

**Testimony before the
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
“Islamist Militant Threats to Eurasia”
February 27, 2013**

Chairman Royce, Rep. Rohrabacher, Members of Congress, Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Jacob Zenn. I am a Research Analyst of Eurasian and African Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing the official position of The Jamestown Foundation.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on the topic of "Islamist Militant Threats to Eurasia."

In this testimony, I will answer the following questions:

- 1) What are America's core interests in Central Asia?
- 2) Are Central Asian Islamist militants a threat to Central Asia?
- 3) Who are the main Central Asian Islamist militant groups?
- 4) Do these militant groups have global operations, aspirations and capabilities?
- 5) What is the role of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Central Asian militancy?
- 6) Where are the areas most vulnerable to Islamist militant infiltration?
- 7) Have Russia and China countered Central Asian militant groups?
- 8) Can the US-Uzbek relationship be the pillar in a post-2013 security framework?
- 9) What influences undermine traditional practices of Islam in Central Asia?
- 10) What can the United States do to show leadership and foster cooperation between national governments to meet the emerging threats in Central Asia?

1) What are America's core interests in Central Asia?

America's core interests in Central Asia are:

- Ensuring stability of Afghanistan
- Promoting moderate religious influences
- Helping mitigate drug trafficking
- Balancing influences of Russia and China
- Access to energy resources especially Kazakh oil and Turkmen gas
- Protecting U.S. investment
- Ensuring European energy security
- Combating international terrorism
- Pressuring Iran on nuclear restraint
- Realizing the New Silk Road strategy

Central Asian countries are key to ensuring a stable Afghanistan. The United States is preparing to withdraw most of its forces from Afghanistan in 2013, but the future of Afghanistan is uncertain, with civil war or a return to ethnic-based warfare a possibility.

Central Asian countries can share the responsibility to ensure that Afghanistan develops economically and is connected to Central Asia via rail and road routes and mutually beneficial trade relationships. This will support Afghanistan's economic viability and allow Afghans to have more interaction with the moderate religious influences of its Central Asian neighbors as compared to its western neighbor, Iran, and eastern neighbor, Pakistan.

Central Asian countries have an interest in preventing Afghanistan from collapsing. First, an unstable Afghanistan would be unable to prevent Islamist militants from infiltrating the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and further northwards to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Second, ethnic Turkmen, Kyrgyzs, Tajiks and Uzbeks all live in northern Afghanistan and ethnic warfare in Afghanistan could have an adverse effect on inter-ethnic relations in Central Asia.

The United States can work with Central Asian countries towards securing a more prosperous and stable Afghanistan. If the United States leaves Afghanistan worse off than it was in 2001, it would damage U.S. credibility. Moreover, Afghanistan could once again become a staging ground for attacks on the United States, its allies in Europe and countries in Central Asia.

It is important to recognize that Central Asia is a core interest to the United States beyond Afghanistan policy. The responses to the questions below discuss these interests and the threat that Islamist militants pose to U.S. interests in Central Asia and Central Asian countries.

2) Are Central Asian Islamist militants a threat to Central Asia?

Yes. Central Asian Islamist militant groups, in particular the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), are stronger than they ever have been before. Many groups formed in the 1990s, but their fighters have become more battle-hardened after fighting against the United States, the Afghan army and the Pakistani army for the past twelve years. One major difference between Central Asian Islamist militants of the 1990s and the Central Asian Islamist militants of today is that now they harbor a hatred of the United States after fighting against the United States since 2001.

One militant group called Jund al-Khilafa (The Army of the Caliphate), which was founded by three Kazakhs, announced its formation in summer 2011 by issuing a series of three videos of its members launching attacks against the United States in Khost, Afghanistan. In October 2011, Jund al-Khilafa then launched its first in a series of attacks in Kazakhstan. For Jund al-Khilafa, attacking American troops in

Afghanistan was very much its “right of passage” to enter the community of militant groups before Jund al-Khilafah later joined with al-Qaeda in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

Militant groups also view as their enemies the secular governments of all five Central Asian countries, China and Russia; non-Muslims, especially the Chinese and Indians, whom they consider as having no religion; and Iran because of its promotion of Shia Islam, which the militants consider as apostasy. Despite competition – and even enmity – between the United States, China, Russia and Iran, there is a mutual interest in preventing the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the rise of Central Asian militant groups.

Some may argue that Central Asian militant groups like the IMU are content in Afghanistan and Pakistan and that, despite their Central Asian roots, they do not intend to return to Central Asia. It is true that some members of the IMU have been based in Afghanistan or Pakistan for two decades, learned Pashto and Urdu and have little desire to leave their refuge.

However, I would dispute that the overall orientation of Central Asian militant groups has shifted from Central Asia for the long-term. I showed in an article called “IMU Reestablishes Bases In Northern Afghanistan” in the SAIS Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst in February 2012 that the IMU is already repositioning itself in northern Afghanistan, where it will use bases to launch attacks into Central Asia.

More recently, on February 21, 2013, the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan reported that: “An Afghan and coalition security force arrested six insurgents during an operation in search of an Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan leader in Kunduz. Kunduz is located in northern Afghanistan, bordering Tajikistan. Reports like this one have becoming increasingly common in 2012 and 2013.”

The IMU may also coordinate attacks in Central Asia with its affiliates already based in Central Asia, such as Jamaat Ansarullah (Supporters of God) in Tajikistan. A Jamestown Foundation article by Igor Rotar titled “Islamic Extremist Group Jamaat Ansarullah Overcomes Tajikistan’s Inter-Tribal Conflicts” from September 2012 discusses the relationship between the IMU and Jamaat Ansarullah.

Afghan leaders in northern Afghanistan are also aware of the IMU’s presence in the region, especially since the IMU is often responsible for carrying out suicide bombings and assassination of leading politicians and tribal leaders. Many IMU leaders double-up as Taliban regional leaders and support the Taliban. The Taliban has historically been weak in northern Afghanistan, which is populated mostly by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, but not Pashtuns, who form the core of the Taliban. Therefore, the Taliban has always found it difficult to control northern Afghanistan, but the IMU can help them achieve this goal. According to Mohammad Omar, a governor in Northern Afghanistan, “al Qaeda and terrorist groups from Chechnya, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan” want to establish bases in northeastern northern

Afghanistan “for further actions against Central Asian countries” (Eurasia.net, January 24, 2010).

Al-Qaeda and its allied militant groups have proven to be patient, often waiting months or years to execute a desired attack— and this is true not only in Central Asia, but globally. For example, in January 2013, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (AQIM) allies in the militia Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) advanced toward Bamako, Mali’s capital before AQIM and MUJWA had consolidated control of northern Mali. As a result, France intervened and pushed AQIM, MUJWA, and their Islamist allies out from their bases in northern Mali, destroying the Islamists’ project of establishing Islamic Law in northern Mali.

Recently, the Associated Press uncovered documents from Timbuktu, Mali showing that AQIM’s leader had encouraged patience among the other Islamist militias like MUJWA. AQIM’s leader did not want to instigate the West to intervene in the region, but the other militias failed to heed the advice.

Central Asian militant groups currently lack the capacity to infiltrate Central Asia because the strong, centralized governments in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have effectively clamped down on any sign of militant activity or expression of support for Islamists. It is strategically more sensible for the Central Asian militants to bide their time in Afghanistan and Pakistan – like the AQIM leader recommended in Mali – and wait for unstable political transitions, ethnic conflicts, or other crises in Central Asia before launching their offensive.

They will also wait for the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan before diverting resources and fighters from the fight against the Americans to the fight against the Central Asian regimes. There has been much talk in the United States about the unreliability of Pakistan for shipping out military supplies from Afghanistan as the withdrawal gets underway. Is the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) going to be secure with military supplies passing through northern Afghanistan into Central Asia? It remains to be seen whether the IMU and the Taliban will attempt to attack these convoys. However, it would fit in with their overall strategy to attack these convoys and portray the American withdrawal as the victory of the mujahideen.

If an offensive is launched in Central Asia, it will be unlikely that the militants can overthrow the governments in Central Asia or destroy the secular states of Central Asia. However, terrorist attacks will weaken the Central Asian states, which are already struggling with severe political and social problems due to the slow transition to market economy and democracy. The militants’ bombings, armed incursions and insurgency outbreaks will result in losses in human lives and material destruction. But if the broader mission of establishing Islamic States in Central Asia is to succeed, the militants will have to capitalize on growing public discontent with the current governments in the region, which many people in the region consider repressive and incompetent or corrupt.

The Islamist militants came close to succeeding in holding territory in Central Asia in the late 1990s and could succeed again. In a speech on September 11, 2011 at the Transit Center at Manas given by Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva, the first woman president in Central Asia and the least authoritarian leader in modern Central Asian history, she said: “We clearly remember the events of 1999-2000, when the guerillas of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan invaded Batken and Osh oblasts, intent on the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and the further spread of its influence within the region. At that time, in the north of Afghanistan there were a number of terrorist bases involving the citizens of numerous countries, including the CIS (Community of Independent States). And no one can say what would have happened in Central Asia, including in our country, if after the tragic events of 9/11, NATO's operation against international terrorism in Afghanistan had not been launched. Literally, this effort kept our territory safe from large-scale incursions by Taliban terrorists and other extremist groups.”

President Otunbayeva went on to warn that the Islamist extremists, together with al Qaeda and the Taliban, have not given up their attempts to establish new terrorist bases in Central Asia.

3) Who are the main Central Asian militant groups?

The following are the main Central Asian militant groups:

- The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its offshoot the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU);
- The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which was formerly known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM);
- Jund al-Khilafaha (Army of the Caliphate); and
- Hizb ut Tahrir (Party of Liberation).

While it is analytically convenient to break Central Asian Islamist militants into distinct groups, many militants do not identify with one particular group. Rather they identify with the broader “mujahideen” network and may fight for whichever group, brigade or cell is in their operational area at the time.

The case of Mohammed Merah is illustrative of how group names can differ depending on the individual's perspective. Merah trained in Pakistan's tribal areas with Jund al-Khilafa, which was then led by a Swiss citizen of North African descent (although it was founded by Kazakhs). When Merah, a French citizen of North African descent, returned to France in early 2012, he carried out a series of murders

of Jews and paratroopers of North African descent. After a manhunt, Merah was finally cornered by French security forces in his apartment. When asked by the security forces for whom he operated, Merah simply said “al-Qaeda.”

However, Merah had in fact trained with Jund al-Khilafah, which Merah likely perceived as al-Qaeda because Jund al-Khilafa is in al-Qaeda’s broader network. Merah’s training with Jund al-Khilafa has been documented by CNN’s Paul Cruickshank in “Investigations shed new light on Toulouse terrorist shootings.”

Merah’s story shows how militants can go to Pakistan’s tribal regions and join the “mujahideen,” but not be aware of the group’s official name— if the group even has an official name. Often “al-Qaeda” comes to represent the broader mujahideen network. Finally, Merah’s story also highlights the how militants with European passports can transfer from one theater to another with more ease than Central Asian nationals.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU):

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, IMU militants were forced out of Uzbekistan by Islam Karimov’s crackdown on Islamist militants. The crackdown on the IMU and other militants strengthened after militants attempted to assassinate President Karimov in 1999 and carried out attacks on the U.S. and Israeli facilities in Uzbekistan in 2004. However, from the mid-1990s, the militants were able to establish bases in Tajikistan, taking advantage of the country’s instability following a 1992-1997 civil war, and create a presence in areas of northern Afghanistan under Taliban control.

With the American invasion of Afghanistan to root out the Taliban and its allies in October 2001, the IMU fled to Pakistan. From 2001 to 2007, the IMU set up training camps in South Waziristan under the protection of Waziri Taliban commander Maulvi Nazir, whose fighters were taking advantage of their mountainous homeland to regroup and launch attacks against American forces in Afghanistan.

The IMU was evicted in 2007 from South Waziristan to other parts of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by Maulvi Nazir partly because Uzbek fighters offended local customs and acted like an “occupying” force in Pashtun territory. When the IMU joined Baitullah Mehsud’s faction of the Taliban around 2009, it had to accept Mehsud’s priorities, foremost of which was fighting the Pakistani state. The IMU and Pakistani Taliban remain in partnership today, with Uzbeks carrying out some of the most brazen attacks against Pakistani security forces, such as the December 2012 attack at Peshawar airport and the Bannu Prison Break in April 2012, which freed Adnan Rashid, who was on death row for having plotted to assassinate then President Pervez Musharraf into 2003. Since his escape, Rashid has admitted to his guilt in plotting to assassinate Musharraf, despite denying it for years while behind bars.

The IJU, which was first called the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG), was founded in 2002 in South Waziristan by two ethnic Uzbeks who were former IMU fighters, including Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih (a.k.a. Najmiddin Jalolov). In contrast to the IMU, which had its roots in Namangan in the Ferghana Valley in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the IJU had its roots in the post- 9/11 multi-ethnic jihad milieu of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier in which America is defined as the main enemy. Even though Fatih may have intended for the IJU to focus on Uzbekistan, from its inception the IJU appealed to young and internationally minded “foreign” fighters, including Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Germans, and Turks, to fill its ranks.

After the IJU’s formation, some Uzbek fighters in Pakistan continued to follow Tahir Yuldash (or Yuldashov), the leader of the IMU from its formation in 1998 until his death in a 2009 U.S. drone strike. Yuldash prioritized overthrowing the “apostate” regime in Uzbekistan and other regimes in “Turkistan” (the name for Central Asia preferred by Islamists), but fighters in the IJU were too preoccupied with expelling the American forces in Afghanistan to focus on Central Asia.

Over the course of the 2000s the international agenda of the IJU gained popularity among IMU fighters, with the IMU eventually dropping the liberation of the Ferghana Valley as its top priority. So long as the IMU was based in Pakistan, the Uzbekistan regime led by President Islam Karimov was less of a direct threat to the IMU than the Pakistani army or international forces operating in the region.

However, Yuldash was recorded in a video released shortly after he was killed in a U.S. drone strike saying, “Our goal is not only conquering Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Our goal is to conquer the entire world.” This makes one question whether Yuldash’s decision to focus on Pakistan was to win the support of the Taliban, but not reflective of his true target, which remained on Uzbekistan.

As of 2013, the IMU is arm-in-arm with the Pakistani Taliban, but also sending forces to northern Afghanistan to help the Taliban in Afghanistan. With several thousand members from multiples nationalities, it more of a small army than a typical terrorist group, with capabilities from terrorist attacks to armed incursions in urban and especially rural areas, where it can seize territory, as it did in the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan in the late 1990s. The IMU’s mandate is more than only Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, with all of “Turkistan” in its aims. In fact, at times the IMU has been reported to also be called the IMT—Islamic Movement of Turkistan.

(The above is excerpted from “The Indigenization of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan,” written by Jacob Zenn for The Jamestown Foundation in January 2012.)

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) (formerly known as ETIM – East Turkistan Islamic Movement)

Since its creation in 2008, the Uyghur-based Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) has vowed to carry out jihad against the “Communist Chinese occupiers” of Xinjiang.

Xinjiang is the large western province of China that borders Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and is known to many of its Muslim inhabitants as “East Turkistan”— a term which is banned in China for its separatist undertones.

While evidence of actual TIP operations in China is slight and the TIP appears to remain confined to its training camps in the tribal areas of Pakistan, the TIP has tried to reach out to the larger Islamic world through a sophisticated and glossy online magazine, “Islamic Turkistan,” and sophisticated multi-lingual video propaganda messages targeted to Russian speaking Central Asians and militants from Turkey.

The TIP used to be known as ETIM, which was then more of a Xinjiang nationalist movement. Now the TIP supports broader internationalist goals beyond Xinjiang. According to the twelfth edition of the TIP’s Arabic language online magazine, “Islamic Turkistan,” which was published on jihadi forums in February 2013 (but also made available in the open-source at jihadology.net), the TIP’s goals are:

First: Creating religious fellowship of Muslims in Turkistan [the term jihadists use to refer to Central Asia] in order to wage Jihad for Allah and spread his word.

Second: The preparation of Muslims in Turkistan and bringing them back to the right Islamic path; to make them worship only Allah; and to implement the Sharia of Allah. It will also help Muslims in uniting and elevating the name and the message of our religion.

Third: Working and cooperating with other Jihad groups around the world in order to help them protect themselves and beat the infidels.

Fourth: Cooperating with loyal Muslims and the Jihadists in Turkistan and in other places in the Islamic world in order to protect the Islamic nation from the infidels. This includes numerous means such as military means, cultural means, economical means and more.

Fifth: Protecting the Islamic holy warriors and supporting them and giving them a helping hand around the world.

Notably, the first two leaders of ETIM and the former leader of the TIP, Abdul Shakur al-Turkistani, were all highly integrated in al-Qaeda’s ranks, with al-Turkistani having served as al-Qaeda commander for Pakistan’s tribal areas.

The largest recent TIP attacks took place on July 30-31, 2011 in Kashgar, Xinjiang Province, China. The attacks began on the evening of July 30 when a car bomb detonated on a street lined with pedestrians and food stalls frequented by Han Chinese. Shortly after, two Uyghur men hijacked a truck, killed its driver, and then

steered the truck onto the sidewalk and into the food stalls and then stabbed people at random.

On July 31, another attack occurred on a popular dining and shopping street for Han Chinese. After two blasts at one restaurant, as many as 10 Uighur men shot and stabbed people indiscriminately, including the firefighters who came to the rescue. Overall, more than 10 civilians and eight attackers were killed and more than 40 others wounded in the two days. More details are available in an article I wrote for the CTC Sentinel in September 2011 called "Violence Escalates in China's Xinjiang Province."

China has significant leverage over Pakistan because China is Pakistan's most important strategic partner, with the two countries forming an alliance to balance against India. It is likely that Pakistan has tried to keep the TIP in check in order not receive China's condemnation for allowing anti-Chinese militants to train on Pakistani territory. The U.S. seems not to have been able to exercise this same leverage over Pakistan, or Pakistan has simply been incapable or unwilling to stamp out anti-American militants in the tribal regions.

Jund al-Khilafa (JaK)

Jund al-Khilafah, meaning "Army of the Caliphate," is now based in Pakistan's tribal areas, but has cells reported in the North Caucasus. Jund al-Khilafah entered the international jihadi scene several months after Nursultan Nazarbayev won the presidential elections in Kazakhstan in April 2011 with 95.5% of the vote and after Kazakhstan passed a controversial religion law.

The group first released videos in September and October 2011 of three attacks it claimed to have led against U.S. forces in Afghanistan over summer 2011. Contrary to popular belief that Jund al-Khilafah emerged from nowhere, there were signs of Kazakh militant groups in the late 2000s operating with the Islamic Jihad Union and other North Caucasus insurgents. The Russian North Caucasus, which includes unstable regions such as Dagestan and Chechnya, is located only 300 miles from Western Kazakhstan across the Caspian Sea. The flow of trade, militants, and Salafist ideology from the North Caucasus to Western Kazakhstan has been a cause for the spike in militancy in that region of Kazakhstan in recent years.

In 2011, Jund al-Khilafah carried out at least three attacks in Atyrau, Taraz and Almaty, while in 2012 its main operation was in connection to Mohammed Merah's killing spree in France. Other attacks in Kazakhstan have been carried out by Salafist-Jihadists in 2011 and 2012, but these militants do not appear to belong to a particular group. Rather, it has been through their Salafist education that they have become radicalized, as discussed in the article "Kazakhstan Struggles to Contain Salafist-Inspired Terrorism" written for The Jamestown Foundation in September 2012.

Hizb ut Tahrir (HuT)

HuT was founded by diaspora Palestinians in 1952 and believes it is obligatory for every Muslim to work toward the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate; that no other system of law but Sharia is permissible; and that it is *haram* (forbidden) for Muslim states to seek protection from America or other *kufaar* (non-Islamic) states. HuT has been suppressed in Uzbekistan, where it first gained popularity in Central Asia in the 1990s, and most of Kazakhstan, but in Kyrgyzstan HuT has reemerged with an estimated 20,000 to 100,000 members.

Moreover, after the ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, HuT made inroads into northern Kyrgyzstan, near Kazakhstan's border. Although HuT members profess non-violence, some of them have been radicalized by way of their increased contacts with Afghanistan and they are often reported to be storing weapons for "self-defense."

Many Islamists first join Salafist groups like HuT before moving on to Salafist-Jihadist militant groups like the IMU. Salafist groups are therefore a bridge to militancy. HuT has also begun using the Internet to recruit new members and spread propaganda and is focusing on recruiting youths and women in Central Asia.

While the majority of Central Asians do not support HuT, they may respect some of its objectives, such as its opposition to U.S. foreign policy and its call for more economic equality. The same is true for the IMU and other militant groups. While most people in Central Asia do not support the IMU, they may agree with the IMU's condemnation of governmental corruption. Some Kazakhs may also sympathize with Jund al-Khilafah's anger at the country's new religion law, but not agree with the group's use of violence to achieve its ends. Similarly, Uyghurs in Xinjiang may agree with the TIP that China has not adequately protected their cultural, linguistic and religious rights in Xinjiang, but not agree with the TIP's killing of ethnic Han Chinese civilians.

Note: Although it is beyond the scope of the discussion today, it is important to mention that the Caucasus Emirate is seeking to expand its financial and operational networks from the North Caucasus to the Russian Volga and Ural regions and Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. There has been a steady rise of Salafism in those regions in recent years, with many HuT cells broken up. New militant groups also have formed which target imams who do not support a strict interpretation of Sharia Law.

4) Do these groups have global operations, aspirations and capabilities?

Yes. Every one of the aforementioned Central Asian militant groups has carried out operations outside of the Central and South Asian region. Virtually all Central Asian militants desire the return of the idealized Islamic Caliphate which, according to

Salafists, existed in the 7th century when the Muslim Prophet Muhammad lived. On the regional level, most – if not all – Central Asian groups desire to create an Islamic Caliphate called Turkistan, which would unite all Central Asian peoples under one Islamic political system.

In the 1990s, militant groups like the IMU and the TIP's predecessor, ETIM, were at least in part nationalist insurgencies with an Islamist core, but this is not the case anymore. They are now Islamist militant groups with national, regional and global objectives. The IMU still wants to overthrow the Karimov government and the TIP has the goal to “liberate” Xinjiang from its “Communist Chinese oppressors,” but they also harbor the goal of international jihad and seek to “liberate” their brothers in other lands.

For example, the TIP's online magazine has discussed Uyghur fighters fighting in Syria and lent their support to the militants (presumably Jabhat al-Nusra and other Salafist-Jihadists) to overthrow the al-Assad regime. This is doubly meaningful to the TIP because its two “near enemies” – Russia and China – are the biggest international supporters of the al-Assad regime, as the TIP discussed in its online magazine.

Jund al-Khilafah also has global ambitions. It has followed other Central Asian jihadi movements in supporting the creation of an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia and the greater Islamic World. In a statement in 2011, JaK said “This name [Jund al-Khilafa] reminds Muslims of their duty to revive the Islamic Caliphate as a system. ... It is the system of Shariah-based governance that must be prevail in every Muslim country from the east to the west. ... We believe that the region of Central Asia, in addition to the Islamic Maghreb [North Africa] and Yemen, are candidates to be the nucleus for the return of the Caliphate State in the future.” It is notable that Jund al-Khilafah mentioned the Maghreb and Yemen, where strong al-Qaeda affiliates also operate—al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

The new generation of Central Asian militants is exposed and well connected to the Taliban and al-Qaeda network, with whom they fought side by side in Afghanistan. This is the generation of Central Asian militants that has fought against the U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. They will look to find new business in the post-2013 era—if not in Afghanistan and Pakistan, then in Central Asia, and if not there then in Kashmir, the West or Africa.

5) What is the role of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Central Asian militancy?

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban do not focus on planning attacks in Central Asia. However, Central Asia fits into their overall ambitions to rid the Muslim World of secular governments, especially those countries with close ties to the United States, Israel and the West. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are more than willing to provide support in

terms of training, financing and ideological preparation to Central Asian militants to enable them to carry out attacks in Central Asia.

Many leaders of Central Asian militant groups have been closely tied to al-Qaeda and moved within al-Qaeda leadership circles, such as former TIP leader Abdul Shakur al-Turkistani, who was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan's tribal areas along with members of the Pakistani Taliban in late 2012. The IMU and the Pakistani Taliban also operate a united front, as described by Amir Mir in a February 2013 article for The News called "Taliban form special unit for operations to free prisoners."

Finally, al-Qaeda and the Taliban play a crucial role in financing and sustaining groups like the IMU, Jund al-Khilafaha and the TIP. One of the key ways they do this is through drug trafficking. The IMU in northern Afghanistan is often responsible for funneling drugs from southern Afghanistan to Central Asia and on to Russia and Europe. As but one example, one of the IMU's main leaders is Usman Ghazi, who replaced Osman Adil in August 2012 after Adil was killed in a drone strike. Ghazi is a former drug and arms trafficker.

Another way these groups are financed are from donations from the Persian Gulf region. This is why many of the TIP's publications are in Arabic. Jund al-Khilafa was reportedly funded by Salafist networks based in Western Kazakhstan, as detailed in "Terror Networks Link Kazakhstani Fighters in Afghanistan and North Caucasus to the Home Front," which I wrote for the Jamestown Foundation in July 2012.

6) Where are the areas most vulnerable to Islamist militant infiltration?

The three most likely areas where Islamist militant groups in Central Asia could infiltrate are:

- The Fergana Valley
 - Tajikistan's Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) and Rasht Valley
 - Western Kazakhstan
-
- The Fergana Valley includes parts of Uzbekistan, such as Andijon, parts of Kyrgyzstan, such as Osh and Jalalabad (not to be confused with Jalalabad, Afghanistan), and parts of northern Tajikistan. The interethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz majority and the ethnic Uzbek minority in the Fergana Valley in 2010 resulted in 500 or more deaths and about 300,000 displaced ethnic Uzbeks.

More recently, in January 2013, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan came to the brink of fighting after a skirmish in an Uzbekistan enclave in Kyrgyzstan. For more details on this recent conflict, please read Igor Rotar's article for The Jamestown Foundation called "Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Heighten Tensions in Violent Local Border Dispute."

The numerous border issues in Fergana, if left unresolved, will be a constant source of conflict that could escalate into regional war in the future. There are also concerns that a military bloated Uzbekistan after 2013 could use military force to resolve such conflicts with Kyrgyzstan, especially if President Karimov's successor is more prone to use military force than President Karimov.

- Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, also known as GBAO, borders Afghanistan's own Badakhshan province and was the scene of clashes between the Tajik government and warlords in 2012. GBAO's long and poorly protected border with Afghanistan runs through remote and difficult terrain, which allows smugglers, political and religious extremists, and terrorists to travel to and from Afghanistan, and is an entry for Central Asian militants into the region.

The Rasht Valley in Central Tajikistan has also been an area of instability and political, religious and clan-based warfare. A short-lived Islamic State was set up by the IMU in a town in the Valley in the late 1990s.

- Western Kazakhstan is where the United States and other Western countries have important oil and energy interests. Kazakhstan's Tengri news agency reported that 90 percent of the province's 8,000 practicing Muslims, are believed to be between the ages of 13 and 30, and 70% of the young people are influenced by Salafism. Jund al-Khilafa emerged from Western Kazakhstan, which is less than a 300-mile boat ride from the Russian North Caucasus. Western Kazakhstan is also where the Zhanaozen protests, which turned deadly in 2011, took place. The Kazakh security services have been quite successful in breaking up terrorist cells in its Western region in 2012.

The events in Mali in 2012 are important to recall. How Central Asian militant groups seize territory would likely depend on events external to the groups' operations, but the militants could capitalize on insecurity anywhere, just as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb did in Mali. For now, it is most likely that Central Asian militants would be able to destabilize these aforementioned regions, but not seize territory as they tried to do in the late 1990s.

The weak and fractured states in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will continue to be a concern. It is important that the U.S. and other countries in Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and especially China and India work together to build the economies in these two countries. Development and security are inherently linked, and one cannot exist without the other.

7) Have Russia and China countered Central Asian militant groups?

Russia is mostly focused on combating militants in the Russian North Caucasus, such as Chechnya and Dagestan. China is mostly concerned with the TIP (which China

anachronistically still calls ETIM), but less on the Taliban and other Central Asian Islamist groups that do not specifically target China.

China's current policy with respect to Central Asian militants other than the TIP is likely short-sighted. As China grows in economic and political power, it is likely to be seen as an enemy on par with the United States. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, despite being based in northern Africa, threatened China after China cracked down on protests that turned into riots and violence in Urumqi in 2009. Most recently, the IMU's mufti Abu Zar al-Burmi, a Pakistani of ethnic Burmese Rohingya origin, threatened revenge against China for China's alleged support of the Burmese government's treatment of the Rohingyas in Rakhine State.

Russia's main security mechanism in Central Asia is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Exercises in September 2012 were focused on dealing with social uprisings similar to those seen in North Africa and the Middle East and the threat from Islamist militants. China's main security mechanism is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia wants to make sure that the CSTO, in which China does not participate, remains the key Central Asian security network. There are concerns that Russia will use the prospect of instability in Central Asia to further an agenda to gain greater political, economic and military influence in the region at the expense of the U.S. and China.

The SCO was created in 2001 as an economic and security body including Russia, China, and the five Central Asian countries. The SCO evolved from the Shanghai Five, which was created in 1996 in order to demarcate China's borders with its Central Asian neighbors, a goal that the organization achieved successfully.

Today, the SCO is focused on countering the three evils of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism." This is not only distinctly Chinese wording, but also underscores that China and other SCO members will provide mutual support to one another if one member suppresses a domestic uprising, mass protest movement or insurgency within its borders. The SCO also plays an important role in opening doors for China to strengthen its economic ties to Central Asia.

It is unclear whether China would intervene to support an SCO member in the event of a major crisis. However, the crises in 2010 and January 2013 in southern Kyrgyzstan suggest that China would be extremely reluctant to intervene in a neighboring state's internal affairs. Russia might be less reluctant than China to intervene in the case of a Central Asian security crisis, but Russia, too, did not intervene militarily to stop the ethnic clashes in Osh in 2010.

In sum, Russia and China's security mechanisms are not specifically geared towards preventing Central Asian Islamist militant groups from launching attacks in Central Asia or responding to many of the causes that drive young Central Asians to join such groups.

8) Can the US-Uzbek relationship be the pillar in a post-2013 security framework?

Yes. For any U.S. strategy in Central Asia region to succeed, it will need Uzbekistan's partnership. Uzbekistan stands in the geographic center of Central Asia, bordering on every other Central Asian country, as well as Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has the largest population in Central Asia with 30 million people now, which is almost as large as the populations of Kazakhstan (17 million), Tajikistan (7 million), Kyrgyzstan (6 million) and Turkmenistan (5 million) combined.

Moreover, Uzbekistan's population is comprised mostly of ethnic Uzbeks, but ethnic Kyrgyzs, Kazakhs, Turkmen and Tajiks all form significant minority populations. Ethnic Tajiks, for example, populate two of Central Asia's most important historic and cultural cities, Samarkand and Bukhara, which are both located in southern Uzbekistan.

In sum, if Uzbekistan is unstable or unwilling to cooperate with the United States, it will be hard for the U.S. to achieve any of its goals in Central Asia. On the contrary, with Uzbekistan's support the United States can play a larger role in security, economic and political affairs in Central Asia in the long-term future. Uzbekistan is also the key country in Central Asia that rejects Russian domination of the region.

Uzbekistan, like the other countries in the region, welcome the U.S. presence as a way to balance against Russian and Chinese domination of the region. In this respect, the U.S. geographic distance from Central Asia is its strength; the countries do not need to worry about the U.S. directly infringing on Central Asian countries' autonomy, independence and sovereignty. In return, Central Asian countries can further U.S. interests in Central Asia and the Muslim World, including, for example, acting as an avenue for dialogue with Iran – if the U.S. so chooses.

The U.S. and Uzbekistan used to be strategic partners, but they have not been since the events in Andijon in 2005. In order for relations to be restored to pre-2005 levels it will be important for the U.S. to communicate to Uzbekistan – as well as other countries in the region – the importance of having a non-military strategy to respond to protests or other mass demonstrations.

The Uzbek military is well-trained, but a pure military response to events like those in Andijon is counter-productive and resulted in a disproportionate number of deaths to suppress the uprising. It is important that the governments in Central Asia and the United States set up a mechanism to share information about the international law and best practices related to protest movements, such as those that have occurred in the Arab World, and are now sweeping to Azerbaijan and possibly further to Central Asia.

It will also be important for the U.S. to carefully analyze and understand incidents of peaceful protests, uprisings, and insurgent actions when such incidents occur, to distinguish one from the other, without pre-judgment. This will help the United States deal with the national governments to resolve the issue peacefully, while allowing for the nationals of these countries the opportunity to express their views lawfully and peacefully in the public square.

A protest in Zhanaozen, Western Kazakhstan in December 2011 highlighted the importance of governments in the region learning about the developing international norms and best practices related to the freedom of assembly, which provide guidance to governments on how to respond to protests and to protestors on how to lawfully exercise their right to assemble. There has been growing literature on the laws and policies related to freedom of assembly since the Arab uprisings took place, which is made available at the following website (<http://www.icnl.org/research/resources/assembly/index.html>).

As for the issue of terrorism and Islamist militancy, perhaps no country has suffered psychologically and materially as much as Uzbekistan— Tajikistan being the other country which has suffered greatly. It is from Uzbekistan that the IMU originated and Hizb ut Tahrir initially established its first bases. HuT currently has found Kyrgyzstan to be the easiest country within which to operate because of the country's relatively weak internal security apparatus. From there, it can seek to expand its influence into the Fergana Valley as well as other parts of Uzbekistan.

After suffering terrorist attacks on its territory in the 1990s, including an attempted assassination of President Karimov and bombings of U.S. and Israeli diplomatic facilities, Uzbekistan succeeded in virtually expelling the IMU and HuT from its territory. However, the IMU shifted from Uzbekistan to northern Afghanistan, where it received protection and support from the Taliban. After 9/11, the United States further weakened the IMU almost to the point of its elimination before the IMU ultimately found safe haven in parts of Waziristan and where it has now rebuilt itself through its close alliance with the Pakistani Taliban.

There are concerns that the U.S. drone strike that killed Maulvi Nazir in South Waziristan in January 2013 will allow the IMU to solidify a long-term haven in South Waziristan as it had in the early 2000s. Nazir had been anti-IMU because of his agreement with the Pakistani army not support the IMU in return for the Pakistani army allowing Nazir to rule Wana, South Waziristan's capital, without Pakistani interference. Nazir's replacement Bahawal Khan, may not have the power or interest in continuing that relationship with Pakistan.

Uzbekistan has a clear determination to prevent the IMU from destabilizing the country as it did in the 1990s, and it can help stand as a bulwark to further Islamist militant infiltration of the Central Asian region. It is important, however, that any U.S. counter-terrorism strategy with Uzbekistan take into account that greater

political and religious opening in Uzbekistan is essential to eliminating some of the push factors that cause youths to join militant groups in the first place.

Should the United States reengage Uzbekistan as a strategic partner, it will be important not to do so at the expense of Central Asia's other regional power, Kazakhstan, which is currently a strategic partner of the U.S. Kazakhstan has a much smaller population than Uzbekistan and lacks Uzbekistan's central geographic location, but is the world's ninth largest country and has vast energy resources in its Western region.

Also important is Kazakhstan's role as perhaps the Muslim World's most consistent voice for religious tolerance and the peaceful co-existence of Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. This voice stands as a bulwark in Central Asia against Iran and Salafist influences from the Arab World, which promote a bi-polar worldview in which Muslims and the rest are constantly in opposition—a recipe for continued religious and cultural conflict.

Kazakhstan, which relinquished all of its nuclear weapons after the breakup of the Soviet Union, is a trustworthy partner through which the United States can communicate with Iran on a host of issues, such as Iran's nuclear weapons program— again, if the U.S. so chooses. Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries are desperate not to see the U.S. or Israel forced to take action to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons as they know this would lead to a surge in Islamist militancy in Iran and the region and could devastate Central Asia's ability to trade with Iran.

Kazakhstan is located between the Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon. Russia seeks to dominate Kazakhstan politically and militarily; China intends to dominate Kazakhstan economically. The United States offers a strategic alliance to help Kazakhstan preserve its autonomy, independence and sovereignty against more powerful neighbors. Because Kazakhstan and Russia share a 4,300-mile border and centuries of historic ties, Kazakhstan will always inevitably be closely tied to Russia and forced to align its foreign and economic policies with Russia. However, this does not mean that Kazakhstan does not value its ties to the United States. On the contrary, it is because of Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia as well as China that it seeks strong relations with the United States. The same is true for Uzbekistan.

9) What influences undermine traditional practices of Islam in Central Asia?

Salafism is noticeably creeping into Central Asia, often through madrassahs and religious schools funded by Arab Countries and Pakistan. In other cases, Central Asians who return home after studying in the Arab World or Pakistan spread the Salafist ideology. Central Asia's proximity to the Russian North Caucasus, where the Caucasus Emirate is waging jihad against Russia, has led to a rise in Salafist-Jihadist influences in Central Asia. In fact, Jund al-Khilafah's inspiration was Said Buryatskiy,

an ethnic Buryat Russian convert to Islam, who was “martyred” fighting the Russians in the North Caucasus. His videos continue to inspire Russian-speaking Central Asian jihadists today.

Traditionally, Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan practiced Tengrianism, an animistic religion. Still today many traditional practices are incorporated in Kazakh and Kyrgyz Islam— also sometimes referred to as “nomadic Islam” or “traditional Islam.” This form of Islam is moderate, open-minded and accepting of other religions, unlike Salafism, which is commonly known “wahabbism” (Wahabbism) among the people in the region. Islam in Uzbekistan, Xinjiang, and Tajikistan, while more conservative than the Kazakh and Kyrgyz brand of Islam, has also historically been tolerant.

Most Central Asians agree that Salafist influence is rising and corrupting local brands of Islam. Central Asian government suppression of Islam has also generated resentment among the religiously conservative, leading some religious conservatives to lean towards groups like Hizb ut Tahrir, which then serve as vehicles for recruitment into militant organizations like the IMU.

10) What can the United States do to show leadership and foster cooperation between national governments to meet the emerging threats in Central Asia?

Although it is counter-intuitive, combating terrorism in Central Asia cannot be done solely by military means. In fact, with the U.S. set to withdraw from Afghanistan, there is almost no way for the U.S. to combat the Central Asian militant groups operating there, let alone the IMU and other groups based in Pakistan’s tribal areas. However, the U.S. can take the following concrete steps to reduce the factors that enable militant groups to form, recruit and re-generate.

- Engage with the younger generation of students and emerging leaders in Central Asia. The first generation of students born after the fall of the Soviet Union are graduating college now. They are aware of democratic values and would benefit from opportunities to learn the English language and engage with their American peers. Although they have been stunted by nepotism in the political systems in the region and their highly centralized governments, there will be political transition in the region in the next decade, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is through English language that youths and students can learn about America and understand the news beyond the Russian language anti-American propaganda that is dominant in the region today.
- Develop a concrete plan for Central Asia, perhaps centered on the New Silk Road strategy. If we want Central Asia to believe we are not abandoning the region to Russia and China, then we need to show commitment, leadership and effort and make proposals backed by concrete plans of action. China should be a partner in the New Silk Road Strategy because of its economic influence in the region.

- View Central Asia through a lens broader than only militancy, terrorism and Afghanistan. An excessive focus on these issues can discourage investors and reduce the focus on issues such as democracy and human rights. Moreover, the U.S. should be sure to commend the countries in the region for efforts in the right direction.
- Change the conception of “Russian and Central Asia” to a conception of “Central Asia” as a distinct region. The Soviet Union is long gone and while Russia’s political, economic and military motives in the region are similar to the past, the ideological element is gone. Viewing Central Asia as similar to Russia can lead to misunderstandings about the people of Central Asia and their countries’ aspirations, which differ from Russia.
- Realize that Salafism and liberal democracy are the top candidates to fill the ideological void in Central Asia and that the U.S. abandons the region to its peril.
- Understand that human rights cannot be imposed on the countries in the region, none of which are more than 25 years old. Rather, the exchange of best practices is the most effective way of engagement with these countries about human rights. Also, it is important to understand the local context. What the U.S. may see as a flagrant human rights violation may have much deeper historical, religious or traditional roots that must be understood before an accurate assessment is made.
- Consider inviting Uzbekistan and other countries in Central Asia as partners in Western institutions. The more we exclude these countries, the more they will fall into the orbit of China and Russia, and the less likely they will be to embrace democratic values. Moreover, the U.S. should work with democratic countries like Japan, South Korea, and India to further democratic values and open up economic opportunities in the region beyond China.
- Encourage countries like Kazakhstan to work with moderate religious countries in other regions, such as Indonesia in East Asia and Niger in West Africa to counter-balance the growing trends of Salafism throughout the Muslim World.
- Establish a Rapid Response Center, possibly in Uzbekistan, to ensure that the U.S. maintains high-level military contacts with local governments in the region and that the U.S. can respond to the types of human security threats that Islamist militants can carry out, including kidnappings of American citizens.
- Promote investment in Central Asia by American companies. Abandoning the region would also mean placing in jeopardy U.S. energy companies.
- Receive and share information about Islamist militant groups with Central Asian countries in order to disrupt militant operations and networks.

Final Remarks:

I thank you for inviting me to discuss the topic of “Islamist Militant Threats to Central Asia” with you today. I would look forward to answering any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact me. My e-mail address is zenn@jamestown.org.

Biography:

Jacob Zenn is a Research Analyst of Eurasian and African Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation and an expert on Central Asian militant movements, including Jund al-Khilafa of Kazakhstan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Turkistan Islamic Party of Xinjiang, China, and Hizb ut Tahrir in Central Asia. He has published on emerging militant threats to Central Asia for the The Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor, Eurasia Daily Monitor and Militant Leadership Monitor, West Point CTC Sentinel, Johns Hopkins SAIS Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, and Asia Times. A Charter Member of the National Language Service Corps for fluency in Chinese, Arabic and Indonesian, he has worked and carried out field research in the five Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Iraq and the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, and studied Dari and Farsi languages at Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan, Uyghur and Uzbek languages at Xinjiang University in Urumqi, China and Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Russian languages at the London School in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Mr. Zenn received a J.D. from Georgetown Law in 2011, where he was a Global Law Scholar, a graduate degree in International Affairs from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) Center for Chinese-American Studies in 2007, and a B.A. in International Affairs from Emory University in 2005. He is a non-resident research fellow of the Center for Shanghai Cooperation Studies (COSCOS) in Shanghai, China and an alumni of the U.S. State Department Critical Language Scholarship program in Malang, Indonesia and the Atlantic Council of the United States "Young Turkey/Young America: A New Relationship for a New Age" program. His professional commitments include research and analysis on the international law and best practices related to the Freedom of Association and Assembly and the socio-economic causes of conflict in Nigeria, the Sahel and Central Asia. His field research in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon in June 2012 inspired his Occasional Report for The Jamestown Foundation, “Northern Nigeria’s Boko Haram: The Prize in Al-Qaeda’s Africa Strategy.” He is a resident of Pennsylvania’s second congressional district.