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Jihad's New Frontier: Tajikistan

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A new front line against Islamist militancy involving the Islamic State is forming along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, where multiple groups of Central Asian militants, as well as the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, have been joining forces with the Islamic State to challenge secular regimes in former Soviet republics.

According to senior Tajik military and intelligence officers, thousands of these fighters have captured large stretches of northern Afghanistan, positioning them to seize strategic Afghan towns and pour back into Central Asia. This raises the prospect of a major expansion of Islamist militancy in three fragile states that have so far been spared it. Russian troops have long been stationed in Tajikistan as its protector, so the possibility of a widening war there cannot be dismissed. Two months ago, some 2,500 troops from Russia and six former Soviet republics held military exercises near the Afghan border.

Nevertheless, there seems to be little appreciation in Western capitals of this growing crisis. Which is astonishing, because the militants seem poised not just to menace Central Asia but also to unravel gains in stability that America and NATO fought for in Afghanistan after 9/11.

NATO and American forces used a Tajik air base to gain access to Afghanistan from 2002 until last year, but now have left. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's fate remains a major American interest, and so the West should push back against the rise of militancy and increase its aid to the region. In doing so, it will have to be willing to work with Russia, and vice versa.

Why not just leave Central Asia to Moscow to sort out, if it wants? One reason is that only a fast-flowing river separates the Central Asian states from Afghanistan, and Central Asian militants who have spent the past decade hiding out in Pakistan are now being helped by their Taliban allies in northern Afghanistan to get access to Central Asia. This year's Taliban spring offensive has been the heaviest since 2001, with the militants' main goal apparently to control strategic towns and territory along the entire 1,200-mile border with Central Asia.

I recently met with senior Tajik military and intelligence officers who rarely talk to reporters — and never do so on the record because they are forbidden to publicly discuss sensitive security issues. They told me that more than 5,000 Central Asian militants from half a dozen groups were fighting in northern Afghanistan alongside several thousand Afghan and Pakistani Taliban members. In late April, those forces came within two miles of Kunduz, a major Afghan city. The Afghan Army pushed them back, but only to 10 miles outside the town.

Other Central Asian militants are concentrated in the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan, a mountainous region adjacent to Tajikistan to the north, Pakistan to the south, and China to the east — a potential roundabout for multiple cross-border acts of terror.

Prominent among them is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, made up of militants from a range of Turkic-speaking groups and bent on creating a caliphate from Turkey to Xinjiang Province in China, which is populated by Uighurs, a Muslim Turkic people. Tajik officials say other groups include the primarily Uzbek Jundullah; the Tajik-dominated Jamaat Ansarullah; and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, largely made up of Uighurs. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmen fighters are sprinkled through these groups.

"We don't know enough about their intentions, their strategy or their capabilities," one top Tajik security official said. "We need the support of all countries, especially regional countries, to meet this threat."

One surprise for Central Asian governments has been a turn toward the Islamic State by their own nations' militants; some 1,500 Central Asians — 300 of them Tajiks — are fighting for the Islamic State in Syria now, local officials estimate.

A greater shock to the Tajik government was the defection of Col. Gulmurod Khalimov to the Islamic State. A renowned special forces police commander, he disappeared in April, leaving behind two wives and eight children, and reappeared in a video in late May, saying he was now in Syria. He denounced the Tajik leadership and told Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rakhmon, "We are coming to you with slaughter, inshallah." Tajik and Western officials worry that he possessed intelligence about the Tajik government's defense plans, Russian and Chinese plans to support Central Asian governments, and training methods used by Tajik security forces.

The extent of radicalization of Tajik youth, however, is in fact still small. And Tajikistan's eight million people are predominantly Sufis — a moderate branch of Islam. They are particularly wary of Islamist extremism because a devastating five-year civil war that ended in 1997 left 50,000 people dead. Nevertheless, their loyalty may be fragile because the country remains the poorest former Soviet republic and has been ruled since 1992 by an authoritarian president, Mr. Rakhmon.

Meeting this threat will require changes by all parties that do not want a united front of Islamist militants destabilizing Central Asia and regaining ground in Afghanistan.

Specifically, the Central Asian governments must realize that repressing all expressions of Islamic faith only plays into militants' hands. They must stop banning beards for men and burqas for women, and banning Islamic studies in schools. Such policies invariably lead to radicalization.

Meanwhile, Russia, China and America must work jointly — first to shore up Afghanistan and then the Central Asian states. That means more than counterterrorism. These countries need economic aid, infrastructure projects and coordination among themselves to institute reforms.

Afghanistan became an extended tragedy during the Cold War when the United States and Russia took opposing sides in its civil wars. Then, despite the American spending of billions of dollars and thousands of lives, only minimal and tentative cooperation among Russia, China and America accompanied the West's effort to pacify Afghanistan. That history must not be repeated. The new militancy on the Afghan-Central Asian border is an opportunity for Russia and the United States to finally stand together against extremism.

Ahmed Rashid is the author of five books on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, including, most recently, "Pakistan on the Brink."