

ASIA PROGRAM

**UZBEKISTAN, TADJIKISTAN, KIRGYZSTAN:
A NEW EPICENTRE OF ISLAMIST TERRORISM IN CENTRAL ASIA?
THE CASE OF THE IMU (ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN) AND ITS NETWORKS**

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« [...] if there is no will for *djihad* in a community comprised of muslims, we cannot regard this community as Islamic » ¹ - Zubayr Ibn Abd Al-Rahman, a IMU theologian, July 5th 1999

The IMU is a militant islamist group that was first willing to overthrow the president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov before pursuing broader goals. ² By the end of the 1990s, the IMU had entered a transnational logic. The IMU thus places the *jihad* as a duty of its members who have to fight to extend the « *Dar-al-Islam* ». This group seems to have vanished due to a harsh repression by the Taliban. But the IMU may still have ways to carry another attacks. ³ On a larger scale, the security situation in Great Central Asia could worsen in the context of the demise of ISIS in Syria and Irak and the subsequent settlement of the IMU cells from the Syrian and Iraki battlefields to Afghanistan. This is the opinion of Murat K. Sembinov and Asel T. Baiturbayeva in 2016. ⁴ This paper asserts both the threat set by the IMU at the border shared by Tajikistan and Afghanistan and the role of the IMU cells in the Ferghana valley as a possible troublemaker for the region. ⁵

First, Islamism was born in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan under the USSR era before being a threat to the independent Republics.

¹ BAHTIJAR Babadžanov, *Le jihad comme idéologie de l'« Autre » et de « l'Exilé »...*, p. 156 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/84>

² ZENN Jacob, *The IMU is extinct : what next for Central Asia jihadis ?*, The CACI Analyst, 2016

³ JARLOY Boris, *L'ordre et la horde - Confins ou pivot ? L'Asie centrale*, Sécurité globale, 2018, p. 9 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-securite-globale-2018-2-page-5.htm>

⁴ SEMBINOV Murat K. et BAITURBAYEVA Asel T., *L'Asie centrale dans une période de turbulences politiques : nouveaux défis, questions de sécurité*, Outre-Terre, 2016, p.188 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-outre-terre-2016-3-page-187.htm>

⁵ BASSOU Abdelhak, *Retour des combattants terroristes étrangers : une menace imminente à gérer*, OCP Policy Center, Policy Brief, 2017, p. 5 in : <http://www.ocppc.ma/publications/retour-des-combattants-terroristes-étrangers-une-menace-imminente-à-gérer>

The 1922-1953 period could be characterized as a transition to « *post traumatic sideration* » to « *a latency and refoulement era* » (Catherine Poujol). In the Bolshevik ideology, history heads towards a particular direction that is the development of socialism. Such history seen under the prism of class struggle cannot approve the existence of religions. That is why the Soviets constantly divided the muslim people of Central Asia between 1922 and 1945. The new regime built up his authority upon Central Asia by measures that undermined the economic, legal and social bases of Islam between 1922 and 1928. ⁶ Joseph Stalin, the appointed commissioner for the region, divided the former Turkistan of the tsarist era in various heterogenous provinces from an ethnic standpoint, imposed the latin alphabet in 1926, forbid *shari'a* law, *waqf* goods and polygamy. Under this repressive regime, the existence of *naqchbandi* soufism was a great asset for Central Asia as this mystic approach allows a certain secrecy. ⁷ In 1924, the expression of Central Asia to name the region of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgystan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan entered the USSR constitution. ⁸ From 1928 to 1942, Joseph Stalin built up its control of society through collectivisation, the sedentarization of muslim minorities and the « *Great Purge* » in 1934 where the muslim members of the communist party are not spared. The will of the regime to impose an « *homo Sovieticus* » partly failed with the resilience of Islam via « *parallel mollahs* » who partly maintained Central Asian Islam. ⁹ Some muslims chose terrorism to undermine the regime. Between 1920 and 1931, the USSR is threatened in Tajikistan by the Basmachi insurgency lead by Ibrahim Bek. After conventionnal battles between 1920 and 1929, he chose to withdraw with his remaining fighters in Tajikistan to establish terrorist cells in various villages. ¹⁰

⁶ POUJOL Catherine, *L'islam en héritage : nouvelle approche d'une problématique persistante, entre résistance participative et acculturation passive*, *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, 13/14 | 2004, p. 200 in :

<https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/360#quotation>

⁷ POUJOL Catherine, *Ibid*, p. 200 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/360#quotation>

⁸ CARRERE D'ENCAUSSE Hélène, *L'Empire d'Eurasie*, Fayard, coll. Le Livre de Poche, 2005, p. 200

⁹ ROY Olivier (dir.), *Le renouveau islamique en URSS*, *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, n°59-60, 1991, p. 139 in : www.persee.fr/doc/remmm_0997-1327_1991_num_59_1_1497

¹⁰ RITTER William S., *The Final Phase in the liquidation of Anti-Soviet Resistance in Tadzhikistan : Ibrahim Bek and the Basmachi*, 1924-31, *Soviet Studies*, 1985, p. 488 in : www.jstor.org/stable/151562

This conflict was a dual axis conflict spreading from the frontier between Afghanistan and Tajikistan (Panj River) to the Ferghana Valley. Reading the accounts of the Basmachi attacks, one cannot avoid to think of the terror strategy of contemporary Central Asian jihadis.^{11 12} The fighting methods of the Basmachi insurgents and the IMU insurgents are similar with the use of guerrilla tactics. The geography of the region is a key-point in a counterinsurgency strategy. There is a considerable topographic continuity between the south of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. It facilitates the establishing of insurgents groups in Central Asian countries and the carrying of attacks and drugs from foreign bases. The border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is almost 870 miles long, making its control difficult. In 1929, having pacified the Ferghana Valley, the Soviet failed to expell the Basmachi insurgents from Tadjikistan after Ibrahim Bek chose to use the Vaksh River as a stronghold to block Soviet forces heading to the South.¹³ Controlling the Ferghana Valley is one thing, but it is inseparable from the control of the Tajikistani border.

One could say that the USSR undergoes a period of « *acculturation to the Soviet model* » (Catherine Poujol) to the importation of the wahhabi ideology under the « *Brejnevian stragnation* » during the 1953-1982 period. After the phase of political reforms under Nikita Khrouchtchev (1953 to 1964), during which the USSR, his successor Leonid Brejnev (1964 to 1982) tried to reform the Soviet economy. This period was the real melting pot of the « *homo Islamo Sovieticus* ». ¹⁴ Catherine Poujol insists on the existence of « *underlying current of opinion* » ¹⁵ during that era. The socialist propaganda had only frozen Central Asian Islam to his pre-revolution state by reducing its access to religious

¹¹ RITTER William S., *Ibid*, Soviet Studies, 1985, p. 490 in : www.jstor.org/stable/151562

¹² CAGNAT et GAUZERE, *Nouvelle donne en Asie centrale : l'État islamique face à l'Amou Daria*, Diploweb, 2017 in : <https://www.diploweb.com/Nouvelle-donne-en-Asie-centrale-l-Etat-islamique-face-a-l-Amou-Daria.html> . See also : MARTY Franz J., *The Phantom Menace of ISIS in Northern Afghanistan*, 2016 in : <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13391-the-phantom-menace-of-isis-in-northern-afghanistan.html>

¹³ RITTER William S., *Ibid*, Soviet Studies, 1985, p. 488 in : www.jstor.org/stable/151562

¹⁴ POUJOL Catherine, *Ibid*, p. 208 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/360#quotation>

¹⁵ POUJOL Catherine, *Islam et mémoire, instruments à double tranchant ?* Les Cahiers de l'Orient, 2008, p. 11, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-les-cahiers-de-l-orient-2008-1-page-9.htm>

litterature. In 1979, Central Asia became a powder keg with the introduction of the *wahhabi* ideology. The influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran the same year was limited due to the fact that most of the Central Asian muslims are *hanafi sunni*. *Chii* Islam, the one promoted by Iran, was only a minority of Central Asian muslims. It is by official channels that the *wahhabi* ideas spread in Central Asia. The Soviet imams from the higher institute of Imam al-Boukhari studied in al-Ahzar univeristy in Cairo and in Yemen where they got in touch with the *wahhabism*.¹⁶ Those imams spread this ideology when they got back to USSR. The transmission of this kind of Islam was a reply to the same circumstances observed in the Middle East countries during that time : ***an Islamist militancy from educated generations that saw themselves abandoned by the economic modernization***.^{17 18} In 1979, the Soviets invaded of Afghanistan to defend the communist regime of Kabul against the *mudjahideens*. This ten year war marked the beginning of a permanent chaos in Afghanistan. It also marked the rediscovery of their Islamicness by Tajik Soviet soldiers and the formation of the networks of transnational Islamist terrorism. The IMU belongs to those networks.

If there was indeed a fear of an « ***Afghanisation*** », that is to say of the betrayal of the USSR by Central Asian fighters in the Soviet army, on the side of USSR officials during the Soviet-Afghan conflict, the reality was more complex. In 1969, Alexandre Bennigsen claimed that the linguistic russification in Central Asia was by no means comparable to the influence of the French language in Algeria and of the English langage in India.¹⁹ But the thesis of the cultural proximity as a cause of desertion for Tajik or Central Asians in Soviet ranks is not valid. Mark Galeotti observes that the USSR soldiers from Central Asia dealt with the

¹⁶ POUJOL Catherine, L'islam en héritage : nouvelle approche d'une problématique persistante, entre résistance participative et acculturation passive, *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, 2004, p. 209 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/360#quotation>

¹⁷ ROY Olivier, *Généalogie de l'islamisme*, 2^{ème} éd., coll. Pluriel, 2001, p. 85

¹⁸ SCARBOROUGH Isaac Mc Kean, CUCCIOLA Riccardo, *Culture and Islam in Late Soviet central Asia*, CAP Paper, 2018, p. 4 in : <http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/CAP-Paper-199-February-2018.pdf>

¹⁹ BENNIGSEN Alexandre, *Colonization and Decolonization in the Soviet Union*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1969, p. 4 in : www.jstor.org/stable/259797

same number of casualties as the other nationalities of the USSR, which is a rather thin evidence for a withdrawal of Central Asian soldiers.²⁰ Olivier Roy points out that the expression « *wahhabi* » as used by the press at the time was only a pejorative term for « *fundamentalist* » and did not reflect a pre-1989 Saudi influence.²¹ For the spreading of *wahhabi* Islam over Central Asia, one has to look after 1989.²² Much of the former Tajik officers of the first Afghan war will chose the Party of the Islamic Renaissance (PIR) after the war.²³ One cannot study the first Afghanistan war without making a reference to the second Afghanistan war (American intervention, 2001 to 2014). First because Uzbekistan and Tajikistan received Soviet military bases during the first Afghan war²⁴ and Uzbekistan and Kirgystan received American military bases during the second Afghan war.²⁵ These bases were an important economic asset for those countries and a way to be an interlocutor on the international scene. Moreover, the wars of Afghanistan were but the background in which the terrorist networks emerged. The United States is responsible in the establishing of neo-fundamentalist militancy in Afghanistan. It is the CIA that operated the junction between the Arab Islamist fighters, including Osama Bin Laden, and the Pachtun, Uzbek and Tajik Taliban or *mudjahideens* in Afghanistan. They formed a network called « *joint-venture* ». If this first network was not at the origins of the IMU, it acquired solid knowledges of insurgency technics and equipments such as the ground-air missiles. It was at the end of the 1990s that Tahir Yudashev (the IMU ideologist) chose to fight on the side of the *mudjahideens* in Afghanistan. As for Juma Namangani, he fought in an airborne Soviet unit during the first Afghanistan war, which is explanatory of the

²⁰ GÖRANSSON Markus, *Tajikistan and the Ambiguous Impact of the Soviet-Afghan War*, Cahiers d'Asie centrale, 2016, p. 120 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/3277>

²¹ ROY Olivier (dir.), *Le renouveau islamique en URSS*, *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, n°59-60, 1991, p. 137 in : www.persee.fr/doc/remmm_0997-1327_1991_num_59_1_1497

²² MODICA Bruno, [Recension] *Asie centrale et Caucase: une sécurité mondialisée*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004, p. 2 in : <https://clio-cr.clionautes.org/asi-centrale-et-caucase-une-securite-mondialisee.html>

²³ GÖRANSSON Markus, *Ibid*, 2016, p. 135 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/3277>

²⁴ GÖRANSSON Markus, *Ibid*, 2016, p. 117 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/3277>

²⁵ PETERMANN Simon, [Recension] *Asie centrale et Caucase : une sécurité mondialisée*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004, p. 3 in : <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ei/2005-v36-n1-ei876/010741ar.pdf>

experience he gained on the battlefield, useful for the IMU.²⁶ The second Islamist network was born out of the delocalisation of the IMU cells in Uzbekistan to Pakistan and Afghanistan with the help of the Taliban, the secret services of the Pakistani army and Osama Bin Laden.²⁷ This second network obtained supremacy over Afghanistan after the death of Ahmed Chad Massoud which signed the demise of « *Islamism* » (*Jihad waged against the national enemies of radical Islam*) and was the stepping stone for « *neo-fundamentalism* » (*Jihad waged against all the « infidels »*). In 2001, the IMU was supported by Islamist groups located in Pakistan, such as « *Sepakhe Sakhaba* » and « *Kharakat-ul'-Mujeheddin* ». ²⁸ The Islamist nebulous including the IMU sponsored by Al Qaeda and its networks was set and able to threaten the security of the region between 2001 and 2014. The Taliban gave access to their bases to IMU fighters in the Afghan sanctuary of Mullah Umar and in Waziristân.

Then, governance problems are risen by the Islamist militancy of the IMU for the former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgызstan.

There are turning points but also elements of continuity in the relation of the Central Asian Republics to Islam nowadays compared to the Soviet era. All the presidents of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgызstan are from the Soviet « *nomenklatura* ». It is the case of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, Enomali Rahmon in Tajikistan and Kourmanbek Bakiev in Kirgызstan. By their national discourses, those presidents kept in mind the legacy of the Brejnevian period on the form of a constant care for « *up-down Islamization* » against a

²⁶ CHARLICK-PALEY Tanya, PHIL Williams et OLIKER Olga, *Ibid*, RAND Corporation, p. 24 in : www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1598a.10

²⁷ KHALID Adeeb, *L'islam et l'État post-soviétique en Asie centrale*, Revue internationale et stratégique, 2006, p. 104 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2006-4-page-101.htm>

²⁸ CHARLICK-PALEY Tanya, PHIL Williams et OLIKER Olga, *Ibid*, RAND Corporation, p. 25 in : www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1598a.10.

« *bottom-up Islamization* ». ²⁹ K. Rabbimov underlines accurately that the contemporary Central Asian societies were much less under the control of the central authorities during the *perestroïka* than they are now. ³⁰ Shortly after the independences of the 1990s, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan have chosen to establish a spiritual governance supervising believers and *ulemas*. ³¹ These governances are inspired by the SADUM (created in 1943) whose mission was similar under USSR. The new geopolitical trend for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan is the melting between the « *suspicion towards Islam* » ³² that is a USSR's legacy and the contemporary discourse on the « *war on terror* ». ³³

The Ferghana Valley is the powder keg of Central Asian Islamism in Central Asia. This valley was fragmented between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan during the 1924-1936 period by Stalin. Each part of the valley under the sovereignty of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan is split from the rest of these countries. ³⁴ The Ferghana Valley brings together Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik ethnics. The total population of the Valley amounts to 12 million people. The Ferghana Valley includes almost a third of Tajikistan's people, a third of Kirgystan's people and about a quarter of Uzbekistan's people. ³⁵ The Valley is a major food and water source for Central Asia. ³⁶ As soon as the beginning of the

²⁹ BALCI Bayram et CHAUDET Didier, *Jihadism in Central Asia : A credible threat after the western withdrawal from Afghanistan ?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014, p. 11 in : <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/08/13/jihadism-in-central-asia-credible-threat-after-western-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-pub-56381>

³⁰ RABBIMOV Kamoliddin, *La question de l'islamisme dans le contexte de la construction d'une société civile nationale*, *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, 2007, p. 73-74 in : <http://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/76>

³¹ PEYROUSE Sébastien, *La gestion du fait religieux en Asie centrale : poursuite du cadre conceptuel soviétique et renouveau factice*, 2004, p. 83-84 in : <http://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/295>

³² KHALID Adeeb, *L'islam et l'État post-soviétique en Asie centrale*, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2006, p. 106 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2006-4-page-101.htm>

³³ This expression was first used by American president George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks, in a speech in front of the Congress on September 20th 2001 : « *Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.* » (Source : <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/pgtrpt/>)

³⁴ DAMIANI Isabella, *Géopolitique de l'Asie centrale : Entre l'Europe et la Chine, le cœur de l'Eurasie*, 2^{ème} éd., PUF, coll. Major, 2013, ISBN : 978-2-13-061851-5, p. 110

³⁵ MAMATOVA Diana, *Grassroots peacebuilding : Cross-Border Cooperation in the Ferghana Valley*, CAP Paper 202, CAAF Fellow Papers, 2018, p. 1 in : <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/12220>

³⁶ CHARLICK-PALEY Tanya, PHIL Williams et OLIKER Olga, *Ibid*, RAND Corporation, p. 32 in : www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1598a.10

1990s, Islamist militias formed to control the prices on the markets following the economic recessions. For example, it was the case in Namangan. One of those militias, « *Adalat* » (« *Justice* » in Arabic) pledged allegiance to another group called the « *Warriors of Islam* » that will further participate in the IMU insurgency. These groups shifted to a fight to the death against president Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. Following multiple attacks allegedly carried from neighbour countries by the IMU in Uzbekistan (attacks in Tachkent in February 16th 1999), Uzbekistan chose in 2001 to install minefields at his borders shared with Tajikistan and Kirgystan, including in contested areas. All conditions seems to be there for the emergence of militant Islamist groups with the growing desertification by lack of irrigation, an urban and industrial desertification and a region where the population is known to be very pious. The terrorist risk in the Ferghana Valley stems from the fact that IMU cells are settled here since the 1990s.³⁷ The insecurity is increased by the vague demarcation of the borders inherited from the USSR. The disagreement over the repartition of the water resources is one major drawback in the cooperation upon security matters. Tajikistan and Kirgystan are the « *water tower* » of the region. In 2013, the construction of a dam over the Syr and Amou Daria by Tajikistan still prevented any shared initiative between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the border control.³⁸

To understand the current state of security situations in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan, a brief historic of the last terrorist attacks allegedly carried by the IMU in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan is necessary. In July 2012, the Tajikistani army was sent to the capital of the autonomous region of Badakshan in order to prevent a possible widespread offensive by the Taliban to seize the control of that region. The Panj River can

³⁷ MOLDALIEV Orozbek A., *Le rôle de l'islam dans l'évolution du fait étatique en Asie centrale postsoviétique*, Cahiers d'Asie centrale, 2007, p. 47 in : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/63>

³⁸ VOLOSHIN George, *Central Asia's Unresolved Bilateral Disputes as a Challenge to Fruitful Security Cooperation*, Jamestown Fondation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2013 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asias-unresolved-bilateral-disputes-as-a-challenge-to-fruitful-security-cooperation/>

become at any time a corridor of infiltration to Tajikistan for the IMU fighters in case of the failure of the Afghan government to control the region.³⁹ In 1999, an assassination attempt was made on president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov.⁴⁰ Between 1999 and 2000, the IMU carried suicide attacks on mosques and embassies in Uzbekistan and Kirgystan.⁴¹ Since 2009, an increase in the frequency of the attacks in Uzbekistan and Kirgystan can be underlined. In 2009, suicide attacks took place, the deadliest being the one in Andijan. In August 2009, a shooting in Tashkent is attributed to IMU fighters. In 2010, terrorists made suicide attacks on a synagogue and a sports hall in Kirgystan. In 2011, an attack of the same type caused the death of three Kirghiz police officers.⁴² All these attacks are significant of the capacity of the IMU to access to sophisticated equipments such as explosive belts and automatic rifles and thus to use the networks and fundings of international terrorism. The evolution of the terrorist insurgency in Tajikistan is worrying as it denotes an evolution in the lineage of ISIS. The attack carried on tourists in the Danghara district in Tajikistan on July 29th 2017 is the epitome of this evolution.⁴³ Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan are not equal from a military perspective to address the terrorist problem. They have to quickly change the military equipment inherited from the Soviet era. Experts agree on the fact that the intelligence services, the men committed to enforce order and the military are poorly trained, poorly funded and poorly equipped.⁴⁴ In the meantime, special forces of Uzbekistan have earned a special status.⁴⁵

³⁹ POTHECARY James, *Tajikistan's islamic Shadow*, Jamestown Foundation, 2018, p. 5 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/tajikistans-islamist-shadow/>

⁴⁰ PAITNAIK Ajay, *Central Asia : Between Stability and Instability*, SAGE Publications, Jawarharlal Nehru University, 2016, p. 181 in : <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0020881717746549>

⁴¹ WEITZ Richard, *Uzbekistan National Security Strategy : Threat and Response*, George Washington University, Uzbekistan Initiative Papers, n°12, 2014 in : <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/7858>

⁴² PAITNAIK Ajay, *Ibid*, SAGE Publications, Jawarharlal Nehru University, 2016, p. 182 in : <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0020881717746549>

⁴³ POTHECARY James, *Tajikistan's islamic Shadow*, Jamestown Foundation, 2018, p. 4 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/tajikistans-islamist-shadow/>

⁴⁴ POTHECARY James, *Tajikistan's islamic Shadow*, Jamestown Foundation, 2018, p. 5 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/tajikistans-islamist-shadow/>

⁴⁵ The CIA's *World Fact Book* underlines that it is « *widely considered to have one of the strongest militaries in Central Asia, although it is untested* » in : https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_uz.html

The Uzbek army can defend Uzbekistan against a full-scale attack by the Taliban. Nevertheless, its ability to project oneself and intervene in a neighbour country threatened by the Islamists insurgents is limited.⁴⁶ Uzbekistan, compared to Tajikistan and Kirgystan is indeed a regional power. Kirgystan has the weakest military of the three countries studied here. It has no common borders with Afghanistan but belongs to the « *Northern Route* », that is to say to the opium and heroin route kept by the Taliban and local terrorist groups and has to carry a better surveillance of its borders.⁴⁷ The « *Uzbek-Tadjik detente* »⁴⁸ is based on two key-events. In April 2015, the chiefs of the border guards of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan met in Khodjent to coordinate actions against terrorist infiltration. On June, 4th and 6th in 2015, the Uzbek Secretary of the Interior met his Tajik counterpart in Dushanbe for the first time since 1998. But the turning point in this relation was Shavkat Mirizyoyev's election in 2016. The re-establishing of the flights between Dushanbe and Tashkent in April 2017 after 25 years of interruption and the re-opening of 10 « *check points* » closed since 2001 by Uzbekistan is a good sign of the will of both state to take responsibility in the establishing of a regional security.⁴⁹ This challenge seems to be addressed with the appropriate means as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On September 18th 2018, 18 600 Uzbek soldiers joined 17 000 Tajik soldiers to accomplish an anti-terrorist operation in the Sughd region in Tajikistan, 200 miles north from Dushanbe.⁵⁰ The troops involved in the exercise used not only light weaponry but unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), tanks, armored vehicles, helicopters and mortars. On a sidenote, the struggle against terrorism also depends on economic results. If « *Central*

⁴⁶ WEITZ Richard, *Uzbekistan National Security Strategy : Threat and Response*, George Washington University, Uzbekistan Initiative Papers, n°12, 2014, p. 5 in : <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/7858>

⁴⁷ For a detailed study of the military capacities of each country studied here, see SEMBINOV Murat K. et BAITURBAYEVA Asel T., *L'Asie centrale dans une période de turbulences politiques : nouveaux défis, questions de sécurité*, 2016, p. 189-190 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-outre-terre-2016-3-page-187.htm>

⁴⁸ VOLOSHIN George, *The Uzbek-Tajik détente: can it last?*, The CACI Analyst, 2015, in : <https://caci analyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13247-uzbek-tajik-detente-can-it-last.html>

⁴⁹ LEMON Edward, *The Transformation of the Uzbek-Tajik Relationship*, The CACI Analyst, 2018 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/transformation-uzbek-tajik-relationship/>

⁵⁰ DALY John C.K., *Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Conduct First Joint Military Exercises*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor, 2015 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-conduct-first-joint-military-exercises/>

Asia is not a breeding ground for radicalisation »⁵¹, one must not forget that the national economy of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgystan has much more suffered the collapse of the USSR than Russia did.⁵²

Last but not least, we can draw the theory of a « *Great Game* » reborn under the security threats linked to the IMU in Central Asia.

Russia is the main power in the « *Very Great Game* » (Sébastien Peyrouse). In 1996, Henry Kissinger underlined the importance of Central Asia for Russian security.⁵³ Following the 9/11 attacks, this prospective prove to be accurate. China and Russia got *carte blanche* by the United States in the context of the « *war on terror* ». In 2001, the UN placed the IMU in the list of the groups sanctioned for association with Al Qaeda.⁵⁴ In 2003, the TIP (Turkistan Islamic Party) was placed on the list of the 15 groups threatening Russian interests by the FSB.⁵⁵ In June 2013, Russian minister of Foreign Affairs Serguei Lavrov warned of an impending security risk created by Islamists of Uzbek and Tajik origins settled in Afghanistan.⁵⁶⁵⁷ The National Security Strategy promoted by President Vladimir Putin on December 31st 2015 hinges around three main ideas. It denounces the NGO's work as an interference in Russian interests. It seeks to establish an alliance with China and other non-Western states to draw a new institutionnal grid that would link

⁵¹ CORNELL Svante, *Central Asia is not a breeding ground for radicalization*, The Diplomat.com, 2017 in : <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/central-asia-is-not-a-breeding-ground-for-radicalization/>

⁵² NOVIKOV Evgueni, *Internal Stability : The Key to Central Asian National Security*, Jamestown Foundation, 1995, p. 3 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/internal-stability-the-key-to-central-asian-national-security/>

⁵³ KISSINGER Henry, *Diplomatie*, Fayard, 1995, p. 744

⁵⁴ Source : an article by *La Croix* in : <https://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/Les-18-principaux-groupes-islamistes-armes-dans-le-monde-2014-09-23-1210674#mio>

⁵⁵ MOLDALIEV Orozbek A., *Le rôle de l'islam dans l'évolution du fait étatique en Asie centrale postsoviétique*, Cahiers d'Asie centrale, 2007, p. 51 : <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/63>

⁵⁶ VOLOSHIN George, *Central Asia's Unresolved Bilateral Disputes as a Challenge to Fruitful Security Cooperation*, Jamestown Fondation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2013 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asias-unresolved-bilateral-disputes-as-a-challenge-to-fruitful-security-cooperation/>

⁵⁷ BLANK Stephen, *Washington et le retour de pivot au centre de l'Asie*, Outre-Terre, 2016, p. 215 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-outre-terre-2016-3-p-208.htm>

Central Asia to the Eastern countries.⁵⁸ At last, it is significant of Moscow's security approach that focuses on responding to security dilemmas through its military. Moscow has a lot of military experience in Central Asia. A lot of contemporary Russian military officials have known the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989). Moscow ensured the security of its Central Asian military bases and brought support to the Tajik government forces during the Tajik civil war (1992-1997). The Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division enforces security on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan against Taliban groups and drug smuggling. After a treaty signed in October 2012 between Dushanbe and Moscow, this Division obtained the right to stay in Tajikistan until 2042.⁵⁹ On July 24th in 2018, the troops of the 201st military base, deployed between Dushanbe and Bokhtar, joined the Tajik armed forces for an exercise in the Badakhshan region.⁶⁰ Russian security interests are also promoted in Kirgystan as an agreement was signed between Moscow and Bishkek for the settlement of another Russian military base in 2012. Uzbekistan seems to be more independent from Moscow as it has chosen the bilateral framework with Tajikistan. This choice continues the tradition of Uzbek diplomacy resting on a mistrust of multilateral mechanism. On one hand, there is no close cooperation between Moscow and Central Asian states on security matters to prevent an ISIS infiltration.⁶¹ On the other hand, Uzbekistan as a regional power does develop a diplomacy opened to various actors to counter Russian influence while Tajikistan and Kirgystan are caught in Moscow's orbit.

⁵⁸ WEITZ Richard, *Moscow's agenda in Central Asia and the Caucasus: it is official*, The CACI Analyst, 2018, in : <https://caci analyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13341-moscows-agenda-in-central-asia-and-the-caucasus-it-is-official.html>

⁵⁹ DALY John C.K., *Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Conduct First Joint Military Exercises*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor, 2015 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-conduct-first-joint-military-exercises/>

⁶⁰ DALY John C.K., *Russia, Tajikistan Conduct Joint Exercise in Badakhshan, Near Border with Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor, 2018 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-tajikistan-conduct-joint-exercise-in-badakhshan-near-border-with-afghanistan/>

⁶¹ SHLAPENTOKH Dmitry, *The ISIS threat and Moscow's influence in Central Asia and the Middle East*, The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 2015, p. 5 in : <https://www.caci analyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13297-the-isis-threat-and-moscows-influence-in-central-asia-and-the-middle-east.html>

⁶² Putin's Russia still has the greatest asset in the race for influence in Central Asia with the security organization it leads : the CSTO, or Collective Security Treaty Organization. ⁶³ It brings together Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgызstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan intermittently (1994-1999, 2006-2012). ⁶⁴ The CSTO allows its members to buy Russian military supplies on sale prices. Moreover, it is the only regional organisation having a common intervention force amounting to 4000 men called « **Deployment Force for Central Asia** »⁶⁵, ready for an intervention in case of a serious security threat in Central Asia. This asset is important as ISIS has declared to have deployed its soldiers at the borders of Central Asia to wage *jihad* there. ⁶⁶ Russia builds up its influence in Tajikistan and Kirgызstan by a military assistance respectively amounting to 1.1 billion dollars and 200 millions dollars. In a nutshell, Russia will be for a long time the main military power in Central Asia, even if other actors involve themselves in Central Asian security matters such as the United States and China. ⁶⁷

So the question is whether there is a Sino-Russian rivalry in Central Asia or a sharing of influence between China and Russia. The OBOR Project (*One Belt One Road Project*) explains the growing Chinese interest for Central Asia. ⁶⁸ China could be forced to intervene in Central Asia to defend its economic interests as they are growing ever since

⁶² PEYROUSE Sébastien, BOONSTRA Joe, LARUELLE Marlène, *Security and development approaches to Central Asia. The EU compared to China and Russia*, EUCAM Working Paper, 2012, p. 7 in : https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/143266/WP11_Security_development_approaches_Central_Asia.pdf

⁶³ PEYROUSE Sébastien, BOONSTRA Joe, LARUELLE Marlène, *Ibid*, EUCAM Working Paper, 2012, p. 8 in : https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/143266/WP11_Security_development_approaches_Central_Asia.pdf

⁶⁴ JULIENNE Marc, *La Chine en Asie centrale, un nouvel acteur de sécurité en zone d'influence russe ?*, Diploweb, 2018, p. 5 in : <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Chine-en-Asie-centrale-un-nouvel-acteur-de-securite-en-zone-d-influence-russe.html>

⁶⁵ USMANOVA Kamilla, *La position de la Russie dans la gestion des risques de sécurité en Asie centrale post-soviétique sur fond de crise afghane*, Tribune « Jeunes Chercheurs » du Congrès de l'Association Belge francophone de Science Politique, 2017, p. 20 in : http://www.absp.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Tribune-Jeunes-chercheurs-Congrès-ABSP_Communication_Kamilla-Usmanova.pdf

⁶⁶ Source : <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/islamic-states-khorasan-province-2-years-on/>

⁶⁷ USMANOVA Kamilla, *Ibid*, 2017, p. 6 in : http://www.absp.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Tribune-Jeunes-chercheurs-Congrès-ABSP_Communication_Kamilla-Usmanova.pdf

⁶⁸ JULIENNE Marc, *Ibid*, 2018, p. 1 in : <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Chine-en-Asie-centrale-un-nouvel-acteur-de-securite-en-zone-d-influence-russe.html>

the start of the OBOR project in 2013.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ China is particularly committed in Kirgызstan and Tajikistan. These countries are the two main Central Asian countries for its investments.⁷¹ The SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) is a regional security organisation led by Russia and China. It was created in 1996. It includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgызstan. The SCO has many weaknesses compared to the OSTC. It has not achieved to plan joint interventions against drug smuggling as the OSTC did. Russia has a greater experience in this field as the anti-narcotic and antiterrorist operations on the Tajikistani border were entirely left to Moscow's army from 1991 to 2005. Russia also has a better influence through the financing of the counter-narcotics brigades of Kirgызstan and Tajikistan by its federal budget.⁷² The SCO has no common defense structure and no common intervention force.⁷³ Even after the creation in 2004 of the RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure), the SCO struggles to be more than a discussion forum for security matters in Central Asia. Russia keeps the monopoly on the selling of military supplies to the Central Asian Republics. The only field where China prevails is the selling of Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAV) to the Central Asian Republics. Russia maintains its political and military influence and China chooses to focus on finance and economics.⁷⁴ As the OSTC, the SCO is a structure created to enforce the Chinese conception of security, that is to say the promotion of an anti-terrorist action against the « *three evils* » (terrorism, separatism and extremism). It could even become a kind of « *renewed Holy Alliance* » that would protect Central Asian autocrats against

⁶⁹ KELLNER Thierry, *La Chine et l'Asie centrale vingt-cinq ans après... De la marginalité au centre de la scène régionale*, Outre-Terre, 2016, p. 273 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-outre-terre-2016-3-p-268.htm>

⁷⁰ PEYROUSE Sébastien, BOONSTRA Joe, LARUELLE Marlène, *Ibid*, EUCAM Working Paper, 2012, p. 11 in : https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/143266/WP11_Security_development_approaches_Central_Asia.pdf

⁷¹ GOBLE Paul, *Central Asia ready to Move out without Russia*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor, 2018, p. 2 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asia-ready-move-without-russia/>

⁷² SARSEMBAEV Iliyas, *La coopération des services policiers, militaires et de la sécurité intérieure des pays membres de l'OTSC*, 2016, p. 81 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-securite-globale-2016-2-p-73.htm>

⁷³ PEYROUSE Sébastien, BOONSTRA Joe, LARUELLE Marlène, *Ibid*, EUCAM Working Paper, 2012, p. 12 in : https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/143266/WP11_Security_development_approaches_Central_Asia.pdf

⁷⁴ FORTAT Vivien, *Où va l'Asie centrale ? Entretien avec René Cagnat*, Asia Focus #30, mai 2017, IRIS, p. 8 in : <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Asia-focus-30.pdf>

changes of political regime.⁷⁵ The course of events could force China to be more present in Central Asian security matters. In 2012, the number two man of Al Qaeda called for *jihad* against China.⁷⁶ In 2016, the TIP (Turkistan Islamic Party), a militant Islamist group that has pledged allegiance to ISIS and is close to the IMU, called for *jihad* against China. The TIP asked the Uyghur fighters in Irak, Syria and Central Asia to join in Xinjiang (China's Northwest province) and launch attacks from there.⁷⁷ China asserts since then its will to control its northwest border that is a constant trend in China's foreign policy through history. A common solution seems to be necessary as there is a porosity between the IMU and other Islamic militancy group like « *Jamaat Ansarullah* » created in 2010 by Amriddin Tamarov, a Uyghur and a member of the IMU who sought refuge in Afghanistan.⁷⁸ However, Beijing does not want to tie its choices in an alliance with Russia. China has made various choices that do threaten Russian military interests in Central Asia. China has conducted anti-terrorist exercises in the Ishkashim region in Tajikistan near the Afghan border in 2016 and 2017. China has also built a military alliance with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan without Russia.⁷⁹ At the same time, Central Asian countries do not hesitate to play the Chinese card to counter Russian influence.⁸⁰ ■

⁷⁵ KELLNER Thierry, *La Tranquille montée en puissance de la Chine en Asie centrale*, Revue internationale et stratégique, 2006, p. 153 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2006-4-page-143.htm>

⁷⁶ DANJOU François, *La Chine et le péril du « Jihad »*, QuestionChine, 2014, p. 6 in : <https://www.questionchine.net/la-chine-et-le-peril-du-dihad?artpage=2-4>

⁷⁷ DANJOU François, *Xinjiang, le régime s'inquiète de la nouvelle empreinte globale de l'ETIM*, 2016 in : <https://www.questionchine.net/xinjiang-le-regime-s-inquiete-de-la-nouvelle-empreinte-globale-de-l-etim>

⁷⁸ DANJOU François, *Mise en garde contre des « risques inhabituels de sécurité ». Retour à la « prudence stratégique » ?* 2015, p. 5 in : https://www.questionchine.net/?page=articlepdf&id_article=3059

⁷⁹ JULIENNE Marc, *Ibid*, Diploweb, 2018, in : <https://www.diploweb.com/La-Chine-en-Asie-centrale-un-nouvel-acteur-de-securite-en-zone-d-influence-russe.html>

⁸⁰ KELLNER Thierry, *La Chine et l'Asie centrale vingt-cinq ans après... De la marginalité au centre de la scène régionale*, Outre-Terre, 2016, p. 280 in : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-outre-terre-2016-3-p-268.htm>

ASIA FOCUS #98

UZBEKISTAN, TADJIKISTAN, KIRGYZSTAN: A NEW EPICENTRE OF ISLAMIST TERRORISM IN CENTRAL ASIA?

THE CASE OF THE IMU (ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN) AND ITS NETWORKS

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