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## “HARD POWER” OF AFGHAN RADICAL ISLAMISTS IN ASIA

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**Abstract.** The capture of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan has changed the regional landscape and created new concerns. Some of them are related to a possibility of strengthening of transnational terrorist organizations in the country. Others are generated by the fear of radical Islamism spreading in the guise of the Taliban or others of its ilk. Meanwhile, various radical Islamist organizations in Afghanistan that resort to “hard power” (armed violence, terrorist methods, etc.) in their practices are destabilizing the situation both in the country and in Asia in general. The conflict potential in Afghani-Pakistani relations is largely stimulated by the activities of the extremist organization Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan. Other threats to the regional peaceful development come from the terrorist group of Islamic State of Khorasan, which was rooted in ISIS in the Middle East. As for the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, they attract great interest of various radical Islamist factions shaped by Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Uighurs and affiliated with different transnational terrorist entities operating in Afghanistan, such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, etc. Their destructive activities necessitate the need for the counter-terrorist action in the region with the aim of preventing Afghanistan and Asia in general from turning into a new hotbed of instability. It would be reasonable to assume that Afghanistan, painfully traumatized by decades of internal feuds and the US military occupation, has fallen under control of the Taliban for a long time. A favorable scenario would imply achieving a sustainable consensus within the country, which will create conditions for successful economic and political cooperation between Afghanistan, Russia, China and other major actors in the future. If radical Islamists or other forces succeed in disrupting the process of Afghanistan post-conflict reconstruction, this will highly aggravate regional disbalances in Asia.

**Keywords:** radical Islamists, “hard power”, terrorism, Taliban, “Islamic state”, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, conflicts, threats.

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## “ЖЕСТКАЯ СИЛА” АФГАНСКИХ РАДИКАЛ-ИСЛАМИСТОВ В АЗИИ

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**Аннотация.** Базирующиеся в Афганистане радикально-исламистские организации, прибегающие в своей практике к “жесткой силе” (вооруженному насилию, террористическим методам) – фактор дестабилизации самого Афганистана, афгано-пакистанских отношений, международных отношений в Азии. Деструктивная деятельность экстремистской организации “Техрик-е талибан Пакистан”, афганского филиала террористической структуры “Исламское государство”, сотрудничающих с ней группировок центральноазиатских радикал-исламистов<sup>1</sup> актуализирует задачу наращивания в регио-

<sup>1</sup> The activities of such terrorist groups as the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic State, and the Islamic State of Khorasan are banned in the Russian Federation.

не контртеррористической борьбы. Ее цель – предотвратить превращение Афганистана и всей Азии в новый очаг нестабильности.

**Ключевые слова:** радикал-исламисты, “жесткая сила”, терроризм, “Талибан”<sup>2</sup>, “Исламское государство”, Афганистан, Пакистан, Центральная Азия, конфликты, угрозы.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The use of “hard power” in the political practice of radical Islamist organisations in relation to Afghanistan and its neighbours – Pakistan, China, and Central Asian (CA) countries – is a complex and not yet fully understood issue. The issue defines the principal research objective of the present article. Its chronological framework covers mainly 2021–2023 – the period of particular importance for understanding the current geopolitical realities of Asia where the consequences of the withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban’s rise to power are tangible and significant<sup>3</sup>.

The relevance of these problems is determined by the potential transformation of Afghanistan and certain states in the region into a new hotspot of instability. This could hinder the implementation of economic and transportation projects already launched or planned in Asia, aimed at integrating Afghanistan into regional integration processes. The potential danger of turmoil emanating from the country poses a threat to the interests of Russia’s partners in Central Asia.

Incorporating the issue of “hard power” practised by Afghan radical Islamism in the study of contemporary political processes and international relations in Asia facilitates the understanding of the peculiarities of this phenomenon. This research perspective does not entail a specific examination of issues related to radical Islamists’ religious attitudes. Furthermore, numerous conceptual interpretations of radical Islamism, its treatment, concepts and definitions necessary for understanding this phenomenon have already been addressed in the works of foreign and national scholars. At the same time, various judgements contained in their works often give rise to terminological disputes (see in detail [2, pp. 451–487]).

<sup>2</sup> Terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Taliban” that has acquired a negative connotation in political discourse is just a plural of the word “Talib”, which is translated as “seeker of knowledge”. It was the Taliban, students of Pakistani religious schools (madrasseh), mostly Pashtuns, including Afghan refugees, who formed the backbone of the Taliban movement in 1994 [1, pp. 15–18].

However, in general, most researchers agree that the ideology and practice of radical Islamism include several main points: the idea of adopting the Sharia as a law regulating life in the Muslim community; inseparability of religion from politics; admissibility of overthrowing “unjust” regimes by force; formation of regional and global “Islamic states” based on the foundations and traditions of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

It is not surprising that radical Islamists who set themselves such tasks are often called *jihadists* (from the Arabic *jihad* – “struggle”, “striving for something”), while the very concept of jihad, as interpreted by radicals, is aimed, according to the researchers, at “liberation of Islamic territories” and is “oriented towards foreign policy” [3]. It is also worth noting the interpretation of Islamism as a «political movement based on radical ideology the essence of which... is the conviction that all the troubles of the Muslim world stem from abandoning the foundations of the “pure, righteous, true Islam of the ancestors”, from the attempts to adopt alien values and secular organisation of the society that is not suitable for Muslims» [4, p. 4].

Radical Islamists implement or plan to realise their destructive goals aimed at undermining the security and stability of societies and states by relying on “hard power”. This is what entails violence, the powerlessness of people, and the dragging of vast territories and regions into chaos. Afghanistan, which did not escape such destiny in the past, is facing new challenges as radical Islamists’ hard power is gaining strength in the country provoking challenges to regional security.

## CHALLENGES AND RISKS OF TALIBAN-2

As the French researcher G. Kepel rightly points out, the Taliban movement during its first rule (1996–2001) did not turn Afghanistan (or, more precisely, the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, as the Taliban referred to the country at that time) into a state in the strict sense of this word. At

that time Afghanistan was not represented on the world stage either [5, pp. 229-230].

Nowadays, the situation in this country seems to be following the familiar pattern again. This is mainly due to the fact that the Taliban-formed provisional government established in 2021 in Afghanistan (which is once again referred to as “the Islamic Emirate”) includes mostly hardliners – veterans of the civil war of the 1990s and of the subsequent armed struggle against foreign military contingent where the USA played a leading role. Many members of the Afghan government holding key positions in it remain under international sanctions. They include, for instance, the Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani known as the leader of the Haqqani Network, a terrorist group banned in Russia, the USA, and a number of countries. Another figure is UN-sanctioned Mohammad Hassan Akhund, one of the founders of the Taliban movement and a field commander holding the position of chairman of the government. It is not surprising that no state in the world is in a hurry to recognise the Taliban-2 regime. Another problem is that the new Afghan authorities despite their intentions cannot instantly resolve the large-scale problems and eliminate the associated risks currently faced by their country, devastated and impoverished by the years of conflicts and foreign intervention.

The severe economic devastation is aggravated by the absence of foreign investment which traditionally formed the country’s budget (almost 80% until 2021). Afghanistan’s Central Bank accounts, totalling \$9 billion, are frozen in the United States. The threat of famine is becoming real. All this leaves the Taliban government with little chance for economic manoeuvring and overcoming the crisis.

The new Afghan authorities have also failed to put an end to drug production. In 2022, the area under opium poppy cultivation extended to 233,000 hectares, which exceeds the previous-year figure by 32% (56,000 hectares) [source 1]. The Taliban leaders justify this situation by arguing that the income from the cultivation of narcotic raw materials remains virtually the only means of survival for hundreds of thousands of farmers. However, it is known that opiate production and trafficking have traditionally been a potentially lucrative source of funding for non-state actors in Afghanistan. In the

past, they included the Taliban, and now – radical Islamist and terrorist groups operating in the country.

There were hopes that Taliban-2 leaders would not reproduce medieval orders similar to those imposed by their predecessors in the spiritual and social sphere. The amnesty announced on 17 August 2021 for officials of the former government and officers of Afghan defence and security forces seemed to support this decision. Moreover, a “Special decree” issued by the Taliban leaders on 3 December 2021 stipulated women’s rights in detail [source 2]. However, the emergence of such a document was hardly accidental.

The Taliban movement originally functioned as a religious structure with a strong touch of deobandism<sup>4</sup>. The compliance with Shariah norms – rules of behaviour inseparable from the practice of Islam – was important. Over time, the ideology of the Movement was modified, becoming milder. This did not prevent the Taliban from asking Ulemas (scholars, recognised and respected experts in Islam) to “share their views on controversial issues”, including women’s rights, so that the government could act on the basis of their conclusion [6]. Given that these advisors were dominated by ultraconservative Ulemas whose views appeared to be in line with those of some Taliban leaders, a decision was made banning Afghan women from studying at universities and schools because this was contrary, as Mohammad Nadeem, Minister of Higher Education, explained, to “the Islamic law and Afghan sense of pride” [7]. The Taliban also reintroduced the Sharia system of punishment, identifying “disloyal” people and reprising those it had previously amnestied [source 3].

As to the radical Islamist groups, the Taliban adopted an ambiguous stance towards them – hostile to some of them and tolerant of others – which allowed the latter to continue engaging in destructive, often specifically terrorist, activities. This situation is outlined in a UN monitoring group’s report which states: “There is no evidence of Taliban restricting the activity of foreign terrorist militants in the country. On the contrary, terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom than at any other

<sup>4</sup> Deobandi is a trend in Sunni Islam that emerged in British India; its supporters, belonging mainly to one of four canonical religious/legal schools (madhhabs) – hanafites, recognise the equality and legitimacy of all these schools.

time in recent history” [source 4]. The UN report authors also confirmed the presence of militants of the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda (banned in the Russian Federation) in at least 15 provinces of Afghanistan. The Taliban leaders denied this, while Al-Qaeda itself preferred not to make its activities public. This situation probably suits both sides. Al-Qaeda prefers not to draw attention to itself, while the Taliban, which obviously seems to remain in partnership with it, creates an appearance that it is faithful to the Doha Peace Agreement signed with the USA on 29 February 2020 which requires the Taliban to stop supporting Al-Qaeda and other extremist and terrorist organisations.

These organisations, having chosen Afghanistan as a convenient platform to expand their activities, and becoming a threat to the security of many countries, share several characteristic features.

First, all radical Islamist groups are characterised by high mobility partly due to the porous nature of the borders in the areas where they operate. This allows their militants to move relatively unimpeded from one state to another, as they do, for instance, along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Second, these groups, some of which either hunker down or represent sleeper cells in Afghanistan or generally in CA, are closely interwound with organised crime and drug trafficking, making Afghanistan an inexhaustible store for recruitment, training, and financing of terrorists who often operate outside South and Central Asia, specifically in the Middle East.

Third, the radical Islamists based in Afghanistan often focus their destructive activities on areas of strategic importance (like Balochistan, Badakhshan or Xinjiang), or those possessing significant resources.

Finally, the hallmark of Islamist group members is indiscriminate aggression. Hence the ease with which they resort to the use of “hard power”, with terrorism as an inevitable integral component of it.

The Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) group established in Pakistan in 2007 with support from Al-Qaeda became a notable example. It has since turned into one of the most notorious paramilitary organisations with a reputation for high-profile terrorist attacks.

## “PAKISTANI TALIBAN” ON THE WARPATH

The TTP group, while not organisationally linked to either the Afghan Taliban or Al-Qaeda, used to coordinate its terrorist activities with them over a long period of time. The link with Al-Qaeda proved to be particularly close. Even after the death of its leader Osama bin Laden in 2011, TTP declared its intention “to provide a safe haven for Al-Qaeda and to support this organisation” [8, p. 16]. It was also assumed that the Pakistani Taliban organisation had established cooperation with the Islamist paramilitary organisation “Al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent” (AQIS) established in 2014, an Al-Qaeda affiliate in South Asia. Having made Afghanistan its home base, AQIS also got engaged in subversive activities in India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan where its goal was to create an “Islamic State” [source 5]. TTP militants also cooperated with another terrorist structure, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK).

Although TTP was recognised as a “foreign terrorist organisation” by the USA in 2010 and subsequently was banned in Pakistan under their pressure, no active opposition to the Taliban – either Afghan or Pakistani – was undertaken by the official Islamabad. There was an explanation for this. Pakistan had a long-standing conflict with India over Kashmir, at the same time having an unresolved territorial dispute with Afghanistan. The separatist sentiments of Pashtun and Baloch peoples who inhabited the western regions of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan were a constant threat to Pakistan’s integrity. The ruling elite, especially the army circles of Pakistan, expected to resolve their complex problems with regard to the fact that a loyal regime favoured by them would take power in Afghanistan. Islamabad, moreover, tried to prevent Afghanistan’s potential rapprochement with India which was disadvantageous to it (the same was feared by Pakistan’s closest ally at that time – China). For this reason, Pakistan’s security services had long maintained close ties with both the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, a terrorist group affiliated with the Taliban and considered to be an ally of TTP. The group had bases in Pakistan.

After the Taliban toppled the pro-Western government of President Ashraf Ghani in 2021

and formed a new government, Pakistan initially seemed to be the main beneficiary. The ceasefire concluded with TTP in the same year could be added to its political success – it provided a temporary opportunity to stabilise the internal political situation in Pakistan and normalise the Afghan-Pakistani interstate contacts. This truce, however, did not last long, and as early as November 2022, TTP with its 4,000 to 6,500 militants resumed armed attacks on Pakistani government facilities. The Afghan-Pakistani friendship proved to be a failure.

The main reason for the rift was the change in Pakistan's foreign policy vector after Prime Minister Imran Khan resigned on 10 April 2022 and the government of Shehbaz Sharif came to power; the latter began to draw the country which was in dire need of foreign investment into the orbit of American influence. As a result, Pakistan began to withdraw from its traditionally friendly relations with the Afghan Taliban, at the same time toughening its treatment of TTP. The combatants of this group resumed attacks on Pakistani civilian and military facilities, on military personnel and security forces. The Pakistani military, in turn, shelled the Pakistani Taliban's bases on the Afghan territory. Meanwhile, the Pakistani government's appeals to the official Kabul to liquidate the TTP bases were ignored. The situation was aggravated by Al-Qaeda's statement about its "continued alliance with TTP" [9], which was unacceptable for Pakistan in the context of its rapprochement with the USA waging an anti-terrorist struggle against Al-Qaeda since 2001.

The emerging differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan aggravated the issue of frontiers even further. Unlike the Pakistani authorities, the Taliban (like all the previous Afghan governments) does not recognise the international border line between the two countries drawn as early as in the colonial era (see [10, p. 41] for more details). The Taliban also asserts the right of citizens of the two countries to move freely across the 2,600-kilometre border. The more unacceptable for Afghanistan was a defence structure on the Afghan-Pakistani border constructed by the Pakistani military. Afghanistan considered this "Pakistani fence" to be a violation of its territorial integrity [11].

As for TTP, this extremist group has been threatening in recent years to turn Afghanistan

into a launch pad for terrorist activities against its neighbours. It is also creating a situation that can trigger a large-scale Afghan-Pakistani conflict with repercussions likely to be felt in India and other neighbouring countries.

#### ISLAMIC STATE'S AFGHAN AFFILIATE

Engendered in 2006 within the ranks of Al-Qaeda, the Sunni-aligned radical Islamist organisation "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) which further referred to itself as "The Islamic State" (IS) starting from 2014, spawned another monster in 2015 – its branch in Afghanistan called "The Islamic State of Khorasan" (ISK). ISK, being a transnational organisation like Al-Qaeda and the originally established IS, aims to recreate the historical Khorasan<sup>5</sup> through extensive use of armed force and terrorist methods. The media close to ISK repeatedly wrote about its plans to "use force in order to amalgamate Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Iran and 'Hindustan' into a caliphate" [12].

According to various estimates, ISK has over 2,000 militants. The main forces of the group are based in the vicinity of Kabul and in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. It is assumed that some of the former government members persecuted by new Afghan authorities may have joined ISK [13]. This is somewhat reminiscent of the Iraqi situation, where, after the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, some of the officials who had lost their jobs, as well as a number of functionaries of the dissolved ruling Baath party, army and security officers, joined ISIL. Moreover, the brutally violent methods used by ISK in Afghanistan are identical to those imposed by ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

With the Taliban coming to power, with whom ISK had tense relations, the group began to pose a real threat to the stability of Afghanistan itself and its neighbours. In 2021 alone, ISK militants committed 365 terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, killing 2,210 people. This figure is higher than that of 2020 when ISK was in charge of 82 terrorist attacks that killed 835 people. In 2022, ISK militants car-

<sup>5</sup> According to the historical tradition, it included eastern Iran, western Afghanistan, some parts of modern Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

ried out several high-profile terrorist attacks in Kabul. The repeated shelling of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan border territories is attributed to CA natives who had undergone appropriate combat and ideological training at ISK camps in Afghanistan [source 6].

ISK also poses a significant threat to Pakistan whose government is portrayed in the terrorist group’s controlled media “as a puppet of the British Empire in the past and that of the enemies such as the United States, China and Russia at present”. These global powers, though competing with each other for influence in the world, are united, as believed by ISK propagandists, by a common goal – waging a war against Islam and oppression of Muslims. ISK also criticises Pakistan for replacing Islam with “nationalism, patriotism and secularism” [14].

The ISK leadership is particularly resentful of the Afghan government’s contacts with Russia and China. The group’s terrorist attack on the Russian embassy in September 2022 can be viewed as a reaction to Russia’s intention to participate in the post-conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan. Ten people were killed then, including two officers of the diplomatic mission. Another explosion attributed to ISK militants took place near the embassy on 25 December. Russia, however, was not intimidated by such terrorist actions. This was evidenced by a visit of Z.N. Kabulov, the Russian president’s special representative for Afghanistan, to Kabul on 12–13 January 2023, who held consultations with the Afghan leaders “on a broad range of issues concerning bilateral relations”. This included the possible participation of Russian specialists in the “construction and operation of Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India gas pipeline, as well as restoration of large infrastructure projects built on the territory of Afghanistan in the Soviet epoch” [source 7].

The propaganda resources of the “Islamic State of Khorasan” actively shape the image of China as the “main enemy of Muslims” among its supporters. ISK accuses China of repressions against Uigur Muslims and of supporting the Afghan regime practised for the Taliban who are not true Muslims, from the point of view of the “caliphate builders”. Having declared PRC citizens as well as Chinese business structures, political and

governmental infrastructure as priority targets for terrorist attacks, ISK militants attacked Kabul’s *Kabul Longan Hotel* on 12 December 2022 where Chinese diplomats, businessmen, and journalists usually stayed. However, neither this terrorist attack nor ISK’s threats have affected China’s interest in developing economic cooperation with Afghanistan. For instance, Beijing is ready to consider the prospects of hooking up Afghanistan to the “Belt and Road” Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor being laid within its framework. In addition, China signed a mutually beneficial agreement on joint oil production with Afghanistan in early January 2023, simultaneously launching a multimodal route to deliver Chinese goods to Afghanistan.

The relatively efficient propaganda support of ISK’s destructive acts, coupled with presumably affluent external funding of this terrorist group, may eventually turn it into a melting pot for “grinding” and subsequent unification of diverse Islamist structures under its auspices, such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or East Turkestan Islamic Movement (banned in Russia, China, and CA states). They fully share the ISK’s destructive attitudes towards the maximum possible use of “hard power”. The weakening of Al-Qaeda as a once influential transnational group in the region allows ISK to aspire to fill the void and extend the geographical horizons of its influence. This is a worrisome development, especially for CA states.

#### CENTRAL ASIA IN THE ISLAMIST CROSSHAIRS

The anxiety felt in CA in connection with the new challenges is not unfounded. There is a growing concentration of ISK militants and their allies in relatively safe northern regions of Afghanistan immediately adjacent to the borders of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is these countries that have become the main object of destructive propaganda on the part of the “Islamic State of Khorasan”. In this regard, its call to revise the “arbitrarily established borders” in CA in favour of the “state of Transoxiana/Maverannah”<sup>6</sup> is noteworthy: the terrorist group intends to create the mentioned state after the overthrow of “tyrannical” – as ISK

<sup>6</sup> Names of territories between Amu Darya (Oxus) and Syr Darya, as met in ancient and medieval history.

views them – regimes in CA [15]. It is obvious that this group is willing to extend to CA the experience of the originally established Islamic State's activity carried out in 2014–2017 in Iraq. This terrorist organisation attempted to establish a pseudo state (*DAESH* in Arabic) there, intending to annex a number of East Mediterranean countries to it.

The ISK-affiliated Uzbek-language telegram channel *Tawhid News*, commenting on Uzbek leaders' contacts with the Taliban, stated that "the Taliban only pretend to be Muslims". Another ISK-controlled Uzbek-language news outlet, "Voice of Khorasan" (*Xuroson Ovozi*), called on CA Muslims to "join the ranks of Caliphate (on the sacred land of Khorasan) and to wage jihad against Uzbekistan, the Taliban and their Western masters". Earlier, the same edition published a post stating: "Our jihad against the Taliban and the apostate (*murtad*) Uzbek government will continue as long as the latter remains a puppet executing the will of the USA and Russia to destroy Islam" [16].

Thus ISK, by means of propaganda, becomes an important actor in the process of radicalisation of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan citizens, which entails a threat of internal political upheaval. This also prevents the establishment of normal diplomatic relations with Afghanistan which, both in the past and at present, has been vitally interested in developing cooperation with CA countries in power engineering, trade and economy. In this regard, the issues of firmness of Taliban-2's intentions to control the radical Islamist groups that have taken root in Afghanistan are gaining relevance for the CA region.

This is important given that there are still some areas in CA that remain vulnerable in terms of security. They include: Fergana Valley; Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region (BMAR) bordering on Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan; Rasht Valley in Tajikistan; traditionally troublesome Western Kazakhstan with its tempting natural resources. Active infiltration of paramilitary groups' members – those formed at Afghan and Pakistani bases, including CA natives – into CA through these potential "hotspots" continued until the early 2010s. The Batken events of 1999–2000 were the most notorious, when the armed forces of Kyrgyzstan had to engage in fighting against the militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

who attacked this area of Fergana Valley and planned to move further into Uzbekistan.

These days, it has become more difficult for subversive groups from Afghanistan to infiltrate CA. One of the reasons is the increased ability of CA states to maintain their security. Another reason lies in the Taliban's stance. According to some reports, the Taliban has advised the movement's commanders and ringleaders of cooperating groups "to refrain from the plans to use Afghan territory for attacks on neighbouring countries" [17]. Obviously, the Taliban currently deprecates the prospect of its involvement in a conflict with CA countries through its affiliated Islamist organisations, regarding it as highly undesirable. While seeking international recognition, the Taliban, on the one hand, is trying to downplay its ties with radical Islamist movements. On the other hand, it sees a serious threat in the media activity of its main antagonist, the Islamic State of Khorasan, which not only aims at undermining stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China but also seeks political and ideological colonisation of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and CA as a whole. The CA states realise the severity of threats coming from Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State of Khorasan, and their offshoots formed on ethnic basis (Uzbek, Tajik, Uighur, etc.). All of these groups do not shy away from terrorist methods and are ready at any moment to make use of local socio-economic problems as well as religious, clan and inter-ethnic differences for the purpose of promoting internal political destabilisation. This is evidenced, for instance, by the January 2023 protests in Kazakhstan. According to the official data, they were organised by representatives of radical and extremist organisations. In particular, the Yakyn Inkar group was mentioned which is a wing of the extremist organisation Tablighi Jamaat (both banned in Kazakhstan) and which is willing to create a caliphate on the territory of Kazakhstan, i. e. to transform the secular state into a religious one [source 8]. It is suspected that religious radicals were ready to kindle the flame of conflict during the armed clashes in September 2022 on the border of Tajikistan with Kyrgyzstan, as well as to provoke unrest in Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan forming part of Uzbekistan, in the same year.

Thus, CA is still attractive for various kinds of radical Islamist formations that are ready to use the difficulties of the countries constituting this region at any moment, particularly in the formation of political systems, as well as to take advantage of the problems faced by them in the economic and social sphere, in employment and cultural transformation.

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Several conclusions can be drawn from the above.

The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan has changed the regional landscape and created new anxieties. Some of them are related to the possible access of the transnational terrorist organisations in Afghanistan to the foreground. The others are born out of fear connected with the potential threat of the proliferation of radical Islamism, whether of the Taliban model or other design. Whereas the peak of political Islam's rise in the Middle East demonstrated during the Arab Spring is apparently left in the past, its sporadic waves in Asia may still overwhelm some countries, including those in CA. With the aggravation of social imbalance there, young people susceptible to radicalism may prefer participation in a jihadist movement at another regional “hot spot” to the migrant workers' dilemma in Russia.

The main challenge for CA countries is the militants who originate from this area and who have fallen under the influence of such terrorist entities as Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State, its Afghan branch and others. The destructive activities of radical Islamists actualise the objective of stepping up the counterterrorist struggle in the region. Its goal is to prevent Afghanistan and the whole of Asia from turning into a new hotbed of instability.

The objective realities show that Afghanistan, with its tangible painful traumas being a result of years of internal conflicts and American military occupation, has fallen under the control of the Taliban, perhaps for a long time. Most of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries have come to terms with this, expecting the Taliban to be the lesser evil compared to transnational terrorist organisations. A favourable scenario assumes the achievement of sustainable consensus in Afghanistan, which would create conditions in the future for successful economic and political cooperation between this developing state and Russia, China, and other members of the global community. If radical Islamists or other forces still succeed in disrupting the post-conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan, this will accelerate the instability and exacerbate the regional imbalance in Asia.

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