachai from the Russian Caucasus republic of Karachai-Cherkessia. A close associate of ash-Shîshânî he was entrusted with managing IS's Russian-language propaganda and became a senior figure of the Russian-speaking faction.⁶⁸ He was placed on the UN sanctions list in 2015 for 'actively conducting propaganda, calling to commit terrorist attacks and spreading extremist ISIL [IS] ideology'.⁶⁹ Shishani the military leader and Atabiev the propagandist formed a powerful dual force, substantially increasing Russophone influence within IS. Shishani's frequent appearance in jihadist videos amplified his role as a charismatic commander, attracting Russian-speaking recruits from across the region, including Tatarstan and Central Asia.⁷⁰ Atabiev's media skills thus played a key role in shaping IS's propaganda outreach across the post-Soviet region.

Ash-Shîshânî was killed in 2016, probably by an American air strike,⁷¹ and replaced as chief military commander by another post-Soviet militant, Gulmurod Khalimov, a decorated colonel of the OMON special forces in Tajikistan, who had dramatically defected to IS the previous year.⁷² Khalimov thus became the most powerful Central Asian in the Islamic State, and was featured in propaganda content across the region. He was eventually killed by an airstrike in Mosul in 2017.⁷³ Al-Furât's media production took on a wider regional focus than FiSyria and ShamToday. While the earlier sites focused largely on a Caucasian audience, Furât sought to attract followers in other post-Soviet states, translating material and producing original content in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Georgian, and other languages.⁷⁴

Some of the earliest IS videos to feature Central Asian fighters had in fact appeared in 2013, before Al-Furât was established, when two videos were circulated showing a large group of Kazakh fighters, and Kazakh children in military training. A third shocking video appeared to show a young Kazakh boy executing two men accused of being Russian spies with a pistol at point

68 'Эксперты исключили выход кавказских группировок из ИГ после смерти аш-Шисшани' [Experts exclude the exit of Caucasian militant groups from IS after the death of ash-Shîshânî], *Кавказский Узел* [Caucasian Knot] website, 15 July 2016.

69 UN Security Council Sanctions List; entry for Islam Seit-Umarovich Atabiev.

70 Or Orkhan Djemal, cited in 'Эксперты исключили', Caucasian Knot website.

71 'The Guardian, 'Isis admits'.

72 Gulmurod Khalimov entry, Counter Extremism Project website.

73 Ibid.

74 Fainberg, *Spread the Word*, p. 27.

blank range.⁷⁵ Thereafter, however, videos aimed specifically at Central Asian audiences were less common until Al-Furât began seeking a wider post-Soviet audience.

A number of Central Asian videos produced early in 2016 appear to reflect a drive to find more recruits among Central Asians and may also reflect competition for recruits with the al-Qâ'eda-linked Uzbek brigades, which were attracting attention with their own media content by this point. These videos appealed to the strong family culture of Central Asia.⁷⁶ One thirty-minute video in Uzbek with Russian subtitles showed an older Uzbek fighter in his sixties calling upon Uzbeks to come to the caliphate. Another, shorter video features two Kazakh fighters and their sons urging Muslims to come to Syria.⁷⁷

While IS Russian media production was dominated by Caucasians, a number of Central Asians also appeared as 'media mujahidin'. Little is known about most, but a 28-year-old Tajik, Parviz Saidrakhmonov (aka Abu Daoud at-Tojġki), illustrates the type.⁷⁸ He left a troubled personal life in Dushanbe to work in Russia, became enamoured of jihad, and turned up in videos in Syria. He was close to two prominent Dagestani preachers in Atabiev's circle, and was photographed with Gulmurod Khalimov, IS's Tajik top military commander. Abu Daoud appears in photographs working on a laptop in an IS 'media centre', implying that he worked as a producer and media activist. In 2015, he was reported on social media to have been 'martyred'—but it is suspected he may have faked the reports himself.⁷⁹

Central Asians are still active on jihadist social media. One media activist calling himself Farûq Shâmî was actively posting militant videos and commentary from Syria in early 2020 on a Russian website and on a number of mainstream social media platforms.⁸⁰ Possibly from Tajikistan, Shâmî appears to be ethnically Uzbek but delivers his video commentaries in Russian.

75 Tucker, CERIA Brief № 13 (Kazakhstan), p. 3; See also Radio Azattyk, '«150 казахских джихадистов в Сирии» взорвали социальные сети' ["150 Kazakh Jihadists in Syria" Shakes Up Social Media], RFE/RL *Kazakh service*, 21 October 2013.

76 Paraszczuk, 'IS Central Asian Recruitment Drive a Family Affair', RFE/RL, 5 April, 2016.

77 Ibid.

78 Paraszczuk, 'Have Tajik IS Militants Faked Their Own "Martyrdoms"?', RFE/RL, 1 July 2015.

79 Ibid.

80 Shâmî posts his videos on Muhajeer.com. WARNING: SOME GRAPHIC CONTENT. A post on Reddit refers to him as coming from Tajikistan.

One dataset of jihadist social media in Russian and Central Asian languages captures a picture of media engagement in the region in the final days of the IS caliphate.⁸¹ This study surveyed content over three months (August–October) in 2018. The analysts found no active IS social media accounts in Russian or local languages during the study period—presumably a sign of the tech companies’ success in removing IS accounts, as well as of the caliphate’s impending military defeat.⁸²

Other VEOs were still active: some 140 active accounts from ten regional Islamist actors were identified on open social media sites. The most active were the Syrian group, Hayât Tahrîr ash-Shâm (HTS), the two Uzbek brigades in Syria, and Hizb-ut-Tahrîr (HuT). All were still posting content on the main social media platforms, especially Telegram, but also Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, VKontakte and WhatsApp, though engaged in a constant battle against blocking and takedowns.

HTS—formerly Jabhat-an-Nusra, the official branch of al-Qâ’eda in Syria—was running an extensive network of news sites and media projects, including projects in Russian and Central Asian languages.⁸³ The Tāvḥîd va Jihod (TvJ) Brigade was running an effective propaganda network with 45 active social media accounts, mostly in Uzbek.⁸⁴ The Imom al Bukhorîi Brigade, though larger than TvJ, had a somewhat smaller media presence, with 14 active accounts.⁸⁵ Hizb-ut-Tahrîr, meanwhile, present in Central Asia since the 1990s, was found to be running a ‘media empire’ online and on paper, publishing content translated from Arabic into Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz, actively distributed via websites and social media.⁸⁶

Extremist content continues to be accessible on social media in Central Asia to the present, including videos and talks by radical preachers, although it is more discreet, sometimes hidden amongst more traditional religious content to avoid being taken down.

.....
81 *Violent Extremism in Central Asia 2018*, p. 13–25.

82 Ibid., p. 20–21.

83 Ibid., p. 14.

84 Ibid., p. 16.

85 Ibid., p. 17.

86 Ibid., p. 20.

Case study—Istok

The online magazine, *Istok* [Исток—‘The Source’] is perhaps the media product that provides the most complete illustration of the ideological motivations of Islamic State’s Russophone leadership. The magazine was produced by the Al Hayât Media Centre, one of IS’s central media offices, not by the semi-official Al Furât Media Centre, which suggests that the political and religious views promulgated in *Istok* were centrally approved. A total of four issues were published between April/May 2015 and April/May 2016, comprising a total of 180 pages and 31 individual articles. The magazine was illustrated with high-quality colour photographs—often romanticised images of jihadist fighters—but the content was heavily textual, most articles being several pages long. This is unlike the tabloid style one might have expected from IS, with its focus on youth-oriented media content, but consistent with a more Russian editorial approach.

The authorship of articles is not indicated, but internal comments suggest that the editorial team was largely Caucasian. Judging by stylistic similarities, many of the longer articles may have been written by the same person. One may speculate whether the voice behind these articles might be that of Islam Atabiev, IS’s main Russian-language propagandist. Whoever the authors, the magazine reveals something of the obsessive, apocalyptic mindset within the leadership of IS’s Russophone wing.

Istok’s target audience is believers within the movement, exhorting them to avoid factionalism and to prepare for martyrdom. Dates are almost entirely absent: religious and jihadist authorities are cited without indicating whether they are contemporary or historical. There is no recognition of the temporal chasm between the seventh century and the present. This lack of temporal awareness contributes powerfully to the jihadist fantasy ‘theatre’ aspect of IS propaganda. The audience is encouraged to see itself as living in the Islamic heroic age of the 7th century, engaged in the apocalyptic battles of the early caliphate.

There is a surprising lack of gore. The bloodied knives and beheadings reproduced in the English-language IS magazine, *Dâbiq*, are almost entirely absent. *Dâbiq* and IS’s grisly videos were designed to shock and frighten Western audiences, but *Istok* was for an audience of fellow believers, who needed cajoling, not terrorising.

Istok reiterates constantly the main discursive schemas of the IS jihadist narrative: a worldview divided between an in-group of true Muslims and an out-group of infidels; the unjust and infidel Western powers are waging an everlasting war on Islam; all true Muslims must wage unceasing jihad; security for Muslims lies only in the IS caliphate, to which all true Muslims should make *hijra*; and the highest moral achievement of jihad is martyrdom in the way of Allah.

Istok's 31 articles can be grouped thematically under the following seven headings:

- *Life as a mujāhid* (8 articles)
- *International affairs* (6)
- *Jihad politics* (5)
- *Martyrdom* (4)
- *Jihad history* (3)
- *Women* (3)
- *Governance* (2)

If we return to Zelin's and Winter's datasets of IS media output (*see above*), they identified six dominant themes between them as the chief concerns of IS propaganda messaging: governance, moral policing [*hisba*], proselytising [*da'wa*], warfare, victimhood, and the idealised caliphate (or utopia). While the specific themes of any individual dataset will vary, these six Islamic State schemas, which are central to maintaining and promoting the global IS brand, also feature repeatedly within *Istok*.

Life as a mujāhid: The magazine's production team undertook to promote the life of the mujāhid, the 'holy warrior', as one of its central concerns. Eight articles provided religious or spiritual advice to boost the morale of the common fighter, including a long address from the IS leader, Al Baghdādi, in *Istok* № 2.⁸⁷ This address in itself covers all the key themes and complaints of the jihadist narrative, with a constant emphasis on the duty of waging warfare: 'O Muslims, Islam has not been a religion of peace for a single day. Indeed, Islam is a religion of battle.'⁸⁸ In a resounding statement of victimhood, Baghdādi warns against all the multifarious enemies of the Muslims. He warns against trusting Christians, Jews, and Americans; he warns against the *rāfida* [rejectionists], the secularists,

87 'Выступайте в походах, легко ли это вам будет или обременительном' [Set out on the journey, whether it is easy for you or burdensome], *Istok* № 2, p. 4.

88 Ibid.

the godless, and the apostates, and he condemns the Saudi royal family, ‘slaves of the Crusaders and allies of the Jews’.

Three articles about the mujâhid life give romanticised accounts of life at the front, one aspect of the idealised caliphate schema. Another, apparently written by a young fighter, encapsulates the victimhood schema with great passion, saying that young people feel intensely the ‘humiliation’ of modern Muslims, and arguing that IS followers are not merely ‘uneducated fanatics, losers and adolescents from difficult families’, as the infidel media would have it. They are ‘brothers, fathers, and sons of those raped by the infidel soldiers’, who seek revenge, who will eradicate the ‘satanic Sykes-Picot borders’ and revive the glories of the Muslim empire.⁸⁹ This intensely emotional article demonstrates clearly the appeal to the affective dimension among IS’s younger audiences.

International affairs: Six articles, including two long addresses by the official IS spokesman, Abû Mohammad al Adnâni, refer to the terror attacks in Sinai and Paris, the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, the weakness of America and other tyrant governments, the divisiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood, the superior qualities of the Islamic State’s caliphate, and the state of Islam in Europe. Here the themes of the idealised caliphate and the victimhood of Muslims in the face of worldwide aggression are repeatedly evoked. Islamic State’s rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood for the soul of the global Islamist movement stands out as an ongoing and significant concern.

Jihad politics: Five articles on jihadist politics discuss frankly the problems of factionalism and infighting. ‘Conspiracies’ figure prominently, and tensions are hinted at between local Syrian fighters and fighters from the Caucasus. Warfare and the need to defeat rivals to establish the IS caliphate as the true home of the Muslims are recurring schemas.

Martyrdom is a constant theme. Four articles tell improving tales of the courage of *mujâhidîn* who go to their deaths killing unbelievers. The ideal of martyrdom is perhaps the most commonly cited theme across the four issues of *Istok*, interwoven with other schemas, such as warfare, jihadist history, and the mujâhid life.

Jihad history articles present episodes from the lives of the early caliphs, and

89 ‘Кто мы? Откуда и куда?’ [Who are we? From where and where are we going?], *Istok* № 4, p. 29–32.

an account of the Prophet's *hijra* [migration] from Mecca to Medina. The ideal caliphate motif appears again with the message that all Muslims should migrate to the land of true Islam.

Women appear rarely in *Istok*, but three articles do touch on female topics, all reflecting the theme of moral policing. One tells of the execution of a Caucasian woman, Elvira Karaeva, described as a spy for Russia. This factually incorrect account is told as a warning to others— particularly women—who might consider acts of disloyalty.⁹⁰ Another article presents a justification for the use of captured women, such as the Yazidis, as slave-girls or concubines, claiming this to be more honourable than the prostitution found in infidel lands.⁹¹

Governance—the provision of public services—was a key theme in IS Arabic-language messaging, but only two articles in *Istok* focus on this theme, one explaining the work of the caliphate's 'vice and virtue' police, and another praising the Sharia traffic police in Raqqa.

If we compare *Istok*'s main schemas with Zelin's and Winter's dominant themes (reflecting the concerns of Islamic State's central leadership and propaganda arms) it is notable that the Russian-language propagandists were most concerned with what might be characterised as the 'power' themes: warfare, victimhood, and the ideal caliphate, with a particular interest in martyrdom. They were less concerned about the 'service' themes—governance and moral policing—and not at all concerned about proselytising, which is not mentioned in the Russian magazine. One may speculate about the reasons for this difference in emphasis, but perhaps it reflects the hard power world of *Istok*'s Caucasian progenitors, who emerged from the brutality of the Chechen and Caucasian confrontation with the Russian state, where survival in the face of overwhelming force was the harsh and dominating reality of daily life.

Efficacy of jihadist media strategies

How effective were extremist online media communications as a radicalising factor in the post-Soviet region? Writing in 2014, Bleuer notes: 'The role of social media in recruiting is often mentioned as an important factor for IS and

90 'Караева Эльвира, Агент Спецслужб России' [Elvira Karaeva, Special Agent of Russia], *Istok* № 4 (April 2016), p. 22–25. For a detailed account of this case, see Jasmine Opperman, 'Elvira Karaeva: The story of the Russian Spy That Wasn't', *Daily Maverick*, 13 May 2016.

91 'Наложницы или Блудницы' [Slave-girls or Prostitutes?], *Istok* № 2 (July 2015), p. 33–36.

other groups in Syria and Iraq, despite this hypothesis being untested.⁹² The hypothesis is still largely untested today and remains an important gap in the research.

The town of Aravan in the Ferghana valley experienced one of the highest levels of migration from Kyrgyzstan to Syria. Despite being in Kyrgyzstan, it has an ethnic Uzbek majority population, cut off from its neighbours in Uzbekistan by national borders. In a detailed study of Aravan, focus groups revealed something of the interplay of jihadist propaganda with other radicalising factors.⁹³

The influence of social-media and other propaganda is not independent of these other factors. In the emerging world of media saturation, online and offline communications are no longer separate strands of engagement. They form a continuum of personal engagement. Individuals engage offline and continue the conversation online, and vice versa. Personal acquaintance, new contacts, and patterns of influence operate seamlessly in both spheres. In discussions with Aravan residents about the mechanisms of radicalisation, ‘very few cited the influence of general online propaganda, but many mentioned the influence of direct online connections via messenger applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram that facilitated recruiting ties between Aravanis already in Syria and their friends, neighbors, or classmates at home.’⁹⁴ Discussions made clear that ‘online communications had played a key role in embroiling the Aravan community in the conflict’—not, however, via traditional social media, but through media usage that reflected offline personal relationships and facilitated direct communication between individuals.⁹⁵

Social media have acquired a particular importance in Central Asia and other ex-Soviet republics where traditional, state-dominated media outlets have always been inherently untrustworthy. Social media platforms, which link individuals with friends and family whom they trust, have become a valued source of news and information in a confusing world of competing information outlets, conspiracy theories, and ‘fake news’. Bleuer speculates about the reasons for the influence of IS propaganda amidst the cacophony of online information that now reaches populations in Central Asia. ‘Central Asians, especially those

.....
92 Bleuer, ‘To Syria, not Afghanistan’.

93 See Noah Tucker, ‘What Happens When Your Town Becomes an ISIS Recruiting Ground? Lessons from Central Asia about Vulnerability, Resistance, and the Danger of Ignoring Perceived Injustice’, Central Asia Program, Paper № 209, George Washington University, July 2018, p. 7.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

in Russia, are enthusiastic users of social media', he notes. IS entered the post-Soviet online media space armed with the latest new media techniques and strategies, whereas earlier extremist groups, such as al-Qâ'eda and the Afghan Taleban, were much less visible. Critically, pro-IS messages were expressed in Russian, on platforms that were popular among Central Asians.⁹⁶ Messages and videos from al-Qâ'eda and the Taleban were mostly in Arabic, Pushto, or Persian, and unlikely to be seen or understood by Central Asians. Smaller Central Asian groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, based in Afghanistan, have never had a significant media presence and have little appeal in Uzbekistan itself. IS understood a basic rule of the media age: the most visible product attracts the greatest attention.

Central Asian language engagement

Online discussions about Syria in Central Asia were dominated by the topic of Islamic State, but there were other producers of extremist content. Those who travelled to Syria in the greatest numbers were ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks so discussions in Uzbek and Tajik were as common as those in Russian. Uzbek was by far the most actively used of Central Asian languages. IS began developing Uzbek-language media channels from 2013. Uzbek members established the KhilofatNews media service, video studios, and video-sharing accounts on YouTube and Vimeo, as well as social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Odnoklassniki. Within a year, however, by November 2014, most of these media outlets had ceased to function.⁹⁷ The reason for this is unclear, but it was probably connected with VKontakte's efforts to close down extremist sites, which began at this time.

While IS ceased to produce Uzbek-language content, the two main ethnic Uzbek groups in Syria became active producers of videos and social media content in Uzbek. The Imom al-Bukhorii Brigade and the Tavhid va Jihod Brigade, were close to al-Qâ'eda and therefore rivals of IS. Many al-Bukhorii fighters were members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who had spent years in exile in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ Led by an Uzbek commander known as Sheikh Salahâddîn al-Uzbeki until his assassination in 2017,⁹⁹ the brigade ran a YouTube channel that uploaded the commander's speeches.

.....
⁹⁶ Bleuer, 'To Syria, not Afghanistan'.

⁹⁷ Tucker, CERIA Brief No 12 (Uzbekistan), p. 2.

⁹⁸ Interview with Tolibov, July 2019.

⁹⁹ Caleb Weiss, 'Al Qaeda affiliated Uzbek leader assassinated in Syria', *Long War Journal*, 30 April 2017.

Tavhid va Jihod consists largely of Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan and was led by a charismatic ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan known as Abu Saloh [aka Sirojiddin Mukhtarov].¹⁰⁰ In 2015, the brigade ran two websites, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel, on which it posted high-quality videos of battles and speeches by its leader.¹⁰¹ The group still hosts a significant online library of religious texts in Uzbek.¹⁰²

Despite the presence of these other significant Central Asian actors in Syria, discussion in Central Asia itself continued to be dominated by talk of Islamic State. Official discussion of extremism, whether from Russia or the Central Asian governments, was couched almost entirely in terms of the IS threat, ignoring the more active messaging from the ethnic brigades taking place in Uzbek. IS thus remained the focus of popular awareness in Central Asia, giving the impression that it dominated the Uzbek jihadist movement, even though many Uzbeks who travelled to Syria joined not IS, but the rival al-Qâ'eda-affiliated brigades.¹⁰³

Compared with Uzbek, local language media in the other Central Asian languages showed much less development. While some 1900 Tajikistan citizens joined IS,¹⁰⁴ Tajiks had no dedicated media outlet in their own language. Tajik-language social media commentary and videos were actively circulated, however, publicising the actions of Tajik fighters, and particularly the most famous Tajik commander, Gulmurod Khalimov.

Unlike Uzbeks and Tajiks, Kazakh jihadists in Syria produced few recruiting videos themselves and no 'celebrity' commanders came forward to promote their exploits online.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, most citizens who travelled to Syria were ethnic Uzbeks. Ethnic Kyrgyz also went, sometimes from Russia, but they were not a significant target audience for IS and there was no independent Kyrgyz brigade in Syria. In mid-2015, Al-Furât Media released one video of a single Kyrgyz jihadist, speaking in Kyrgyz and Arabic, who called on Muslims to emigrate to the caliphate. Filmed in a sun-dappled woodland setting, the video contained

100 Interview with Tolibov, July 2019. (Abu Saloh is accused of responsibility for the 2017 terrorist attack in the St Petersburg metro and also an attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in 2016.)

101 Paraszczuk, 'Uzbeks Arrested for Allegedly Trying to Join Al-Qaeda Group in Syria', *RFE/RL*, 6 November 2015.

102 Interview with Tucker, July 2019.

103 Tucker, CERIA Brief *No 12* (Uzbekistan), p. 3.

104 International Centre for the Study of Radicalization estimate is 1899–2000 (2019); Soufan estimate is 1300 (2017).

no violent scenes and no weapons.¹⁰⁵ It seems likely that few Kyrgyz fighters suitable for propaganda videos were available to Al-Furât to produce more such appeals.

Nasritdinov perhaps sheds light on IS's lack of interest in Kyrgyz recruitment. In a detailed discussion, he reaches the conclusion that Kyrgyz migrants in Russia were generally less susceptible to radicalisation than their Uzbek or Tajik fellow migrants.¹⁰⁶ Along with other experts, he concludes that the Kyrgyz government's relatively liberal religious policy played an important role in this. Religious Kyrgyz are less likely to feel they are being oppressed by a godless state so have less reason to feel angry. Kyrgyzstan's official Islamic religious establishment is also actively involved with migrants in Russia, helping to maintain stabilising community, family, and religious ties.¹⁰⁷ Nasritdinov cites the experience of Kyrgyz migrants who were aware of recruiters visiting and of jihadist propaganda online, but who said the message did not attract them. This discussion would seem to present valuable lessons for other Central Asian republics as their own engagement with the phenomena of jihadism and future extremist groups evolves.

Conclusion

A full assessment of the impact of jihadist media strategies on Central Asia and the wider post-Soviet region is not yet possible. The Islamic State's territorial caliphate has been eliminated, but IS fighters continue to launch attacks in Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Many Russophone Muslims—men, women, and children—remain in detention in Syria. Conflict in the Middle East has become part of the daily information experience for post-Soviet Muslims who are active online. The internet and social media gave the 'jihad' in Syria and Iraq a prominence it would not have had when the Caucasus and Central Asia were sealed inside the controlled information space of the Soviet Union. Extensive post-Soviet and diaspora networks now link Central Asians with other Russian-speaking Muslims in Russia and in Turkey. The internet has brought the distant near.

105 Zelin, 'Al-Furât Media Center presents a new video message from The Islamic State: Message to Our People in Kyrgyzstan', *Jihadology*, 25 July 2015.

106 Nasritdinov, *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants*, p. 10–14.

107 Ibid.

The Caucasus and Central Asia have always been regions of intersecting influences, for reasons of simple geography. The Caucasus lies on the fault line between Christianity and Islam, at the junction of the Turkic, Persian, and Slavic cultural spheres. Central Asia lies in the Eurasian heartland, lodged between competing civilisations—Turkic, Arabic, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and European. Since the end of Soviet isolation, Muslims from Central Asia have been rebuilding ties with the Islamic Middle East. The arrival of conservative religious ideologies and groups—Hizb-ut-Tahrîr, Tablîghî Jamâ'at, Salafism, Islamism—is part of this larger reintegration with the Muslim world.

This process is taking place along a complex pattern of interlinked emerging networks, integrating once disparate and isolated ex-Soviet regions with the wider world along several vectors—post-Soviet networks linking Russophone Muslims; religious networks linking Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East; trade and ethnic ties between Central Asia, Turkey, and Dubai. The evolution and intensification of these networks is facilitated and accelerated by online communications. Just as globalised infotech has revolutionised industry, entertainment, and the media, the formation of new jihadist networks has also been enabled and accelerated.

Seen in this broader context, can it be said that jihadist media engagement was the key factor driving and enabling extremist recruitment from the post-Soviet region on a hitherto unknown scale? The underlying answer is that these emerging communications networks made the Syrian struggle an intrinsic and intimate part of many post-Soviet individuals' personal, cultural, and information concerns—on the basis of which they chose to travel to Syria. Logistically, the Russia-Caucasus-Turkey networks also made it relatively simple to travel to Syria.

If we compare Afghanistan, the first of the modern transnational jihadist wars, nothing in the news reports that reached Central Asia in the post-Soviet 1990s made that endless conflict appear romantic or idealistic to young Tajiks or Uzbeks in Central Asia, and only a trickle of exiled diehards of the IMU elected to fight there. The still largely impenetrable southern borders also meant that travel to Afghanistan was difficult and dangerous.

Syria was a different matter. By 2014, with hourly updates via smartphone and easy access to the warzone prearranged by compatriots on the ground, Syria became the first modern jihadist conflict that engaged large numbers of

Russophone Muslims at a visceral, emotional level. While jihadist adventurism is as baffling for most Central Asians as it is for Western European or American audiences, for the minority who turned to radicalism for a variety of personal reasons, Syria became an irresistible call to action. Without the daily influence of emotionalised media messaging in Russian and local languages, it is unlikely that IS or the Syrian war would have caught the imagination of so many individuals across the region.

Jihadist media were not the cause of the extremist support. That can be found in the underlying drivers of radicalisation. Most specialists emphasise that online engagement per se is not the cause of extremism, but for people of the digital age, increasingly there is no clear division between the online and offline worlds—communication, social interactions, political and emotional engagement, all happen in a seamless information space saturated with internet accessibility. The online information space has, however, been a significant facilitator and amplifier of the extremist message, enabling the instant global dissemination of Islamist ideas to thousands of individuals at the click of a mouse. Yarlykapov (2019), researching the appeal of the ‘ghostly caliphate’ in the Middle East to Muslims working thousands of kilometres away in remote communities in Siberia, has noted the ‘tremendous effectiveness of the propaganda of ISIS’, delivered via modern communications.¹⁰⁸ Nasritdinov et al. likewise note that the internet, with its highly visual culture of traumatic images, ‘has become the main platform for fundraising, plotting, and recruiting and mobilizing people’.¹⁰⁹ Easily accessible via mobile devices, ‘it was the main channel through which some of our more radically minded interlocutors obtained information that interested them’.¹¹⁰

In the same way that earlier advances in communications, from the railway to the telephone, enabled early extremist groups to organise more effectively, recent advances in information technology have vastly facilitated the reach and mobilisation of modern extremist organisations. IS was the first VEO to exploit this new technological facility on a mass scale. The SecDev survey of 2018 concludes that research on the overall impact of social media on extremist recruitment is still inconclusive, and that evidence for its role among Central Asian recruits is largely anecdotal. Social media, it concludes, may play an

108 Akhmet Yarlykapov, ‘Islamic State propaganda in the North Caucasus’ in Fridman *et al*, p. 221.

109 Nasritdinov *Vulnerability of Labor Migrants*, p. 12–13.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

amplifying or supportive role in recruitment, with the primary pathway being ‘the direct relationship between recruiter and recruit’.¹¹¹ That said, the fact remains that without social media, many of those direct relationships would not have been established. In a pre-internet age, thousands of Central Asians would not have sought to join a ‘jihad’ in the Middle East. Social media are enabling the emergence of new forms of networking, replacing older forms of organisational membership.¹¹² Extremist organisations skilled in this new networking are ideally placed to exploit them to engage individuals scattered across the vast territory of the post-Soviet region.

In areas such as Central Asia, where traditional media are weak and access to reliable information is often limited, online modes of engagement are now embedded in the information culture. As a result, Islamic State’s strategic communications have had a profound impact on the lives of thousands of post-Soviet individuals and families. This experience suggests strongly the need to understand better the dynamic interplay between radical ideologies and media engagement in the post-Soviet context, so the region can be better prepared for the future extremist movements that are bound to emerge.

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¹¹¹ *Violent Extremism in Central Asia*, p. 24.

¹¹² McDonald, *Radicalization*, p. 18.

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