

ISIS in Central Asia: the Potential Impact on Security Interests of Iran and India

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Abstract

Since its emergence in the Levant including Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS Takfiri militant group) selected province of Khorasan (Afghanistan and some parts of Central Asia) as its territory, thus established its sovereignty and identity under the same title. The main question underlying the current study is that what would be the main contexts and substrates for the gradual presence and influence of ISIS in the region? The main hypothesis underlying the article is that: secular authoritarian political structure, the approach adopted and inappropriate actions taken by the governments in the region in response to the extremism, extremist fundamentalist groups in the region, fragile and complex social fabric of Central Asian countries and also the presence of the nationals in the countries of the region in ISIS structure are some of the most important factors that can lead to the formation of ISIS in the region. This presence is a common security threat to Iran and India, which can strengthen the need to security cooperation between the two countries. The current article uses an analytical method, and for data collection, the article has utilized reliable library-based sources.

Keywords

ISIS, Central Asia, Extremist Fundamentalist Groups, Iran, India.

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Introduction

Takfiri-terrorists often are created in critical environments, and are developed in the light of some factors such as political instability, security gaps, and fragile social fabric of the community. Alongside these factors, if the relevant currents benefit from some military and financial advocates and economic suppliers, they can expand their power in different areas quickly.

ISIL as a Salafi-Takfiri group is one of these Takfiri currents that emerged out of Salafi current of al-Qaeda. Subsequent to the occurrence of political, social, and security crises in Syria and Iraq, this group was able to achieve a status in the region, and play effective roles in the security equation of Western Asia, and even international environment.

After dominance over some parts of Iraq and Syria, ISIS sought to expand its influence and the caliphate in a region known as Khorasan province, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia. Accordingly, due to their different social, political and geopolitical characteristics, the Central Asian countries have come under the spotlight of ISIS. The territorial proximity of the region to global and regional powers such as Russia, India and Iran, adjacency to Afghanistan, and use of the revenues from drug trafficking to finance their spending, all have caused Isis to see Central Asia as a desirable place for expanding its influence.

The main question in the article is that what would be the main backgrounds and substrates for the formation of ISIS presence and influence in the region? What are the potentials and capacity of Central Asia for the outbreak of the current extremist trend? Temporary answer to this question, as a hypothesis proposed in the cur-

rent article, is that: secular authoritarian political structure, incorrect actions and approach adopted by the states in the region, the presence of extremist fundamentalist groups in the region, fragile and complex social context of the central Asian countries, critical geographical centers in the region such as Fergana Valley and Afghanistan and the presence of the nationals of the countries in the region in ISIS military structure are the most important factors that could lead to the formation of ISIS in this area. By assuming the issue that “social and political beds” is the factors influencing the formation of ISIS in the region, the current article seeks to examine the genesis of ISIS and security cooperation between Iran and India in this regard. The current article uses an analytical method, and the method to collect the documents is reliable library-based sources.

1. Theoretical framework: security from the perspective of Copenhagen School

Security is a complex and conflicting concept, and heavily relies on attitudes and values. In this context, there is a considerable controversy about the concept of security and its relevant causes. There is not a fixed relationship between the signifier and signified of the term “security”. To establish such connection, mental element, values and subjective presuppositions play a pre-eminent role, which are considered as immaterial elements or sense of security. From this perspective, security is a contextual, relative, complex, and ambiguous concept (Yazdanfam, 2007: 726).

Buzan significantly underlines understanding the concept of security. In his view, a correct understanding of national securi-

ty depends on a correct understanding of the concept of security. However, adopting a simplistic approach to the concept of security has not led to its backwardness and underdevelopment. According to Buzan, five basic factors are involved in backwardness and underdevelopment of concept of security including complexity of the issue, resolvability of security in power in case of the probable confrontation between these two concepts, a reaction against transnational realism, the nature of strategic studies, and the instrumental use of security (AbdullahKhani, 2011: 120).

Five assumptions can be identified as the main assumptions underlying Copenhagen school including broad security rather than narrow security (five-fold dimensions of security), development of security analysis levels, securitization and de-securitization, interaction between objective and subjective attitude, the interaction between subjective/objective attitude, and finally quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Given that the current article underlines the concept of security and its various dimensions, here broad rather than narrow security is merely discussed. The traditional research performed on security merely focused on the military dimension as the only option on security aspects. In this regard, Buzan expanded security into five sectors including military, political, economic, social, and environmental.

Accordingly, what have long triggered insecurity in the Central Asian region is not military considerations but political and social issues that did occur in the domestic context of these countries. Some factors such as ethnic identity erasure, religious identity erasure and subsequent consequences such as ethnic crisis and extremist nationalism crisis in the Soviet era by the incumbent rulers,

the growth of Salafism and Fundamentalism in the region, terrorism and drug trafficking, ethnic and tribal issues in the post-Soviet era, are all evidence to this allegation.

2. Backgrounds to the emergence of Islamic State in Central Asia

2-1. Political contexts

2-1-1. The structure of the political system and ideology on countries in the region

One of the important areas of the formation of violent Salafist movement in the Muslim world, especially in recent decades, is the presence of the authoritarian states and lack of democratic institutions and, democratic modern and traditional foundation (Houshang and Pagnjy, 2011: 290). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the achievement of the countries of the region to political independence, the political situation of these countries was altered in a mere formal way compared to the past. Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, Emam Ali Rahman in Tajikistan, Safar Murat Niyazov in Turkmenistan and Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan had been and are the leaders who were formerly the members of Communist Party in the Soviet era, and they adopted the same post-authoritarian approach following the collapse (Kouzehgar Kalegi; 2012: 78-79).

It is possible to categorize regional political structure into different forms of totalitarianism. Perhaps the closest definition lies in this classification: intellectual authoritarianism: reforming authoritarian (Kyrgyzstan), romantic authoritarianism: Uzbekistan, a patrimonial authoritarianism: Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, mono-

cratic authoritarianism: Tajikistan. The common denominator in all forms of authoritarianism is the fact that family orientation, ethnicity and regionalism are more preferred over national values. In addition, the type of authoritarianism prevailing in these countries has not been understood properly (Kouzehgar Kaleji, 2012: 79). On the other hand, in addition to type of authoritarianism prevailing in the countries in the region, the ranking of democracy in the countries of the region are as follows: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan (Nations in Transit 2015).

Countries	Election Trend	Civil Community	Independent Media	National Democratic Structure	Local Democratic Structure	Judiciary Framework and Independence	Corruption	Democracy Result
Kazakhstan	6.75	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.61
Kyrgyzstan	5.50	4.75	6.00	6.50	6.25	6.25	6.25	5.99
Turkmenistan	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75	7.00	6.75	6.93
Tajikistan	6.75	6.50	6.25	6.50	6.00	6.50	6.25	6.39
Uzbekistan	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75	7.00	6.75	6.93

In addition to the above mentioned factors, according to the ranking of Freedom House in 2015, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were ranked as the worst of the worst countries in terms of freedom level, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan ranked in the category of the non-free countries, and only Kyrgyzstan has been able to be ranked as a partly free country (Freedom House, 2015). Thus, it could be said that totalitarianism is more or less the main characteristic of all Central Asia countries. On the other hand, in addition to totalitarianism, political ideology that was replaced by Communism in the Central Asia and Caucus can be known as “Secular Despotism”

(Aydin, 2002: 172). Given that the religion of the majority of people in Central Asia is Islam, over 70% of the people in this area are Muslim and Hanafi. However, the ideology underlying these nations is built upon Secularism, which this has led to the formation of a necessary context for fundamentalist movements in the countries of the region (Hoseinzadeh, 2015: 100).

2-1-2. Approach and acts of the regional governments toward extremist groups and ISIS

Asian regimes are nowadays encountered with a big dilemma. On the one hand, a factor namely Islam, that has found a different definition in Central Asia, has contributed to the unification of multi-ethnic and tribal countries, and on the other hand, totalitarian regimes feel that political Islam would be a threat to their sovereignty (2012: 73). In the meantime, the bilateral role of Islam as the effective factor in the formation of government and state-building has obliged the political leaders of the states to regard Islam as a threat to the states (Sa'adat et al. 2012: 73). Accordingly, in Central Asia, we are witness to two types of strategy by the rulers in the region in confrontation with Islamist current: repression strategy and compliance strategy (Mahmoudi: 2007).

In Uzbekistan, Karimov introduces Islam as an ideological and political risk, and clearly commands its nation to implement harsh policies against unofficial religions and mass worships, and to establish official Islam under the supervision and support of the state (Aqaei and Demiri, 2014: 29).

In Tajikistan, over the past years, Islam has always been one of the foundations of national identity. However, Tajik government

is largely secular, and the country can be considered the legacy of the former Soviet Union era. Thus, if the government insists on the separation of religion and politics, Tajik society becomes more religious day by day, and people show more commitment to the fundamentals (Athari and Bahman, 2012: 35).

Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan is the only recognized religious party in Central Asia, and The Supreme Court of Tajikistan declared it as a terrorist and radical organization and banned its activity in the territory of Tajikistan on September 29, 2015. The court also banned the activity of “Nijat” as the official publication of Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and its official website, and publication of any audiovisual work composed by this party was announced to be illegal (Ozodagon.com, 2015).

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, more limitations revolve around the prohibition of Arabic headscarf, and officials in the country have not adopted an anti-religion policy towards Islam. For example, some Kazakh authorities officially announced that they are opposed to Islamic dress for women and girls in the country. Because they regarded this coverage as imposed by the external forces, and declared that Kazakh women and girls have never been veiled in such a way, and this type of cover is not consistent with their national and religious traditions (Hosseini Zadeh, 2015: 97-98).

In general, it should be said that the overall structure, ideological system, and practice of governments in the region have provided the impetus to the development of religious extremism groups, and presented an extremist and fundamentalist picture, and in collaboration with other countries, the regional states are more willing to the countries with similar political systems (Dehghan-

banadaki, 2012).

2-1-3. Radical fundamentalist Islamic groups in the region and the grounds for formation of ISIS

It is obvious that extremist groups were emerged in opposition to the tyrants and totalitarian governments. Thus, the origins of the Egyptian violent fundamentalist groups such as Al-Jihad and Al-takfir can be traced in Naser's notorious prisons (Houshang and Pagnjy, 2012: 293). Central Asia republic countries show the strongest oppositions to the dominant regimes (Athari, 2002: 92). In the wake of ISIS growing influence in West Asia, Osman Ghazi as the leader of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan alongside several of his companions, in a 2.30-min video which the date inscribed on it is the sixth July 2015, show allegation to ISIS, and announces its loyalty to the leader of this terrorist group (Shafaqna, quoted from Anadolu Agency, 2015).

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb ut-Tahrir, Akramyeh movement, Ansar Allah, Tablighi Jamaat, etc. are some of Takfiri Salafi groups in Central Asia. The significant point is that apart from the IMU and Islamic Jihad Union's (IJU) allegiance to the Islamic State, there is no evidence of relationship between the terrorist groups in the region with ISIS, unless the groups' members have joined ISIS for personal and individual desires.

2-2. Socio-cultural contexts

2-2-1. Socio-cultural structure of communities of Central Asia

In this part of the article, by evaluating the socio-cultural structure

of the communities in the region, the impact of such components on the emergence of ISIS is explored. One of the main problems in this area is rupture and polarity in the community in the form of rural-urban, center-periphery, ethnic-regional (region) dichotomies. For example, the competition among the representatives of the regions such as Khojandiha and Koulabiha in Tajikistan, those of Tajikistan, Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan and Bukhara, or those of Bishkeks and Oshis in Kyrgyzstan is a subject that has great potential to ensue crisis. In this regard, some other latent and important competitions such as secular-religious rift or the rift between the values and life style of the new generation who have graduated from the Western, Eastern, Islamic and Arabic countries with those of the educated people trained in the schools and universities in the Soviet era (Karami, 2012: 190-191). Among the communities of Central Asia, social structure of Tajikistan is more sensitive and fragile than that of Uzbekistan and then Kyrgyzstan. However, the authorities in Turkmenistan have been able to control this space.

2-2-2. The impact of poverty and unemployment on the formation of ISIS in the region

In the Soviet era, the people in Central Asia achieved a level of development that was mainly higher than that of other Asian regions. Since the era, they have been witnesses to the gradual decline of their life standards. Human development indicators in these countries did approach to those of the poorest countries in the world. Under such condition, it is surprising that the people hope for a type of leadership and also the religion that prospects a better future (Akiner, 2014: 143).

In Central Asian countries, especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, more than a quarter of the population live below the poverty line, and the majority lack food security, and the countries import a significant part of agricultural products such as wheat, potatoes, onions and fruits from abroad, especially from China and even Afghanistan (Fars News Agency, 2014). In Tajikistan, about 85 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, which this can exacerbate the extremism and also drug trade from Afghanistan through Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries, Russia, and Europe (Allison & Johnson, 2010: 59). In Kyrgyzstan, due to the inability to earn an income for life, some people, especially those living in the south of the country, join ISIS militants. Although the primary reason underpinning youth unemployment's joining to ISIS is youth unemployment, they will fall prey to destructive ideologies after a while in such brutal groups (Akinef, 2014). Unemployment is a serious problem in these communities. According to "International Labor Organization" in 2014, the unemployment rate in Central Asian countries is as follows: Tajikistan: 8%, Uzbekistan: 10%, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan: 5% (Fars News Agency, 2014).

2-2-3. The presence of the citizens of the region in ISIS military operations

Central Asia is one of the most critical areas which according to the contexts that were mentioned above, has great potential to be influenced by these deviant currents to the extent that the republican individuals and large groups of citizens and youth of the region form a significant part of the fighters of this radical movement. The

number of people who have joined ISIS from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan can be estimated to over five thousand people (Zamoune.com, 2016).

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, the valley of “Fergana” and specifically the province of Andijan are the main exporters of Uzbek militants for war against Syria. According to the announcement presented by the security agencies at late 2013, at least 500 Uzbek citizens entered Kyrgyzstan under the pretext of labor migration to Russia and then headed to Turkey through Bishkek and Osh flights (Fars News Agency, 2013).

In Tajikistan, Joseph Rahman the country’s Attorney General has announced that there are 1904 Tajik fighters in ISIS structure in Iraq and Syria, most of whom are the followers of the Salafist sect (Ozodagon.com, 2016). According to Kyrgyzstan Interior Ministry, a total of 508 citizens, including 121 women, fight in ISIL structure.

It is noteworthy that one of the reasons for the presence of the citizens of the Central Asian region in ISIS organization is the activity of the virtual social networks and propaganda campaign by the terrorist group, such that Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has identified and suspended more than 57 thousand websites in Central Asia which were engaged to recruit citizens, especially the youth residing in the region (CA-NEWS.org, 2016).

3. Security relations between Iran and India in the light of ISIL presence in Central Asia

Islamic Republic of Iran and India are in the same region in terms of security interactions, and the presence and expansion of ISIS in

their adjacency can lead to the common security threats for both countries. The common threats can be divided into two sections. First, Iran and India are regional neighbors, and developments in this area can directly affect the security level of the two countries. Undeniably, the growth of terrorism in Central Asia and Afghanistan affect the security of Iran and India. An example of this can be found in al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Common security threat is one of the most effective reasons for the expansion of security cooperation between the two countries.

Second, based on what was mentioned about the grounds for the expansion of ISIS in Central Asia, both Iran and India have potential to expand some brutal groups such as ISIS within the context of their community. Considerable rate of poor and young population, a significant number of unemployed youth, the presence of the promoters of the ideology of Salafism, etc. are the factors that can confirm that fact that both India and Iran have a common fertile ground for the formation of terrorist groups like ISIS in their country. This is another reason for the need for security cooperation between Iran and India about the fight against the Islamic State.

Iran and India in 2016 signed an agreement with Afghanistan to create extensive communication and also cooperation through Chabahar Port. This collaboration is expected to lead to the expansion of economic relations with Afghanistan. However, as numerous experts have acknowledged in this regard, this level of cooperation is not possible without the establishment of security in Afghanistan. India and Iran has repeatedly declared their readiness to assist the Afghan government to expand the Security, and the

latest example was announced in September 2016 and subsequent to the terrorist attack in Kabul.

Conclusion

To investigate the factors underlying ISIS presence in Central Asia, it should be said that this region cannot be considered a monolithic geography with identical or similar components. In other words, a part of Central Asia is likely to be affected by ISIS, while in another part, this probable impressionability is not highly likely. For example, Tajikistan and some parts of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan can be a place for the activity of Islamic extremism, but in the majority of the geography of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan it is much less likely.

A study of the function of the geopolitical context in the emergence of ISIS in this region is also of significance. The geostrategic nature of the region and its proximity to India and Iran, presence in Fergana Valley as the critical geographical center in this region, the adjacency of the region with Afghanistan, Central Asia's impressionability due to the developments in Afghanistan, and the presence of regional narcoterrorism are all geopolitical factors involved in this issue.

Through proper security cooperation, India and Iran can resist against the threat of the formation of terrorist groups such as ISIS in the region and expand their bilateral ties.

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