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Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia

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Although Central Asian states are vulnerable to the activities of radical Islamic organisations due to the weaknesses of their political and social systems—marked by authoritarianism, corruption, nepotism, and ethnic and religious tension, as well as their poor economic circumstances—interest in ISIS among their citizens remains low. These states so far also have not become an area of interest for ISIS, although that may change. When some people in these countries do leave for Syria and Iraq, their decision is not rooted just in poverty but also in social exclusion and poor religious education. At the same time, citizens of far more affluent and often far less authoritarian European and Middle Eastern countries travel in higher numbers to Syria to join ISIS. Nonetheless, a potential increase in the popularity of radical Islamist factions will not only be a problem for the five countries of the region, where the authorities will try to use the phenomenon to strengthen their special services and raise funds for border protection, but also for Russia, especially since people from Central Asia are mainly recruited to ISIS on Russian territory and traverse it to reach the battlefields. Russia, therefore, will continue to support its neighbours in the fight against such organisations by helping to strengthen border control, support for local special services and by CSTO Rapid Reaction Forces. The European Union and the United States should offer not only intelligence support and assistance in protecting these borders against this threat but also economic programmes and development assistance that can be used to decrease the factors that may contribute to the radicalisation of those living in Central Asia.

One of the pillars of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's (ISIS) strategic communication is "remaining and expanding." ISIS sees itself as a "state" that will not be abolished and will not go away, and at the same time is focused on territorial expansion. In 2014 and 2015, the organisation has successfully lived up to this motto, as its troops stormed Mosul, Tikrit (later recaptured by Iraqi forces) and, most recently, Ramadi. At the same time, it has accepted pledges of allegiance from jihadist outfits within and outside the Middle East, tasking the latter with forming ISIS "provinces" in faraway countries. The example of Boko Haram, a group operating mainly in Nigeria and separated by thousands of kilometres from the ISIS zone of operations, is perhaps the most telling. Consequently, with ISIS seemingly in continuous growth, policymakers may be poised to ask where will it appear next and where will it gain a foothold and expand.

In theory, it looks as if Central Asia is a natural place for ISIS expansion and it could constitute the organisation's next priority. Central Asians are politically marginalised by repressive authoritarian regimes,

face bleak economic prospects, suffer from poor governance, and face extensive corruption. They live in “weak” states that overly brutalise their responses to any opposition and have the potential to push many of their citizens, who typically do not have Islamist leanings, towards Islamic extremism, but then will be unable to successfully address the upsurge in radicalisation.¹ This would be a worrying development with far-reaching consequences to neighbouring Russia, especially, but also to the EU Member States, which under the Latvian presidency of the EU Council have been attaching a higher priority to outreach to the region and are internally threatened by an upsurge in radical Islamist activity. Opposing ISIS has become a global issue, and suddenly the fact that a region seemingly far removed from one’s interests might be threatened by the organisation immediately raises concerns.

At the same time, however, ISIS has devoted a far from overwhelming amount of attention to Central Asia and its potential for growth in the region. It largely ignored the September 2014 pledge of loyalty from the largest jihadist Central Asian group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and so far has not tasked the Uzbek group with establishing an ISIS “province” in the region. ISIS relatively rarely refers to Central Asia in its propaganda materials but has not shied away from filming its Kazakh child soldiers in training,² or the execution of “Russian spies” by one of the aforementioned militants,³ or filming a video with a former Tajik special forces commander who joined the ranks of the organisation.⁴ It also speaks of its desire to establish an Afghanistan–Pakistan centred “province” in South Asia (Khurasan), which would also encompass parts of several Central Asian countries.⁵ This province, however, plays a very distant fiddle to mentions of the struggle with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and also different Western or European countries in ISIS’ strategic communications and its geopolitical interests.⁶ Thus, it seems likely that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s organisation finds Central Asia more challenging, and perhaps not yet ripe for “expansion” as previously thought.

Central Asia as an ISIS Target from a Comparative Perspective

In order to ascertain the region’s preparedness and adequacy for ISIS expansion, it is worth studying its five countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) from a comparative perspective with regions that supply the highest number of foreign fighters to the battlefronts in Iraq and Syria, i.e., the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Europe. If poverty, political repression, political marginalisation, poor governance and corruption, undoubtedly present in Central Asia, are to pave the way for the appearance of ISIS in a given country then we should look at how these factors influence the

¹ See, e.g.: A. Borisov, “Ex-Soviet Central Asia raises alarm over IS recruitment,” *Yahoo News*, 15 May 2015, http://news.yahoo.com/ex-soviet-central-asia-raises-alarm-over-recruitment-052100409.html?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign;

G. Ibragimova, “Central Asia turning to Russia and the US to combat ISIS,” *Russia Direct*, 3 April 2015, www.russia-direct.org/analysis/central-asia-turning-russia-and-us-combat-isis;

International Crisis Group, “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia,” Policy Briefing, Europe and Central Asia Briefing no. 72, Bishkek/Brussels, 20 January 2015, [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf); S. Phunchok, “ISIS in Central Asia,” Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses, 22 October 2014, www.idsa.in/issuebrief/ISISinCentralAsia_pstobdan_221014.html; S. Reid, “Shadow Boxing with the Islamic State in Central Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/06/shadow-boxing-with-the-islamic-state-in-central-asia-isis-terrorism>; D. Turovsky, “How ISIS is recruiting migrant workers in Moscow to join the fighting in Syria,” *The Guardian*, 5 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/05/isis-russia-syria-islamic-extremism?CMP=share_btn_tw; for comparative studies, which look at all the countries of the region, vis-à-vis the threat from ISIS to Central Asia.

² For excerpts of the video, see: www.dailynews724.com/race-towards-good-isis-chilling-video-of-kids-using-guns-webtv.37578.html.

³ For the full video, see: <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/13/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-uncovering-an-enemy-within>.

⁴ See: “Glava OMON Tadzhiqistana prislyagnul na vernost ‘Islamskomu gosudarstvu,’” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 28 May 2015, www.mk.ru/incident/2015/05/28/glava-omon-tadzhiqistana-prislyagnul-na-vernost-islamskomu-gosudarstvu.html.

⁵ M.A. Rana, “What ISIS and the ‘caliphate’ mean for Pakistan,” *DAWN*, www.dawn.com/news/1116799.

⁶ See Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s most recent (May 2015) audio message: <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/05/14/a-new-audio-message-by-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-march-forth-whether-light-or-heavy>.

decisions of Europeans and the inhabitants of MENA who are quite eager to travel to Iraq and Syria or to set up ISIS “provinces” in their native countries. Tables 1, 2 and 3 set the five Central Asian states against the top five foreign-fighter source nations of MENA (Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia) and Europe (Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Germany, United Kingdom) in terms of indicators providing a snapshot of a given country’s economy, quality of life, social spending, political freedoms, competitiveness, social progress, migration rate, etc. They also depict the differences in foreign fighter numbers, the distance of a given country to ISIS-held territory and the percentage of the Sunni Muslim population, as ISIS follows an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam, in all cases studied.

Central Asia seems not to be the world’s preeminent place for recruits for terrorism—either domestically or internationally. In theory, significant detachments from Central Asia have joined ISIS or other rebel groups in Syria, but per capita the number of volunteers from this region to the conflict tell a slightly different story. State by state, 1 in 14,400 Turkmen, 1 in 40,000 Tajiks, 1 in 56,000 Kyrgyz, 1 in 58,000 Uzbeks and 1 in 72,000 Kazakhs have become foreign fighters in Syria. These numbers, however, apart from the Turkmen case, are far from impressive in comparison to the numbers from the top MENA countries, which are more significant and stand at (while only taking lower estimates into account): 1 in 5,300 for Jordan, 1 in 6,500 for Lebanon, 1 in 7,300 for Tunisia, 1 in 18,200 for Saudi Arabia, and 1 in 22,000 for Morocco. Surprisingly, some of the top European source states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1 in 11,700; Belgium, 1 in 23,800; France, 1 in 55,200) also have higher per capita numbers of citizens joining foreign fighter ranks than that of any or some of the Central Asian countries (see: Row 1 of Tables 1, 2, 3). Simultaneously, those countries rank far lower, with the exception of Kazakhstan, than European and especially MENA as sources of foreign fighters on the Global Terrorism Index (see: Row 18), which ranks countries in terms of terrorist activity and terrorism impact. Thus, their obvious poverty and authoritarianism are not synonymous with the existence or presence of strong and domestically-oriented terrorist groups, organisations or recruitment networks for international terrorism within their borders.

Central Asians usually get to Iraq and Syria either via Russia or Turkey, and rarely do we see direct travel between a given country and the battlefields of the Middle East. With the exception of Turkmenistan, the rest of the countries are situated relatively far from Iraq and Syria, and one can hardly expect impoverished local populations to afford long distance travel (see: Row 2). The top MENA foreign fighter source countries are mostly located, with the exception of Tunisia, much closer to ISIS’ *de facto* capital and it is much easier for their citizens to travel to Syria or Iraq. The same cannot be said about the European top source states, with the exception of Bosnia, the territories of which are located similarly far from Raqqa as those of the Central Asian countries. Citizens of the latter, however, are in a less desperate financial situation and are able to afford travel to the Turkish–Syrian border more easily.

The Central Asian states have a long migration track record, bar Kazakhstan (see: Row 6), to mainly Russia but to a smaller degree to Turkey. To a lesser extent, this is mirrored in the MENA region, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, and far less in Europe. In theory, this could suggest that immigrating to a foreign land should not constitute a problem to such people as the inhabitants of Tajikistan. There exists, however, a key difference between leaving a country for Russia in order to work to send remittances back home and to uproot oneself completely and go to territory controlled by ISIS. The latter seems to be an option chosen far less frequently by citizens of all five states.

The Central Asian countries are less Sunni Muslim than the top source states in MENA but far more than the European countries (see: Row 3). This does not mean that the predominance of Sunni Islam is in any way threatened in the region, and the ISIS *bête noire*, the Shiites, are far from numerous in the region. Thus, ISIS is highly unlikely to mobilise Central Asians along the lines of its conflict with the “rejectionist” and treacherous Shiites. The local Muslims are also far more removed, geographically and conceptually, from the conflicts raging in the Middle East and the majority of them will be less ready to endorse transnational, pan-Islamic causes.

An enormous disparity exists in the GDP figures for Central Asian countries, with Kazakhstan the most better off and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan amongst the poorest countries in the world (plus

Turkmenistan's whopping 60% unemployment) (see: Rows 4, 5, 7). The MENA sources, and most of the European ones, are far richer and simultaneously more widely represented amongst the ranks of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. To an extent, this shows that the link between poverty and terrorism is tenuous, as some citizens of the world's poorest countries are not ready to wholeheartedly endorse a pan-Islamic and terrorist organisation. At the same time, they do not rush to join local jihadist outfits either, as these are relatively feeble.

The quality of education in all five states is of a very low standard (see: Row 25), although Kazakhstan pushes the regional average upwards and is the only country that could compete with MENA in this respect. The top European foreign fighter source nations are in a far better position in this respect, with Bosnia and Herzegovina lagging behind. This state of affairs is no way offset by Central Asia's low spending on education (see: Row 9), with two countries providing no data in this respect and only Kyrgyzstan devoting a percentage of its low GDP, but in line with European standards, to this issue. Simultaneously, all five countries spend a far smaller percentage of their GDPs than MENA and European countries on health (see: Row 8). These statistics speak volumes of the region's low quality of life, which, again, seems to push people towards emigration but not essentially outright radicalisation and travel to join a transnational jihadist movement.

Online radicalisation seems far less likely for local inhabitants as their countries rank low for the number of internet users (see: Row 10) and compared to the total population. Turkmenistan ranks lowest in this category, with about 80,000 internet users for a population of more than 5 million. The Middle Eastern and especially European source states for foreign fighter are far into the digital age and there online radicalisation is widely regarded as one of the primary mechanisms for recruitment into ISIS.

Central Asia is much poorer compared to the European or MENA countries but within the region it is the far richer countries that provide the larger net number of fighters to the battlefronts in Iraq and Syria. Central Asian poverty is reflected by statistics regarding the number of people below the poverty line and the percentage of inhabitants living below \$1.25 per day. The national average for the former category from all five states stands at 34%, which means far more people live in poverty there than the average of the top MENA and European source states (see: Row 11). Central Asia also has an average of 9.1% of people living below \$1.25 per day (and specifically, fewer in Kazakhstan and more in Turkmenistan). These numbers compared to MENA or European countries are negligible at best (see: Row 12). The poverty of this region is compounded by its low ranking in terms of economic freedom, global competitiveness and ease of doing business (see: Rows 19, 20, 21). The only comparable element here is the fact that the five studied MENA countries are almost as uncompetitive as the trio of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (no data is available for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). All five countries also vary around the 100 ranking in terms of innovation, social progress and globalisation (see: rows 22, 23, 24). Their rankings are far lower than the averages derived from the top MENA and European source countries (the only exception is social progress, which is also far from impressive in the Middle East and North Africa). The Central Asian situation is equally bleak in relation to HDI (see: Row 13); only one country (Kazakhstan) is ranked "high" in terms of human development, while the rest stand at "medium." Of the MENA foreign fighter sources, one (Saudi Arabia) is ranked "very high" and another (Morocco) is "medium," but the rest are given a "high" rank. The European countries are all ranked "very high" with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Four of the five Central Asian states are "authoritarian regimes" with only Kyrgyzstan falling into the category of a "hybrid regime" (see: Row 15). Interestingly, this is mirrored by the situation with the top MENA source countries, which have seen higher overall numbers and far higher per capita numbers of those joining the ranks of foreign fighters. As a consequence of authoritarianism, the states in the region rank negatively on rule of law, corruption perception, and their press is described as not free (see: Rows 14, 16, 17). The MENA and European source states score much better on these indices, yet still see higher numbers, and sometimes higher per capita numbers of citizens who travel to join the conflict in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS in Central Asia? A Case Study Approach

As was shown, Central Asia, despite at times looking ripe for ISIS' picking, is still from a comparative point of view relatively untouched by the organisation's interests or presence. Below is a case-by-case analysis that provides context for the findings contained in Table 1.

Kazakhstan

About 250 Kazakh citizens are fighting in the ranks of ISIS. About half of them are specialised in such professions as nurses, teachers, engineers, etc. Also, about half of them could be women⁷ and 50 may be children,⁸ as entire Kazakh families of different social and economic backgrounds have travelled to Syria and Iraq. Although most Kazakhs are linked to the mild Hanafi school of Islamic law, Kazakhs fighting on the side of ISIS profess themselves to be Salafists, which is relatively unpopular in Kazakhstan.⁹ Recruitment into ISIS in Kazakhstan is handled by a missionary extremist organisation banned in the country, "Tablighi Jamaat." However, its social scope of influence is limited to a minority of Kazakhs who already have a radicalised worldview and weak bonds with the rest of society.¹⁰

It is difficult to indicate the ethnicity or region of Kazakhstan from which the dominant number of citizens have joined ISIS as fighters. On a regional scale, the greatest threat to the activation of ISIS recruitment occurs in the southern districts bordering countries where the problem of terrorism is theoretically much higher. At the same time, the risk of ISIS supporting group activation is significant in the north of Kazakhstan, which witnesses a high level of activity of ISIS-linked Caucasian networks from Russia.¹¹ Recruitment of volunteers takes place both within the country in mosques or within religious communities as well as abroad, mainly in Russia.¹² Turkey acts as the transit point on the way to the Middle East from Central Asia because Kazakhs enjoy visa-free travel to this country. The factors motivating Kazakhs to go to Iraq and Syria include political marginalisation in their own country, their difficult life situation, radicalisation amongst women experiencing social inequality, religious radicalisation and the search for alternatives to the post-Soviet realities of life in Kazakhstan, especially among young people.¹³

The problem of religious extremism in Kazakhstan is seen as one of the key threats to the stability of the state, especially after the first terrorist bombing on its territory in its history in Aktobe in 2011.¹⁴ Despite great interest in the problem among local media and state institutions, Kazakhstan is not a state in which religious radicalisation is a large-scale problem as it mostly relates to socially or religiously marginalised

⁷ A. Sarhan, "300 Kazakhs fight with ISIS Says Kazakhstan's National Security," *Iraqi News*, 18 November 2014, www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/300-kazakhs-fight-isis-says-kazakhstans-national-security.

⁸ J. Paraszczuk, "Kazakhs Fighting with IS Are Victims of Radical Propaganda," *Radio Free Europe*, 20 March 2015, www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-is-fighters-propaganda-victims/26911658.html.

⁹ "Terrorism and Islamic radicalization in Central Asia," Jamestown Foundation, February 2013, www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown_articles_-_Terrorism_in_Central_Asia_February_2013.pdf.

¹⁰ J. Zenn, "Kazakhstan Reacts to Video of Children with Islamic State," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 11, issue 224, The Jamestown Foundation, 16 December 2014, [www.jamestown.org/regions/centralasia/single/?tx_ttnews\[pointer\]=2&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=43207&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=53&cHash=1a8efb9d5c60851b725e645a0e6c903e#.VV8j0UY3ROZ](http://www.jamestown.org/regions/centralasia/single/?tx_ttnews[pointer]=2&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43207&tx_ttnews[backPid]=53&cHash=1a8efb9d5c60851b725e645a0e6c903e#.VV8j0UY3ROZ).

¹¹ J. Paraszczuk, "In Russia, Kazakh Accused of Recruiting Students for Islamic State," *Radio Free Europe*, 6 February 2015, www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-recruitment-islamic-state/26833481.html.

¹² "Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia," *Policy Brief*, International Crisis Group, 20 January 2015, www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf.

¹³ A. Borisov, "Ex-Soviet Central Asia raises alarm over IS recruitment," *Yahoo News*, 15 May 2015, http://news.yahoo.com/ex-soviet-central-asia-raises-alarm-over-recruitment-052100409.html?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign.

¹⁴ "Five Kazakhs Jailed for Membership in Banned Islamic Group," *Radio Free Europe*, 16 January 2015, www.rferl.org/content/five-kazakhs-jailed-for-membership-in-banned-islamic-froup/26797197.html.

groups.¹⁵ Kazakhs attach more importance, however, to their clan membership and their local and regional identity than to transnational religious extremism.¹⁶

Kyrgyzstan

In the last decade, two revolutions took place in Kyrgyzstan. In both cases, the protests began in the south of the country, which is also from where most of the current-day ISIS recruits come.¹⁷ Both revolutions underscored the weakness of the Kyrgyz state—the lack of democratic institutions, corruption, poor economic situation, clan and ethnic tensions.

According to estimates, at least 100 Kyrgyz citizens (but as many as 600) out of a population of 5.7 million have joined ISIS. Their average age range is 22–28 and the majority of them are men (however, there is a visible trend of entire families departing together) who previously showed no inclination to aggression.¹⁸ Recruitment follows a pattern familiar for other countries in the region—the majority of Kyrgyz who join ISIS were recruited in mosques in Russia where they work, and pass through Turkey, which waives visas for Kyrgyz, on their way to either Syria or Iraq. According to official statistics provided by Russian mass media, about 500,000 Kyrgyz work in Russia. Moreover, from May 2015, when Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union, they no longer have to apply for any kind of work permission.¹⁹ Other means of recruitment include social networks such as V Kontakte, Odnoklasniki (“Classmates”) and to some extent also Facebook.

On one hand, it may seem that the main reasons for going to fight in the name of the Islamic State is poverty and a lack of perspectives among young people living in Kyrgyzstan, their exclusion (in Russia and in Kyrgyzstan), and far from proficient religious education (to some extent, a legacy of the Soviet period), which does not give local Muslims a reliable basis for their faith. On the other hand, the reason why people also want to go to Syria is they dream to live in a “real Islamic state” or to take part in jihad and fighting with infidels, which is treated as a kind of “adventure.”²⁰ What makes the Kyrgyz case specific is the fact that 95% of those recruited by ISIS in this country come from its southern part, and the majority of them belong to the Uzbek minority, which has historically faced violent repression and which is more religious than ethnic Kyrgyz.

Tajikistan

In referring to ISIS, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon called the organisation the plague of the 21st century.²¹ This plague, however, is unevenly threatening different parts of his country and is by far not the most pressing concern of the Tajik authorities. Tajikistan is a state profoundly divided as far as ethnicity and geography are concerned, but more than 90% of the population are Sunni Muslims (the majority of them live in the western and north-western parts in places such as Ferghana Valley and Gissar Valley, which is where most of the country’s ISIS recruits come from). At the same time, the Gorno-Badakhshan

¹⁵ “Galym Shoykin: Nelzja associirovat religii s banditami, boyevikami, terroristami,” *Zakon.kz*, 16 March 2015, www.zakon.kz/4697039-galym-shojkin-nelzja-associirovat.html.

¹⁶ “Author talks about Kazakhstan’s Clan Politics,” *Radio Free Europe*, 27 May 2015, www.rferl.org/content/author_talks_about_kazakhstan_clan_politics/24312927.html.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the first conflict in Osh on an ethnic basis started during the times of the Soviet Union, in 1990.

¹⁸ A. Melnikov, “‘Khalifat’ rekrutiruyet Srednyuyu Aziyu,” *Nezavisimaya*, 4 March 2015, www.ng.ru/problems/2015-03-04/7_halifat.html.

¹⁹ For more, see: M. Solopov, “Kirgizskikh migrantov v maye osvobodyat ot polucheniya razresheniy na rabotu,” *RBK*, 16 April 2015, <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/16/04/2015/552fd4b09a79477f02388592>.

²⁰ A. Melnikov, *op. cit.*

²¹ *Vystupleniye Predsedatelya Narodnoy Demokraticheskoy Partii Tadjikistana (NDPT) Emomali Rakhmona na XII syezde NDPT*, www.prezident.tj/ru/node/8038. See also: *Vystupleniye na otkrytom zasedanii SKB ODKB po prioritetam predsedatel'stva Tadjikistana v ODKB*, www.prezident.tj/ru/node/8053.

Autonomous Region, located in the Pamir mountains and bordering Afghanistan, constitutes a special case as it is inhabited by a Shiite (Isma'ilits) population which feels threatened by Taliban incursions from Afghanistan.²² As a consequence, there is almost no interest in supporting Sunni and the revanchist ISIS in this region.

According to Tajik data, about 400 citizens of the country have joined ISIS as fighters (some estimates, however, put this number at 2,000, while the International Centre for Study of Radicalisation says it's 190),²³ which is not a significant number considering the 7 million who live in this country. Moreover, the majority of Tajiks were recruited not in Tajikistan, but in Russia, where they work.²⁴ The primary place of recruitment in Russia is in mosques, which consolidate working migrants and provides them with a sense of security and community. It is also worth adding that in stories about recruitment in the country, the narrative dominates that Chechens are responsible for it.²⁵ Also social media is used for recruitment, again the sites V Kontakte and Odnoklasniki are used, but they are not the most popular way to obtain fighters. Russia-recruited ISIS-bound Tajiks mostly pass through Turkey, where visas are not required. Alternatively, they also pass through Afghanistan.

The vulnerability of Tajiks to recruitment is strongly connected with their exclusion both in Russia and their homeland (caused by the fact that since they are forced to work abroad they are no longer part of the society in their homeland, and simultaneously, they are not accepted as part of the society in the host country, either), the lack of good religious education and poverty. Paradoxically, the threat of a prohibition on entering Russia (400,000 Tajiks would feel the brunt of it) due to previous violations of visa regulations could also push people from the country to the Middle East as they would have no prospects to improve their material status.²⁶ At the same time, another pull factor is the dream of a life in a "real Islamic state" where rules of Sharia apply. Other important factors are also the money that ISIS gives to fighters and their families, and the possibility of conducting jihad. This desire exists against the backdrop of rather unsophisticated knowledge on the tenets of Islam, and what jihad in a foreign land actually entails.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is a hermetic country and little is known about social trends there. However, in terms of the number of foreign fighters who are fighting in Syria and Iraq, Turkmen are second in Central Asia and number around 360. This is not, however, a by-product of general or widespread radicalisation in Turkmen society. With much greater value than religious radicalisation, Turkmen attach importance to clan identity and national identity. The phenomenon of recruitment to ISIS is related primarily to the excluded minority of people who do not feel as strong of national and clan identity as the rest of society.

Emigration to Russia, again, plays an important role in the process of recruitment to ISIS. As with their other Central Asian counterparts, Turkmen work in low-skilled and low-paid jobs in Russia and become susceptible to propaganda from Caucasian gangs who recruit volunteers to ISIS.²⁷ They often decide to join the organisation when they see it as a chance to receive appreciation and improve their social status. They often lack such opportunities in their own country, which has an oppressive authoritarian government that

²² Author's interview with Małgorzata Biczak, an expert on Central Asia with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 20 May 2015.

²³ V. Mukhin, "Voyska ODKB gotovyatsya dat' otpor islamistam," *Nezavisimaya*, 26 May 2015, www.ng.ru/armies/2015-05-20/1_odkb.html.

²⁴ About a million Tajiks work in Russia, according to official statistics. For more, see: "Chislennost tadjikov v Rossii rastet, a tadjichek—sokrashchayetsya," *ASIA-Plus*, www.news.tj/ru/news/chislennost-tadjikov-v-rossii-rastet-tadjichek-sokrashchaetsya.

²⁵ C. Moore, "Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and 'Beyond'," 6 May 2015, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2015.1032035.

²⁶ K. Bakhtiyor, "Ekspert: Rossiya ne obyazana prinimat vsekh migrantov," *ASIA-Plus*, 6 April 2015, <http://news.tj/ru/news/ekspert-rossiya-ne-obyazana-prinimat-vsekh-migrantov>.

²⁷ D. Turovsky, *op. cit.*

fails to or is not interested in providing its impoverished and stratified society with means to improve their lives.

Sunnis constitute a majority in Turkmenistan and the religion has been rising since the beginning of Turkmen statehood and is strongly linked to public policy.²⁸ Turkmenistan has never experienced major turmoil because of religious radicalisation but Islam's prominent role in society, combined with socio-economic deprivation and decaying social relations could push some young Turkmen towards radicalisation and potentially to joining ISIS.²⁹ Interestingly, Turkmen may not constitute the best ISIS fighters as their brethren inhabit both Syria³⁰ and Iraq.³¹ These brethren are Shiites and some of ISIS' primary targets in the Middle East. Thus, Turkmen joining an anti-Shia organisation in the Middle East would be an insult to the Turkmen population, which is still motivated by Panturkic ideas. This limits the potential for ISIS influence to the part of the country that borders Afghanistan, as the organisation could penetrate Turkmenistan from its nascent base there.³²

Uzbekistan

Uzbeks are strongly represented in the ranks of ISIS with more than 500 fighters originating either from the country or from amongst the ethnic Uzbeks living in neighbouring countries. At the same time, the Uzbeks seem to be quite eminently present in the ranks of the Syrian rebels as they even constitute their own groups/factions affiliated with other rebel groups, mainly the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al Nusra.³³ Many volunteers come from Kyrgyzstan where Uzbek-Kyrgyz antagonisms are one of the factors enhancing social and religious radicalisation.³⁴ The specificity of the Fergana Valley, with its numerous ethnic conflicts and areas that are difficult to control and access, are also the reason for the relatively easy crossing of borders between countries. Potentially, ISIS or any other Islamist group could find this part of Uzbekistan a place ripe for agitation and possibly guerrilla-style activities.

Emigration to Russia plays a large role in the recruitment of young Uzbeks. Quite often, Uzbeks perform the least-prestigious professions in Russia and, recently, see diminishing returns from working abroad as the rouble has rapidly lost value. This only increases social frustration and dissatisfaction with life in the post-Soviet world. As a consequence, Uzbeks, as all emigrants from Central Asia do, often fall into the orbit of Caucasian gangs, which actively recruit volunteers to the Islamic State, offering protection and the prospect of a better and more meaningful life.³⁵ These influences are felt particularly in the south of Russia, where the networks of recruiters to terrorist organisations are particularly well developed.³⁶ However, very often an alternative in the form of going to war in Syria and Iraq turns out to be unattractive because many

²⁸ A. Fergana, "Turkmenistan's Islam: Between Religion and State," *Global Voices*, 20 March 2015, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2015/03/20/turkmenistans-islam-between-religion-and-state>.

²⁹ R. Standish, "Shadow Boxing with the Islamic State in Central Asia," *Foreign Policy, Report*, 6 February 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/06/shadow-boxing-with-the-islamic-state-in-central-asia-isis-terrorism>.

³⁰ M. Gurcan, "Syrian Turkmen are forgotten ally in war against Islamic State," *Al-Monitor*, 11 February 2015, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/turkey-isis-syrian-turkmen-forgotten-ally.html.

³¹ "Iraq: ISIS Kidnaps Shia Turkmen, Destroys Shrines," *Human Right Watch*, 28 June 2014, www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/27/iraq-isis-kidnaps-shia-turkmen-destroys-shrines.

³² M. Casey, "ISIS's and Turkmenistan's Border Worries," *Indian Strategic Studies*, 28 March 2015, <http://strategicstudyindia.blogspot.com/2015/03/isis-and-turkmenistans-border-worries.html>.

³³ J. Paraszczuk, "Central Asian Militants in Syria Pledge Allegiance to IS," *Radio Free Europe*, 30 October 2014, www.rferl.org/content/under-black-flag-central-asia-militants-allegiance/26666098.html; "Katibat Al Tawhid Wal Jihad," *The Line of Steel*, 1 March 2015, <http://thelineofsteel.weebly.com/social-media-analysis/katibat-al-tawhid-wal-jihad>.

³⁴ M. Walker, "Kyrgyzstan: the scars of ethnic conflict run deep," *The Guardian*, 10 June 2011, www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/10/kyrgyzstan-ethnic-conflict-osh-uzbekistan.

³⁵ D. Turovsky, *op. cit.*

³⁶ A. Nemtsova, "In Russia, the Struggle to Un-Recruit ISIS Followers," *The Daily Beast*, 4 March 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/03/in-russia-the-struggle-to-un-recruit-isis-followers.html.

volunteers from Central Asia, due to poor training and low combat skills, act as cannon fodder in the conflict.

The country's leading Islamist group, the IMU, has, as was shown, officially declared its support for ISIS. IMU—1,000 strong and seemingly allied to Al Qaeda—operates out of the north of Afghanistan and conducts operations in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.³⁷ IMU has shifted ideologically as well as it now preaches about the need of a pan-Sunni uprising and the creation of an Islamic Emirate in Central Asia. IMU for years has been focused on the fight against authoritarian governments in the region, but now has turned towards enhancing the movement of volunteers to fight in the Middle East. It is particularly active on the border with Afghanistan, where IMU militants took part in skirmishes on the Taliban side.³⁸

Prevent Popularity and Deny Access

As demonstrated above, ISIS does not yet possess organisational structures in Central Asia but might acquire them via, e.g., accepting IMU into its sphere of influence and tasking it to carve out a “province,” even if merely in name, in Central Asia. At the moment, however, al-Baghdadi's organisation does not seem to be preoccupied with this possibility and devotes more attention to its Afghan-Pakistani representatives who might, in the future, be tasked to reach into Central Asia. Consequently, at this moment, ISIS is a very vague concept to Central Asians, but if its Khurasan “province” was to appear on the borders of, e.g., Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, then the situation could change relatively quickly. In such conditions, impoverished, repressed populations of the region might be poised to endorse some of its ideas with more vigour.

Currently, ISIS remains a threat to the region mostly because of the fact that Caucasian networks recruit Central Asians and Russians to the organisation in Russia. In this sense, Central Asian foreign fighters in Syria, who have travelled to Russia to find work, are a blowback from Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen or Uzbek poverty, lack of political freedom, poor governance, corruption, etc. As a result of that, Russia should be equally worried with the rising numbers of Central Asian fighters in Iraq and Syria, as these individuals pass through its territory before emerging on the Turkish-Syrian border. At the same time, it is more than likely that many more Central Asians radicalised in Russia will not necessarily opt for jihad in the MENA region but will instead return home and act as jihadist force multipliers in their native countries.

Such returns or any sign of domestic radicalisation will be used by the local repressive authorities to ask for more Russian assistance in combating the threat, and as a pretext to limit civil liberties even further. To an extent, Russia will be receptive to such calls as this could also be an excuse for it to push for strengthening the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR) of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and simultaneously, an opportunity to lobby for more stringent border controls on behalf of the Central Asian states. The latter should also increase intelligence cooperation with the West and improve and redeploy the capacity of their security services away from monitoring and brutalising any real or imagined opposition towards genuine counter-terrorism intelligence work.

Such purely security-oriented measures, however, will not suffice for the Central Asian states to prevent an internal surge in ISIS popularity, or its appearance within their borders. The authorities should also focus on improvement of administration in rural areas in which the state's writ often does not apply. They should prioritise economic and regional development, and outreach to the genuine local authorities (via clans) as an element of their counter-terrorism efforts. Such efforts, spurred by terrorism and radicalisation scares,

³⁷ “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan declares support for ISIS,” *Alakhbar English*, 6 October 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21859>.

³⁸ M. Adeel, “Uzbek militants in Afghanistan pledge allegiance to ISIS in beheading video,” *Khaama Press*, 31 March 2015, www.khaama.com/uzbek-militants-in-afghanistan-pledge-allegiance-to-isis-in-beheading-video-9962.

would be, paradoxically, in line with the EU's priorities for its relations with Central Asia (under the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU) which speak of fostering economic cooperation, the rule of law and human rights in the region. This could be augmented by development of programmes that strengthen the economic potential of the countries of the region as well as increasing development aid—Poland could offer its Tadjik involvement as a practical example of outreach that works, i.e., consisting of strengthening the capacity of local communities.³⁹ Such efforts improve the living standards of the local population and this could be a factor decreasing interest in radical Islamic organisations. Simultaneously, countries such as Turkey but also Russia and Iran (for Shiite populations) could be involved in the effort to enhance the quality of religious education in Central Asia, which is at a very low level in the region and is sometimes responsible for rapid radicalisation of some of the foreign fighters.

³⁹ For more, see: "Projects in particular years/Tajikistan," *Solidarity Fund*, www.solidarityfund.pl/en/opisy-projektow-2013/wg-krajow-2/tadzykistan.

Table I. Central Asian countries and their preparedness for ISIS

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Average
1. Number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (% of the population)	250 (0.001%)	500 (0.002%)	360 (0.007%)	100 (0.002%)	190 (0.002%)	280 (0.002%)
2. Distance to the battlefield (Capital city—Raqqa)	3,080 km	2,680 km	1,734 km	3,133 km	2,643 km	2,654 km
3. Muslims	70.2%	88% (mostly Sunni)	89%	75%	90% (Sunni Muslims: 85%, Shia Muslims: 5%)	82.40% (Sunni Muslims: 85%, Shia Muslims: 5%)
4. Gross Domestic Product Purchasing power parity \$ (Rank)	420,600,000,000 (43)	170,300,000,000 (67)	82,150,000,000 (87)	19,290,000,000 (143)	22,220,000,000 (140)	142,912,000,000 (96)
5. Gross Domestic Product per capita \$ (Rank)	24,100 (74)	5,600 (162)	14,200 (108)	3,400 (181)	2,700 (193)	10,000 (144)
6. Net migration rate (Rank) (if X>0 = immigrants entering the country; if X<0 then emigrants leaving the country)	0.42 (72)	-2.46 (173)	-1.86 (164)	-6.16 (199)	-1.17 (152)	-2.246 (152)
7. Unemployment rate Note: % of labour force without job (Rank)	5.10% (51)	4.90% (47)	60% (198)	8.60% (96)	2.50% (18)	16.20% (82)
8. Health expenditures Note: % of GDP (Rank)	4.20% (157)	5.90% (118)	2.00% (190)	7.10% (77)	5.80% (120)	5% (132)
9. Education expenditures Note: % of GDP (Rank)	3.10% (138)	No data	No data	6.80% (25)	3.90% (114)	4.6% (92)
10. Internet users / Population (Rank / Rank)	5,299,000 / 17,948,816 (43) / (62)	4,689,000 / 28,929,716 (48) / (45)	80,400 / 5,171,943 (162) / (120)	2,195,000 / 5,604,212 (72) / (114)	700,000 / 8,051,512 (108) / (97)	2,592,680 / 13,141,240 (87) / (88)
11. Population below poverty line (% of population)	Rank: 123, Score: 12.10%	Rank: 82, Score: 26%	Rank: 69, Score: 30%	Rank: 42, Score: 40%	Rank: 15, Score: 60%	Rank: 66 Score: 34%
12. Population below 1.25 \$ per day (% of population)	0.1%	No data	24.8%	5.0%	6.6%	9.1%
13. Human Development Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	High (Rank: 70)	Medium (Rank: 116)	Medium (Rank: 103)	Medium (Rank: 125)	Medium (Rank: 133)	Medium (Rank: 109)
14. Freedom of the Press (Rank: 1 = the best)	Not Free (Rank: 185, Score: 85)	Not Free (Rank: 197, Score: 95)	Not Free (Rank: 197, Score: 95)	Not Free (Rank: 148, Score: 67)	Not Free (Rank: 179, Score: 82)	Not Free (Rank: 181, Score: 85)
15. Democracy Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 120, Score: 3.62)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 160, Score: 1.85)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 162, Score: 1.83)	Hybrid regime: (Rank: 111, Score: 4.08)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 149, Score: 2.45)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 140, Score: 2.77)
16. Rule of Law Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 93, Score: 0.35	Rank: 97, Score: 0.29	No data	Rank: 70, Score: 0.47	No data	Rank: 87, Score: 0.37

17. Corruption Perceptions Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 126, Score: 29	Rank: 166, Score: 18	Rank: 169, Score: 17	Rank: 136, Score: 27	Rank: 152, Score: 23	Rank: 150, Score: 23
18. Global Terrorism Index (Rank: 1 = the worst)	Rank: 65, Score: 2.37	Rank: 111, Score: 0.14	Rank: 124, Score: No data	Rank: 112, Score: 0.10	Rank: 68, Score: 1.99	Rank: 96, Score: 1.15
19. Index of Economic Freedom (Rank: 1 = the best)	Moderately Free (Rank: 69, Score: 63.3)	Repressed (Rank: 160, Score: 47.0)	Repressed (Rank: 172, Score: 41.4)	Moderately Free (Rank: 82, Score: 61.3)	Mostly Not Free (Rank: 140, Score: 52.7)	Mostly Not Free Rank: 125, Score: 53.14
20. Global Competitiveness Ranking (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 50, Score: 4.4	No data	No data	Rank: 108, Score: 3.7	Rank: 91, Score: 3.9	Rank: 83, Score: 4
21. Doing Business Economic Ranking (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 77	Rank: 141	No data	Rank: 102	Rank: 166	Rank: 122
22. Global Innovation Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 79, Score: 32.8	Rank: 128, Score: 25.2	No data	Rank: 112, Score: 27.8	Rank: 137, Score: 23.7	Rank: 114, Score: 27.4
23. Social Progress Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 83 Score: 61.38	Rank: 90 Score: 59.71	Rank: No data Score: No data	Rank: 93 Score: 58.58	Rank: 96 Score: 56.49	Rank: 91, Score: 59.04
24. Index of globalisation (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 76, Score: 60.06	Rank: 149, Score: 42.34	Rank: 167, Score: 37.96	Rank: 99, Score: 53.91	Rank: 137, Score: 45.02	Rank: 126 Score: 47.86
25. Education Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 70, Score: 0.762	Rank: 116, Score: 0.651	Rank: 103, Score: 0.679	Rank: 125, Score: 0.656	Rank: 133, Score: 0.639	Rank: 109, Score: 0.677

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Table 2. Top five MENA foreign fighter source countries and their preparedness for ISIS

	Tunisia	Saudi Arabia	Jordan	Morocco	Lebanon	Average
1. Number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (% of the population)	1,500–3,000 (0.014–0.028%)	1,500–2,500 (0.005–0.009%)	1,500 (0.019%)	1,500 (0.05%)	900 (0.15%)	1,380–1,880 (0.08–0.011%)
2. Distance to the battlefield (Capital city—Raqqa)	2,689 km	1,462 km	527 km	4,150 km		1,844
3. Muslims	99.1% (Sunni Muslims: 99% 1% > Shia Muslims)	100% (Sunni Muslims: 85–90% Shia Muslims: 10–15%)	97.2% (Predominantly Sunni Muslims)	99% (Sunni Muslims: 99%, Shia Muslims: 0,1%)	54% (Sunni Muslims: 27%, Shia Muslims: 27%)	89.9% (Sunni Muslims: 77.5–8.8% Shia Muslims: 9.75–11.0%)
4. Gross Domestic Product Purchasing power parity \$ (Rank)	125,100,000,000 (77)	1,616,000,000,000 (15)	79,770,000,000 (89)	254,400,000,000 (57)	80,510,000,000 (88)	431,156,000,000 (65)
5. Gross Domestic Product per capita \$ (Rank)	11,400 (122)	52,800 (20)	11,900 (120)	7,700 (150)	17,900 (90)	20,340 (100)
6. Net migration rate (Rank) (if X>0 = immigrants entering the country; if X<0 then emigrants leaving the country)	-1.74 (161)	-0.59 (138)	17.22 (5)	-3.46 (186)	83.82 (1)	19.05 (98)
7. Unemployment rate Note: % of labour force without a job (Rank)	15.20% (146)	11.20% (122)	12.30% (129)	9.60% (109)	No data	12.08% (126)
8. Health expenditures Note: % of GDP (Rank)	7.0% (80)	3.20% (178)	9.80% (25)	6.40% (101)	7.30% (73)	6.70% (91)
9. Education expenditures Note: % of GDP (Rank)	6.20% (38)	5.10% (68)	No data	5.40% (59)	2.20% (169)	4.70% (84)
10. Internet users / Population (Rank / Rank)	3,500,000 / 10,937,521 (58) / (79)	9,774,000 / 27,345,986 (29) / (47)	1,642,000 / 7,930,491 (76) / (98)	13,213,000 / 32,987,206 (28) / (39)	1,000,000 / 5,882,562 (96) / (110)	5,825,800 / 17,016,753 (57) / (75)
11. Population below poverty line (% of population)	Rank: 150, Score: 3.80%	No data	Rank: 121, Score: 14.20%	Rank: 119, Score: 15.00%	Rank: 75, Score: 28.00%	Rank: 116, Score: 15.25%
12. Population below \$1.25 per day (% of population)	1.1%	No data	0.1%	2.5%	No data	1.23%
13. Human Development Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	High (Rank: 90)	Very High (Rank: 34)	High (Rank: 86)	Medium (Rank: 140)	High (Rank: 74)	High (Rank: 85)
14. Freedom of the Press (Rank: 1 = the best)	Partly Free (Rank: 93, Score: 48)	Not Free (Rank: 180, Score: 83)	Not Free (Rank: 145, Score: 66)	Not Free (Rank: 145, Score: 66)	Partly Free (Rank: 118, Score: 55)	Not Free (Rank: 136, Score: 64)

15. Democracy Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 135, Score: 3.06)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 159, Score: 1.92)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 113, Score: 3.92)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 115, Score: 3.90)	Hybrid regime: (Rank: 85, Score: 5.82)	Authoritarian regime: (Rank: 121, Score: 3.72)
16. Rule of Law Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 41, Score: 0.58	No data	Rank: 64, Score: 0.50	Rank: 46, Score: 0.56	Rank: 44, Score: 0.57	Rank: 49, Score: 0.55
17. Corruption Perceptions Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 79, Score: 40	Rank: 55, Score: 49	Rank: 55, Score: 49	Rank: 80, Score: 39	Rank: 136, Score: 27	Rank: 81, Score: 41
18. Global Terrorism Index (Rank: 1 = the worst)	Rank: 46, Score: 3.29	Rank: 55, Score: 2.71	Rank: 70, Score: 1.76	Rank: 67, Score: 2.11	Rank: 14, Score: 6.40	Rank: 50, Score: 3.25
19. Index of Economic Freedom (Rank: 1 = the best)	Mostly Not Free (Rank: 107, Score: 57.7)	Moderately Free (Rank: 77, Score: 62.1)	Moderately Free (Rank: 38, Score: 69.3)	Moderately Free (Rank: 89, Score: 60.1)	Mostly Not Free (Rank: 94, Score: 59.3)	Moderately Free (Rank: 81, Score: 61.7)
20. Global Competitiveness Ranking (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 87, Score: 3.96	Rank: 24 Score: 5.06	Rank: 64, Score: 4.25	Rank: 72, Score: 4.21	Rank: 113, Score: 3.68	Rank: 72, Score: 4.23
21. Doing Business Economic Ranking (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 60	Rank: 49	Rank: 117	Rank: 71	Rank: 104	Rank: 80
22. Global Innovation Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 78, Score: 32.9	Rank: 38, Score: 41.6	Rank: 64, Score: 36.2	Rank: 84, Score: 32.2	Rank: 77, Score: 33.6	Rank: 68, Score: 35.3
23. Social Progress Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 67 Score: 64.92	Rank: 69 Score: 64.27	Rank: 74 Score: 63.31	Rank: 91 Score: 59.56	Rank: 80 Score: 61.85	Rank: 76, Score: 62.78
24. Index of globalisation (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 46, Score: 85.16	Rank: 58, Score: 65.27	Rank: 46, Score: 68.08	Rank: 51, Score: 65.97	Rank: 60, Score: 64.85	Rank: 52, Score: 69.87
25. Education Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 90, Score: 0.621	Rank: 34, Score: 0.723	Rank: 77, Score: 0.700	Rank: 129, Score: 0.468	Rank: 65, Score: 0.631	Rank: 79, Score: 0.629

Sources: See Table I.

Table 3. Top five European foreign fighter source countries

	France	Germany	United Kingdom	Belgium	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Average
1. Number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq (% of the population)	1,200 (0.002%)	500–600 (0.000617–0.000741%)	500–600 (0.000784–0.000941%)	440 (0.004%)	330 (0.09%)	594–634 (0.07%)
2. Distance to the battlefield (Capital city—Raqqa)	3,295 km	2,724 km	3,533 km	3,213 km	1,350 km	2,823 km
3. Muslims	7–9%	3.7%	4.4%	5%	40%	12–12.5%
4. Gross Domestic Product Purchasing power parity \$ (Rank)	2,587,000,000,000 (9)	3,621,000,000,000 (6)	2,435,000,000,000 (11)	467,100,000,000 (39)	38,080,000,000 (114)	1,829,636,000,000 (36)
5. Gross Domestic Product per capita \$ (Rank)	40,400 (39)	44,700 (27)	37,700 (44)	41,700 (37)	9,800 (134)	34,860 (56)
6. Net migration rate (Rank) (if X>0 = immigrants entering the country; if X<0 then emigrants leaving the country)	1.09 (59)	1.06 (60)	2.56 (38)	1.22 (57)	-0.38 (132)	1.11 (69)
7. Unemployment rate (Rank) Note: % of labour force without job	9.70% (110)	5.00% (49)	5.70% (59)	8.50% (95)	44.30% (193)	14.60% (101)
8. Health expenditures (Rank) Note: % of GDP	11.70% (9)	11.30% (13)	9.40% (30)	10.80% (16)	9.90% (24)	10.60% (18)
9. Education expenditures (Rank) Note: % of GDP	5.90% (43)	5.10% (74)	6.20% (36)	6.60% (30)	No data	5.95% (46)
10. Internet users / Population (Rank / Rank)	45,262,000 / 66,259,012 (8) / (22)	65,125,000 / 80,996,685 (5) / (18)	51,444,000 / 63,742,977 (7) / (23)	8,113,000 / 10,449,361 (35) / (84)	1,422,000 / 3,871,643 (83) / (129)	34,273,200 / 45,063,936 (28) / (55)
11. Population below poverty line (% of population)	Rank: 145, Score: 6.20%	Rank: 133, Score: 11.00%	Rank: 123, Score: 14.00%	Rank: 117, Score: 15.20%	Rank: 86, Score: 25.00%	Rank: 121, Score: 14.30%
12. Population below 1.25 \$ per day (% of population)	No data	No data	No data	No data	0.0%	0.0%
13. Human Development Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Very High (Rank: 20)	Very High (Rank: 6)	Very High (Rank: 14)	Very High (Rank: 21)	High (Rank: 86)	Very High (Rank: 29)
14. Freedom of the Press (Rank: 1 = the best)	Free (Rank: 35, Score: 23)	Free (Rank: 22, Score: 18)	Free (Rank: 38, Score: 24)	Free (Rank: 3, Score: 11)	Partly Free (Rank: 107, Score: 51)	Free (Rank: 41, Score: 25)
15. Democracy Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Full Democracy: (Rank: 24, Score: 8.07)	Full Democracy: (Rank: 13, Score: 8.82)	Full Democracy: (Rank: 23, Score: 8.08)	Full Democracy: (Rank: 20, Score: 8.15)	Hybrid Regime: (Rank: 87, Score: 5.78)	Full Democracy: (Rank: 33, Score: 7.78)
16. Rule of Law Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 14, Score: 0.79	Rank: 9, Score: 0.83	Rank: 10, Score: 0.81	Rank: 11, Score: 0.81	Rank: 51, Score: 0.54	Rank: 19, Score: 0.76
17. Corruption Perceptions Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 26, Score: 69	Rank: 12, Score: 79	Rank: 14, Score: 78	Rank: 15, Score: 76	Rank: 80, Score: 39	Rank: 29, Score: 68
18. Global Terrorism Index (Rank: 1 = the worst)	Rank: 56, Score: 2.67	Rank: 83, Score: 1.02	Rank: 27, Score: 5.17	Rank: 93, Score: 0.53	Rank: 86, Score: 0.76	Rank: 69, Score: 2.03
19. Index of Economic Freedom (Rank: 1 = the best)	Moderately Free (Rank: 73, Score: 62.5)	Mostly Free (Rank: 16, Score: 73.8)	Mostly Free (Rank: 13, Score: 75.8)	Moderately Free (Rank: 40, Score: 68.8)	Mostly Not Free (Rank: 97, Score: 59.0)	Moderately Free (Rank: 48, Score: 68.0)

20. Global Competitiveness Ranking (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 23, Score: 5.08	Rank: 5, Score: 5.49	Rank: 9, Score: 5.41	Rank: 18, Score: 5.18	No data	Rank: 14, Score: 5.29
21. Doing Business Economic Ranking (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 31	Rank: 14	Rank: 8	Rank: 42	Rank: 107	Rank: 40
22. Global Innovation Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 22, Score: 52.2	Rank: 13, Score: 56.0	Rank: 2, Score: 62.4	Rank: 23, Score: 51.7	Rank: 81, Score: 32.4	Rank: 28, Score: 50.9
23. Social Progress Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 21, Score: 80.82	Rank: 14, Score: 84.04	Rank: 11, Score: 84.68	Rank: 17, Score: 82.83	Rank: 59, Score: 66.15	Rank: 24, Score: 79.70
24. Index of globalisation (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 20, Score: 82.65	Rank: 27, Score: 78.86	Rank: 19, Score: 82.96	Rank: 3, Score: 91.00	Rank: 50, Score: 66.18	Rank: 24, Score: 80.30
25. Education Index (Rank: 1 = the best)	Rank: 20, Score: 0.816	Rank: 6, Score: 0.884	Rank: 14, Score: 0.860	Rank: 21, Score: 0.812	Rank: 86, Score: 0.655	Rank: 29, Score: 0.805

Sources: see Table I.