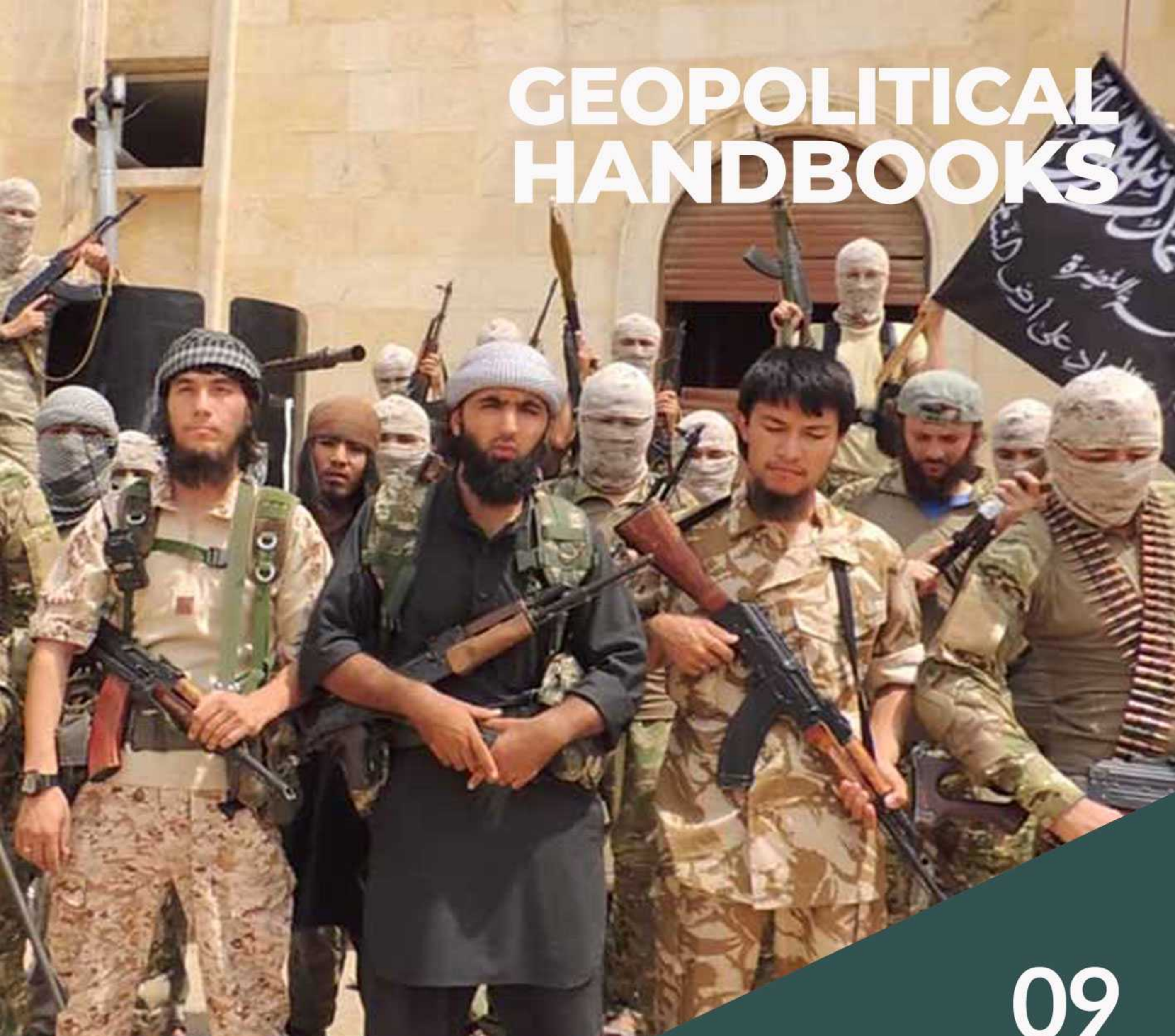


GEOPOLITICAL HANDBOOKS



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THINK LIKE JIHADIST: ANATOMY OF CENTRAL ASIAN SALAFI GROUPS

URAN BOTOBEKOV





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Uran Botobekov is a Doctor of Political Sciences, and an Expert on Political Islam. His scientific research focuses on the radical ideology of Sunni Wahhabism in Central Asia and the Middle East, as well as the Salafi-Jihadi movements underpinning such groups as al Qaeda, and the Islamic State.

During his career, he combined civil and diplomatic service for the government of Kyrgyzstan with his scientific research and publishing. At different times, he worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Embassies of the Kyrgyz Republic in Ukraine and Turkey, and headed the Press Service of the first Kyrgyz President, and conducted research as a Scientific Secretary of the Kyrgyz National Academy of Sciences.

His scientific publications on the religious and political aspects of modern Islam in Central Asia and the Middle East have been published in Germany, France, Britain, Japan, the USA, Iran, China and the post-Soviet countries including Russia and Ukraine. These works cover the reasons behind the radicalization of Sunni Salafi Jamaats and their surreptitious methods of spreading the Jihadi ideology by religious extremist groups, whose activities seriously threaten global security and stability. He has contributed over 100 articles based on his research and investigative reports to platforms such as Modern Diplomacy, The Diplomat, The Jamestown Foundation and the American Foreign Policy Council.

He has advised government agencies, non-governmental organizations and think tanks of some post-Soviet countries as well as the United States on issues related to the activities of the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadist movements. In his research he has presented his analysis of why some Uzbek, Uighur, Kyrgyz and Tajik militants join the al Qaeda terrorist organization, whereas others join the so-called Islamic State, which oppose each other and are the key players of the global Jihadi movement.

Anatomy of Central Asian Salafi groups

Salafi Jihadism has become a serious problem in Central Asia that encompasses five former Soviet republics - Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan - collectively known as the “Five Stans”, as well as Afghanistan and western China. Central Asia, which was for 3,000 years a place of revival of main religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Shamanism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Judaism, and where the great Sunni Islamic scholars as al-Bukhari, al-Ghazali, and Ahmed Yesevi lived, today has become a target for militant Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

In Central Asia, the focus of Islamic revival and of Jihadists groups has been the Ferghana Valley, a densely populated and ethnically mainly Uzbek territory divided politically between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The valley has traditionally been a center of Islamic fervor, and was the area where Salafists first established a presence. The mass poverty of the population, the drop in the level of education after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the corrupt and authoritarian rule of political regimes, and the repressive methods of law enforcement have played a role in the radicalization of Islamic groups in Central Asia.

In the early 1990s, the first armed jihadist groups in the region appeared in response to harsh persecution by the authoritarian regimes of communist China and Karimov's Uzbekistan. In that period, many members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and China's Uyghurs of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (now Turkestan Islamic Party - TIP) who adhered to the Salafist ideology, moved to neighboring Afghanistan and fought under the wing of the Taliban. The combination of repressive governments and economic deprivation in Central Asia, particularly China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, served as an incubator of Salafi Jihadism.

After 9/11, Central Asia's jihadists, who are members of IMU and TIP, were the mainstay of Al Qaeda's defense in southern Waziristan as well as participants in the fight against the armies of Afghanistan, Pakistan and NATO.

Central Asian jihadist groups are supporters of Takfirism, a kind of religious extremism that accuses other Muslims of disbelief or apostasy. This ideology became the banner of the caliphate and led to jihad against other Muslims and open disobedience against the authorities. These practices are part of the legacy of the Takfirist instructions and ideas that emerged from the Al-Qaida environment.

Many of Central Asia's Islamists have been infected with the "virus" of the Salafi ideology from Arab preachers and local theologians who were educated in Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt. After the link into al-Qaeda and Taliban, they laid an accusation of unbelief (takfir) against the rulers of the "Stans". They refused to recognize official state institutions and declared jihad against the armed forces of their respective countries.

In response, the governments of the "Stans" and China have suppressed, and continue to suppress, the activities of more than twenty Islamic groups that are recognized by the court as extremist or terrorist organizations, which constitute a danger to the state's constitutional order. In particular, the activities of the following Islamic groups have been suppressed: The Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB), TIP, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), IMU, Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Zhaishul Mahdi, Jund-Al-Khalifa, Ansarullah, Jan-natOshiklari (Fans of Paradise), and others.

The second wave of the outflow of Central Asian Islamists abroad occurred after the start of the Syrian civil war. After the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 and ISIS emerged as a competing alternative to al-Qaeda three years later, the thousands of Central Asian jihadists who streamed into Syria had to decide between al Qaeda and ISIS.

Some jihadists of IMU and Jund-Al-Khalifa shifted to Syria and joined ISIS. Central Asians, and especially the migrant workers from Russia, who traveled to Syria, independent of any of the main Salafi-Jihadi groups after 2014 tended to join al-Baghdadi's Caliphate. Uyghur's TIP, Uzbek's KTJ and KIB became enmeshed with al-Qaeda in Syria and maintained loyalty to the Taliban.

After joining al Qaeda, Taliban and ISIS, the ideological base of Central Asian militants broadened and was affected by the more-global agenda of transnational Salafi-jihadi networks.

Today, the goal of the religious groups from Central Asia has greatly expanded so that now their goal is to develop a world-wide caliphate. They have become an integral part of world-wide terrorism and jihadism. Thus, Central Asian Islamists have expanded their influence and militant activities to the Middle East. Over the past two decades, the locus of Central Asian radicals has moved from the Ferghana Valley through Afghanistan into the tribal badlands of Pakistan toward Syria.

Methods of preventing Central Asian Islamists attacks

Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups pose a significant threat to the security of not only the "Stans", but the EU and the U.S. For example, Central Asia's Islamist radicals committed the following attacks in the US and Europe:

A terrorist attack committed by a 29-year-old national of Uzbekistan, Sayfullo Saipov, in the downtown of New York City, which killed 8 civilians in 31 October 2017; **The blast** in the subway of St. Petersburg, which was committed by an Uzbek terrorist from southern Kyrgyzstan Akbarzhon Dzhaliylov in April 2017;

The truck attack in the center of Stockholm Sweden by an immigrant from Uzbekistan, Rakhmat Akilov, rammed through the crowd last April; **The terrorist attack** by a native of the Fergana Valley of Central Asia, Abdulkadir Masharipov, on December 31, 2016 murdered 39 people in the Reina nightclub in Istanbul;

The terrorist attack at the international airport of Ataturk in Turkey by citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in June 2016; Another Uzbek terrorist, Ulugbek Kodirov, tried to kill even US President Barack Obama in July 2011 and was sentenced to 15 years in prison;

More than a dozen Uzbeks have been charged with terrorism between 2012 and 2016 in the USA and are now involved in continuing legal proceedings, which is evidence of the growing Islamic terrorism among immigrants from Central Asia.

To combat the Central Asian Salafi-jihadist groups, it is very important to understand the reasons for their ideological appeal to certain segments of Sunni Muslims. Only after a thorough analysis of their Jihadi ideology can a strategy be developed to combat them. In accordance with my scientific purposes, I continue to conduct my research on the activities of Central Asian Islamist groups. The goal is to prevent other terror attacks like 9/11 in the U.S.

Unfortunately, as the tragic example of Sri Lanka has shown, it is small Islamist terrorist groups associated with ISIS or al Qaida, including Central Asian jihadists, that due to the difficulty to triangulate, can pose the greatest danger to global stability.

In this regard, I want to express my gratitude to Modern Diplomacy for providing a platform for comprehensive scientific researches on the roots and causes of the radicalization of Islamic ideology and the activities of Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups. A Geopolitical Handbook under the name "Anatomy of Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups" is a great contribution to European and global security by Modern Diplomacy.

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THAT SEPARATES
ITS SCHOLARS FROM
ITS WARRIORS
WILL HAVE
ITS THINKING
DONE BY COWARDS
AND ITS FIGHTING
BY FOOLS**

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Uzbek's Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad changed its leader

On April 12, 2019, Central Asia's Salafi-Jihadist group Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) issued a statement on the Telegram channel, in which it announced the resignation of its amir Abu Saloh (real name Sirojiddin Mukhtarov), a native of southern Kyrgyzstan, from the position of head of the group. According to the statement, the decision on the resignation of Abu Saloh was made at the meeting of the group's Shura (Council) based on his own statement. In this regard, Shura also expressed gratitude to him "for the fruitful service in the name of Allah over the past six years in protecting the spiritual values of Islam and leading jihad against the enemies of Muslims."

Abdul Aziz, a little-known in the jihadi world, an Uzbek and a native of the Fergana Valley was elected the new leader of KTJ. In the statement, a brief characterization of the new leader was given using an honorable

tone, which states that "Our teacher Sheikh Abdul Aziz hafizahullah devoted his life to Allah, has many years of experience on the path of the jihad and deep knowledge of science [in the study of Islam]." In addition, the statement calls on all members of the group to strictly obey the new leader, in connection with which the Surah An-Nisa [4:59] of the Quran is quoted: "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you".

It should be noted that Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad was created by Abu Saloh in 2013 in northern Syria, which consists of Central Asia's militants, mostly Uzbeks of the Fergana Valley. Since that period Syria's northwest, long a hotbed of armed resistance and the heartland of al-Qaeda-linked operations has become a real-life shelter for Uyghur, Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz militants, and their families. Today Uzbek mil-



Former KTJ leader Abu Saloh

itants are the most combat-ready, well-equipped and largest group among the Central Asian foreign jihadist groups in Idlib Province. The approximate number of KTJ militants is about 500 people.

Under the Abu Saloh leadership, KTJ grew out of an unobtrusive regional group into a formidable and tough member of the global Salafi-Jihadi movement. In early 2015, Uzbek militants of the group swore allegiance to al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri. During this time Abu Saloh demonstrated his brilliant ability to successfully spread the al-Qaeda ideology on a global scale. He was and remains a faithful and aggressive propagandist of the Jihadi idea into the post-Soviet space.

KTJ is also affiliated with the Syrian rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and is currently fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime. HTS has from the beginning of the Syrian war been a combat mentor for Uzbek militants.

Who was Abu Saloh?

The former leader of the group Abu Saloh, fluent in Uzbek, Uyghur, Russian and Arabic, in the early 2000s received a theological education at the Islamic University of Al-Fatah al-Islamiya in Syria. It was there that he became an ideological supporter of al-Qaeda, deeply studied the theological works of Islamic scholars, the founders of the radical current of Salafism and Wahhabism Ibn Taymiyyah and Abd al-Wah-

hab. After graduating from university, he returned to Kyrgyzstan, worked as an assistant to the imam in one of the mosques in the Osh region.

The persistent study of the Wahhabi literature and love of the Salafi ideology led him back to Syria in 2012. Thanks to his profound knowledge of the Koran, oratory and leadership skills, Abu Saloh quickly rose through the ranks, became a spiritual mentor of the Mujahideen. In battles with the Syrian government troops, he was wounded in the eye and treated in the city of Gaziantep in Turkey in 2014.

After conducting a comprehensive analysis of audio and video public performances of Abu Saloh, as an expert on the radi-

calization of the ideology of Islam, I must note that he has a deep religious erudition, knows by heart the Quran and the hadith of Imam al-Bukhari. He clearly and emotionally expresses his thoughts, confidently holds the attention of the crowd and has been able to inspire a new generation of jihadists to suicide attacks.

From time to time, in his video and audio appeals he argued in absentia with political leaders and heads of intelligence services of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. He accused them of repressing innocent Muslims, banning the norms of Islam and called them satans who sold their souls to the devil.

During his time in Syria, he avoided several attempts on his life by ISIS supporters. But on July 9, 2018, at the hands of the local member of the Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Caliphate in Idlib his wife and four-year-old son were killed; he himself was not injured.

Reasons for the resignation of Uzbek jihadist group's amir

Abu Saloh's resignation from the post of group leader may be due to several factors. First, Russia's special services are leading a real hunt for him in Syria. Director of Russia's Federal Security Service Alexander Bortnikov accused KTJ leader of organizing the terror attack on St. Petersburg's metro in April 2017 and Kyrgyz authorities blamed Abu Saloh for the attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkekon August 30, 2016. In order to avoid pinpoint strikes by Russian aviation on the locations of the KTJ group in Idlib, he may have initiated his resignation and gone deep underground.

Secondly, the possible fall of Idlib in the future will force Central Asian militants to seek new shelter places; they will most likely prefer to move to Afghanistan. To do this, they will have to use the territory of Turkey for the transit zone.

If it were loudly announced, the resignation of Abu Saloh could divert the attention of the Turkish secret services from the Central Asian militants-smugglers.

Thirdly, within the KTJ group there has long been a slight opposition to his Amir, who are dissatisfied with his financial and organizational activities. Perhaps in order to avoid splitting the group, he was forced to resign and thus is trying to preserve the unity of the ranks of the Uzbek jihadists.

In the end, it should be noted that, despite his resignation, Abu Saloh remains a fanatical follower of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, an ardent propagandist of al Qaeda ideology and the most wanted terrorist in the post-Soviet space.

Did Central Asia's Jihadists Challenge Al Qaeda?

Uzbek and Uyghur Muhajireen support HTS

First-time al Qaeda-linked Salafi-Jihadi groups from Central Asia, Caucasus and China's Xinjiang fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime in northern Syria have interfered in ideological disputes and internal confrontations between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Tanzim Hurras al-Din, the Guardians of Religion, which has remained loyal to al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Foreign fighters groups in Idlib such as the Uyghurs' Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), the Uzbeks' Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) and the Chechen-led Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) affirmed their support to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in a joint statement released in February 2019.

Also, the statement was signed by the Albanian militants group Katibat al-Alban, Iran's Harakat al-Muhajireen al-Sunna, Saudi Arabia's Rabitat al-Ma'ali, the Maldivian Mujahideen and other smaller foreign groups fighting under the leadership of HTS.

Thus, foreign speaking Salafi-Jihadi groups violated their traditional balanced ties with al Qaeda's various branches and first time openly supported one of the sides of the confrontation.

As is well known, Uzbek and Uyghur militants have always tried to keep their neutrality, without interfering intra-jihadi rivalries between HTS and other al Qaeda-affiliated groups.

In the one-page and three paragraphs statement, foreign fighters are clearly stated their strong support and loyalty to HTS. The first paragraph states that "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, represented by its leadership and fighters, is the dignity and the force of Ahl al-Sunnah [Sunni Islam] in Bilad al-Sham". Further, statement authors poured to HTS generous words of praise that "it is the best to have borne the banner of jihad in this blessed land; the one that defends the frontlines; it has protected Muslims security and established the courts that rule by God's law in all the areas subjected to them". Special attention is paid to the centralized role of HTS "around whose leadership the mass of the Ansar [natives] and Muhajireen [foreign fighters] has gathered".

Then, they turn to other opponent groups that "we are with our brothers in one rank and a structured edifice, and we will stand as a barrier of obstruction before all who take it upon themselves to attack HTS." Thus, foreign groups gave a clear signal to other branches of al Qaeda that they are ready to take a bullet for themselves for the HTS and they will defend it in arms.

The second paragraph of the statement is devoted to the relations between Ansar and Muhajireen, who are militants from Central Asian and the Caucasus, who made Hijrah (migration of Muslims) to Syria for jihad. The Muhajireen are

very worried that their interests are not being taken into consideration. According to the authors, "the interest of the Muhajireen is the same as the interest of the Ansar, the masses of the Muslims in al-Sham, and they cannot be separated from each other. Because Muhajireen came to this blessed land of Sham at the call of Allah and do not claim particular interests and particular rights. Both belong to the Muslims Ummah and what comes upon them comes upon others besides them."

Then, foreign militants raised the sore question that "some local groups want to use them [Muhajireen] who came from all over the world to Syria for holy jihad as a bargaining chip to be handed over to 'disbelievers'."

The authors noted, "we will not be content that they [opponents of HTS] should be a door for auction to support a faction over another besides it, for their [HTS] support is truly well-known in its ways and there is not from that auction in their name." Then the foreign fighters thanked the HTS for its strong support, reception and granting of refuge to Muhajireen and called it the best of Ansar.

In the letter's third paragraph foreign fighters turned to other al-Qaeda-backed groups and warned that they should not accept the false accusations of the HTS address at face value and advised them to verify and investigate it. They called for

the conciliation and unity of all Mujahideen to lead together jihad in the path of Almighty God.

There are several reasons why al Qaeda-backed foreign fighter groups support HTS.

Muhajireen and Ansar: Brothers or Rivals?

At the time the Syrian government forces with the support of Moscow and Tehran have achieved significant success in regaining control over the main part of the country, the question of the withdrawal of foreign militants from the region is often being raised not only by Damascus' sponsors but also by the local influential Salafi groups too.

It should be noted that Syria's northwest, long a hotbed of armed resistance and the heartland of al-Qaeda-linked operations, has become a real-life shelter for the foreign militants from the former Soviet Union and Chinese Xinjiang. Among them the Uzbek groups Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad and Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, Uyghur's Turkestan Islamic Party and Chechen's Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar are affiliated with al Qaeda.

All of these groups are fighting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad under the leadership of HTS. They share al Qaeda's ideological doctrine and, on its call, performed Hijrah from Afghanistan and Central Asia to Syria.

The presence of al Qaeda-backed foreign militant groups in Idlib greatly irritates Moscow and Tehran. During regular meetings, the leaders of the so-called “guarantor countries of the Syrian peace process” – Russia, Turkey and Iran – constantly reaffirm the determination to eliminate HTS’ predecessor “Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist groups associated with al Qaeda or ISIS”. The main responsibility for forcing the withdrawal of al Qaeda-backed foreign groups from Idlib obligated Turkey, the initiator of the Sochi Memorandum to accomplish this. But, so far, Ankara has not succeeded in fully complying with its obligations to withdraw the militants and heavy weaponry from the demilitarized zone.

Because Ankara has limited opportunities to influence foreign militant groups associated with al Qaeda in Syria. The main obstacle on this path is HTS which took under its wing of protection the Turkestan Islamic Party, Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad and Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar not only from Assad’s regime but also from possible attacks by other Salafi-Jihadi rival groups. HTS remains the most powerful Islamist group in Syria. During the last three months, HTS had expanded its territories and imposed control over 90% of Idlib, the last major opposition stronghold, inflicting a crushing defeat on the rival rebel groups Nour al-Din al-Zenki and Ahrar al-Sham, the members of the

Turkey-allied National Liberation Front. Therefore, Muhajireen from post-Soviet countries and China feel secure under the umbrella of HTS.

The HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani considers that on the question of mutual relations between Muhajireen and Ansar his group relies on Islamic values when the local inhabitants [Ansar] of Medina warmly welcomed, provided shelter and supported the Prophet Muhammad and his followers [Muhajireen], who had left their homes behind for the sake of Islam in 622.

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war Jabhat al-Nusra provided Muhajireen, who migrated from Central Asia and joined al Qaeda, the opportunity to live in separate villages in the northwestern Syria’s countryside where they could lead jihad against the forces of Damascus. Thanks to HTS support the Turkestan Islamic Party, Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad and Katibat Imam al-Bukhari have taken deep root in Syria soil where they opened several madrasahs in which militants’ children receive the education in Uzbek and Uyghur languages. In recent times, cases of joint marriages between Muhajireen and Ansar have become more frequent.

Abu Abdullah al-Shami, the head of HTS’ Shariah Council and the group’s highest ideologue, in his article entitled “Six Issues” clearly defined the posi-

tion of the HTS regarding Muhajireen. He claims that “HTS will not compromise on its principle of refusing to barter with the Muhajireen. We do not do something that does not please our Lord. We consider it forbidden to hand over the Muslims to the disbelievers [the states]. And the Muhajireen are our brothers and we do not see a difference between a Muhajireen and Ansar, and our throats are beneath the throat of the one who has migrated to us, and we will not allow bartering on their portfolio in any circumstances, for besides the fact that it is in contravention of the Shari’a principles, it is far removed from Islamic ethics and chivalry.”

The strong support of HTS for Muhajireen fully meets the military and religious goals of Uzbek and Uyghur fighters who made Hijrah to Syria for jihad. In turn, they respond to the HTS with reciprocity and devotion to the ideals of jihad and with respect for Ansar. Abu Saloh, the leader of Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad, during the Bayat (oath of allegiance) to al Qaeda stated that Abu Mohammad al-Julani is the lion of Islam, who never uses Muhajireen as a bargaining chip. He compared the HTS leader with the founder of the Taliban movement, the late Mullah Omar, who provided Muhajireen at the head of Osama bin Laden refuge in Afghanistan to conduct jihad against America. According to him, after 9/11, even under the threat of the US military inter-

vention to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Mullah Omar did not betray bin Laden to crusaders and remained faithful to Islamic values of Muhajireen until the end of his life.

HTS's Controversial Turkey policy

Russian and Turkic speaking foreign fighter groups are supporting HTS rapprochement with Turkey which has long been a sensitive issue causing problems among global Salafi-Jihadi movements. Turkey's factor and the forced collaboration of HTS with Ankara caused sharp criticism from al Qaeda, his loyalist Tanzim Hurras al-Din and many ideologues of Salafism.

In a speech entitled "The Way of Salvation" and published on 5 February 2019, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri criticized HTS for clinging to territory under Turkey's protection, albeit not mentioning the group explicitly. He rebuked HTS for relying too heavily on Turkish support and its desire to hold onto ground at all costs. In his opinion, the jihadists in Syria are engaged in a misguided "competition for an imagined authority" over territory that is under the oversight "of secular Turkish checkpoints." Zawahiri strictly warned the jihadists that they shouldn't rely on Turkey to protect them. The main point of the appeal of the al Qaeda emir is that the HTS jihadists instead, of holding onto Idlib province as a proto-Emi-

rate, it would be better for them to go underground and conduct continuous jihad against the Bashar al Assad regime, Zionists and America.

The HTS' position on Turkey was sharply criticized by one of the most important spiritual fathers of the Salafi-Jihadi ideology Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, who considers that any diplomatic or military ties with non-Muslim rulers count as "sinful wala'." For Maqdisi, allowing Turkey to control any land at all in Syria is equivalent to allowing the criminal, apostate regime to do so, and makes HTS dangerously close to violating Tawhid.

The decision of the HTS to allow Turkish troops to enter Syria and establish 12 military posts in Idlib agreed upon at Astana on October 2017 was also heavily criticized by Tanzim Hurras al-Din. The Hurras al-Din amir Abu Hammam al-Shami and its Chief Sharia Counsel Sami al-Uraydi published a statement on 30 January 2019, in which they argued that HTS's jihad is not founded on correct Aqida (Islamic creed) or Manhaj (Methodology of the Salaf us-Saalih). Further, the leaders said some of HTS's weapons belong to al Qaeda, and since Hurras al-Din now represents al Qaeda in Syria it is the rightful owner of the weapons.

Along with authoritative ideologues, ordinary supporters of al Qaeda accused the HTS of

thwarting its own jihad by forming relations with the NATO army [Turkey] and considered it a traitor. But they could not blame HTS for apostasy.

HTS Shura Council member Abu Al-Fatah al-Farghali denied all this accusations and named three conditions under which the Turks were allowed to enter Idlib that were based on the Shari'a. First, the military superiority in the liberated areas should be for the mujahideen and not the secular Turkish army. Secondly, the Turks should not intervene in ruling or administering the liberated areas in any circumstances or forms, so as not to violate the Sharia rule. Thirdly, the decision of peace and war in the liberated areas should be in the hands of the mujahideen and not the Turkish army. He concluded that today all three conditions are strictly enforced according to the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal (al-wala' wal-l-bara').

The vitriolic debate and ideological violent controversy between HTS and Hurras al-Din most turned into an armed confrontation, during which an HTS fighter was killed in a checkpoint in southern Aleppo on February 7, 2019. The Central Asian's Muhajireen were worried that a conflict between al-Qaeda's former allies was causing damage to the common goals of Jihad. As a result, on February 10, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din reached anew agreement, in

which both organizations swore to end their war of words and cooperate against their common enemy. HTS and HAD agreed that an Islamic court would handle the controversial issues between the parties.

As we noted at the beginning of our article, the Uzbeks' KTJ and Uyghurs' TIP suggested that the Ansars resolve the dispute through an Islamic court, where they promised to protect the HTS with a weapon in the event of an attack on it. They hope for the justice of Islamic scholars at the head of Abu Qatada al-Filastini, who became a member of the Islamic court review the case. It should be noted that Abu Qatada al-Filastini played a key role in joining the Uzbek group KTJ to al Qaeda and HTS.

Uzbek and Uyghur militants support HTS in its pursuit to choose the lesser of two evils and do not see in its forced cooperation with Turkey violating the doctrine of loyalty and disavowal of Salafism in waging Jihad. Muhajireen do not oppose Ankara's initiatives to create a demilitarized zone in Idlib jointly with Moscow. This is due to several factors.

First, the cultural, linguistic and kinship community with the Turks plays an important role, and they consider Turkey's initiative helped delay for one year a possible attack by the Assad army, Iran's Shiite proxy forces and the Russian Aerospace Forces on Idlib. During this time, the Muhajireen and the

Ansar were able to prepare for a future battle.

Second, the Uyghurs Muhajireen view Turkey as the only country that provides them with moral and political support in the face of Chinese repression. More than 50 thousand Uyghurs live in Turkey who fled from Beijing's persecution and Ankara condemned China's Islam policy. In this regard, the Uyghurs are trying to pay back for this act of kindness. Some Uyghur Muhajireen participated in the military Operation Olive Branch along with the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army to liberate Afrin in March 2018.

Thirdly, in the Kurdish question, the ideological position of the Central Asian militants coincides with the position of the HTS, who consider Kurdish YPG and PKK as communist organizations and unbeliever (kafir) groups.

The future of Central Asia's Muhajireen in Idlib's Safe-Haven

The ideological contradictions and continuous clashes between the rival rebel groups in Syria clearly characterize not only the current state of relations between former al Qaeda allies, but also the complex transformation that occurs within the global Sunni Salafi-Jihadi movement.

In this regard it should be noted that the statement of foreign fighters in support of HTS will

have far-reaching consequences. Now, the prospect of finding Uyghur, Uzbek and Caucasian salafi groups on Syrian soil and their participation in global jihad in Middle East will depend on the position of the HTS. It can be expected that further deepening of the contradictions between HTS and al Qaeda in the near future will raise the question for foreign fighters about the choice of a strategic partner, because TIP and KTJ are members of al Qaeda, but at the same time they support the position of HTS in its dispute with al Qaeda.

After the defeat of the last stronghold of ISIS in al-Baghuz the attention of the regional powers will now be focused on the HTS, which built a prototype of the Caliphate, the so-called "Government of Salvation" in Idlib, which is managed on the basis of Sharia. However, HTS's pursuit to distance itself more and more from al Qaeda and its desire to transform itself into a participant in the political dialogue of the Syrian conflict will force it to distance itself from the foreign Muhajireen. Therefore, in the near future, Uzbek and Uyghur Muhajireen will have to flee from Idlib or they await the bitter fate of ISIS.

Central Asian Jihadists Renew its Oath of Allegiance to Al Qaeda Leader

At the beginning of January 2019, the Central Asian terrorist group Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) has publicly renewed its bayat (oath of allegiance) to Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda's global chief. Despite the fact that KTJ swore to al Qaeda in 2015, the group leader Abu Saloh's (Sirojiddin Mukhtarov) oath was issued in the form of an audiotape that was first released via the venture's Telegram channel. This indicates that the ties of Uzbek jihadists with al Qaeda remain strong and Ayman al Zawahiri through affiliated groups continues to influence the religious situation in Central Asia.

It should be noted that besides KTJ, also Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) and the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) from Central Asia swore allegiance to al Qaeda. All of them today are fighting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria's northwestern Idlib province under the leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni jihadist group.

While HTS, following a series of strategic rebranding efforts, proclaims that it is an independent entity not affiliated with al-Qaeda, his combat squad KTJ first published its bayat to Ayman al Zawahiri. Thus, the Central Asian groups in Syria became the link between al Qaeda and HTS after their formal detachment of ties, although many experts on Salafism, including myself, are suspicious of their severed relations.

To identify the aggressive ideology of al Qaeda and its thick shadow hanging over the Middle East and Central Asia, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of KTJ's bayat.

How Uzbek jihadists swore allegiance to al Qaeda?

The Uzbek jihadists' oath ceremony is fully audio-recorded and released on the Abu Saloh's Telegram page under the heading "Bayat to al Qaeda". From the sounds of prayer speech, it can be assumed that the Uzbek

jihadists took the oath to al Qaeda during the Salat-al-Juma (Friday congregational prayer), which is considered an important day in Islam.

In the 14-minute Khutbah (preaching) Abu Saloh elaborated on the ideological and political prerequisites of why they should swear allegiance to al Qaeda. He began his speech that "Allah Almighty said that only constant and continuous Jihad protects Islam from internal and external enemies, for which Muslims must unite and fight against Mushrikeen (idolater) and Kafirs (unbelievers including Jews and Christians).

The main kafirs are America and Russia, which conduct a hostile policy towards Muslims. Therefore, Mujahideen must fulfill the covenant of the Creator and lead the Jihad against the American and the Russian." This position of the KTJ leader is fully consistent with the ideological doctrine of al Qaeda, which considers the US as the 'first enemy' of Muslims.

Further, Abu Saloh continued that "Muslims must overcome internal turmoil and unite into the Ummah. Unification of our forces will accelerate the approach of a Nasr" (in Uzbek there is no word 'Nasr', he talks about the Quran's Surah an-Nasr, which translates 'victory' or 'Allah's help'). He quotes this Surah in Arabic. According to Abu Saloh, "if the Mujahideen wholeheartedly devote to Allah, constantly repent before Him

and hurry to become Shahids for His sake, He will surely give a Nasr."

Then he emotionally says that "in order to speed up the arrival of an-Nasr and declaring Jihad against Kafirs, our Jamaat takes the oath of allegiance to al Qaeda." Someone from the crowd shouts, Takbeer." After that, all Uzbek terrorists shout "Allahu Akbar".

After taking the oath, Abu Saloh praises al Qaeda, "this group has successfully delivered a series of crushing blows to the enemies of Islam in their territory, which still causes a feeling of fear and nightmare to the Crusaders" (here he is referring to 9/11 terror attacks). The leader of the Uzbek jihadists once again emphasised the US "the main enemy of Islam and the great Sheitan (devil) who must be beheaded."

Abu Qatada al-Falastini as a spiritual inspirer of the Central Asian Jihadists

The Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups joined al Qaeda in two waves. The first wave began in the late 90s of the last century in Afghanistan when Uyghur militants of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and Salafists of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan took the oath of allegiance to al Qaeda. The main role in the ideological conquest of al-Qaeda of post-Soviet Central Asia and Chinese Xinjiang was played by Osama bin Laden. TIP leader Abdul Haq

was even appointed a member of al Qaeda's elite Shura Council in 2005.

The second wave of the accession of Central Asian Salafi groups to al Qaeda occurred after the outbreak of the Syrian war. A vivid proof of this is the renewed oath of allegiance of KTJ to the al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, which we are analyzing now.

A Salafi cleric Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who was described by JTF-GTMO threat assessment as a "prominent al Qaeda spiritual leader, recruiter, and financier", played a significant role for Central Asian militants who became members of al Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra. Today, about two thousand Uyghur, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik Jihadists are members of al Qaeda. As the most influential ideologues of the global Salafi-Jihadi movement Abu Qatada issued fatwas justifying the killing of Muslims who converted from Islam, including their wives and children, and authorizing the killing of Jews and their children.

Abu Saloh confesses that he consulted with Abu Qatada and received his blessing for joining KTJ to al Qaeda. It was then Abu Qatada offered to give the name "Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad" to the Central Asian militant group, which was welcomed by Abu Saloh. The leader of the Uzbek militants calls Abu Qatada "Great Ulama (scholar interpreter of Islamic doctrine

and law), which, like a ray of light, illuminates the path of Jihad.”

At the end of his speech, Abu Saloh informs his militants about his last meeting with the Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and about a joint agreement to liberate Palestine after the conquest of Damascus. It should be noted that the liberation of Jerusalem from Israel is the program goal of Ayman al Zawahiri because Palestine remaining a cause to mobilize Sunni Salafi-Jihadi groups around al Qaeda.



Abu Saloh concludes his speech by congratulating his militants on joining al Qaeda. “Today, our Jamaat has become a member of the Great Umah, now we have embarked on the path of holy Jihad. Now we are responsible not only for our Jamat but also for Great Umah. May Allah bless our bayat.” Again “Takbeer” sounds from the crowd. In confirmation of the bayat, all shout “Allahu Akbar”.

Conclusions

As is known, the US State Department designated Central Asian jihadist groups Katibat Imam al Bukhari and Turkestan Islamic Party that joined al Qaeda as global terrorist organizations. But despite the fact that KTJ Jihadists have increased their stature among global terrorist groups over the past five years, and are receiv-

ing assistance from al Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the US State Department has not yet included it in the list of global terrorist organizations.

An analysis of the activities of KTJ showed that it had turned into an aggressive agitator and successfully carried out the al Qaeda ideology’s propaganda. Central Asian countries and Russia have recognized KTJ as a terrorist organization. KTJ was accused by Russia’s Federal Security Service of the terror attack on St. Petersburg’s metro in April 2017. The Kyrgyz authorities blamed Abu Saloh for the attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek on August 30, 2016. But this did not stop the terrorist activities of KTJ. Even al Qaeda-linked TIP and KTJ opened two madrasas in Syrian Idlib where Uyghur and Uzbek children study Salafism.

In this regard, it would be advisable for the US Government and the UN to take punitive measures against KTJ. Since, after the US government announced Katibat Imam al Bukhari as a global terrorist organization, its anti-American, Zionist rhetoric and propaganda of al Qaeda’s ideology markedly subsided.



What is the Future of Malhama Tactical?

Perhaps no single Salafi-Jihadi groups from Central Asia deserved such close attention of Western media like an Islamist private military contractor (PMC) Malhama Tactical (MT), that founded by a jihadist from southern Kyrgyzstan and training militants in Syria. This was possible thanks to the creativity and active self-promotion of the head of this small consulting firm on the Internet, which has managed to attract the attention of many Western journalists and researchers on Islamic radicalism.

The authoritative Foreign Policy called MT the world's first jihadi consortium of elite, well-paid fighters from across the former Soviet Union and compared its activities with the infamous Blackwater USA (now named Academi). BBC Monitoring published a series of analytical ar-

ticles entitled How Malhama Tactical became the 'Blackwater of the Syrian jihad' in December 2018. The Independent, CSAF, the American Partisan, The Daily Caller, MEMRI and others also described MT as a successful jihadist training organization that supposedly changed the course of the Syrian war. My colleagues in the study of Salafi Jihadism Pieter Van Ostaeyen and Neil Hauer even interviewed the MT's commander in November 2018.

The main disadvantage of all these articles is the lack of critical thinking regarding MT. Western analysts relied on videos, interviews and statements of MT's leaders published on the Internet as advertising. As a result, the MT's tactical role in the Syrian war is undeservedly overestimated since the boast of its leaders is

taken at face value.

About MT more detailed facts cited the Russian Telegram channel Directorate 4, which is associated with the Russian special services. But the main problem of Russian researchers is that it is difficult to determine the edges of analysis and propaganda, which in some places is accompanied by rude insults to the MT's leader.

The mysterious name of Al-Malhamah Al-Kubra

One should recognize the creative thinking of the Uzbek young man Abu Rofiq, who gave his organization the mysterious name "Malhama Tactical", which was immediately noticed by the sponsors of the Salafi movement in the Islamic world. According to the Hadith, the al-Malhamah Al-Kubra means the great battle, bloody fights, massacres and the conquest of Constantinople by Muslims from the Romans.

Abu Rofiq likes to create a halo of mystery around his person and his organization. Western media have created his image like the fearless Rambo and a former officer of the elite of the Russian Airborne Forces, who from the inside knows the secrets of the Russian military-training science. On Facebook Abu Rofiq at one time positioned himself as a former sniper of the Russian elite Special Forces GRU whose staff was involved in the poisoning

of former Russian intelligence officer Skripal in British Salisbury and in the interference of the 2016 US elections.

But our analysis showed that some of the statements of Abu Rofiq were not true. All his biographical data, family ties and information about the military career are known to the authorities of Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The real name of Abu Rofiq is Sukhrob Baltabaev who was born in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan on August 10, 1993. By the way, the leader of al Qaeda-linked Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad Abu Saloh is also from this region.

After completing school in 2010, he left as a labor migrant to Russia. The Russian authorities have documented that Sukhrob Baltabaev was called up for military service on May 14, 2012, by the Military Commissariat of Russia's Tatarstan. He began serving in the 45th Guards Separate Special Purpose Intelligence Regiment of the Airborne Forces in the Moscow Region. However, due to the disease of an intervertebral hernia, he was discharged from the Russian army.

Hijrah to Sham not for the purpose of Jihad but for making money

According to Russian sources, after an unsuccessful military career, Sukhrob Baltabaev returned from Moscow to Kazan and worked as a computer pro-

grammer at the firm Potok. In those years that ISIS and al Qaeda began actively recruiting Central Asian migrants working in Russia to Syria and Iraq. Having fallen under the influence of the ideologists of Wahhabism, in February 2014, he left for Syria and joined the Jamaat of Chechen militants Shishani. A young wife from Osh and a son Muhammadrofiq remained at home.

At the end of 2015, he created MT with several friends from Central Asia, who began to train on a commercial basis both local and foreign militants in Syria fighting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The exact number of the group's members is unknown but it is thought to consist of 10-15 fighters, all originating from former USSR states. Knowledge of computer technology, creative advertising campaign and ability to find a common language with the leaders of jihadist jamaats helped him in developing this business. MT has become popular due to the wide use of social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, VK, Twitter and Telegram, where he began to publish examples of military training under the pseudonym Abu Rofiq and offer his services for money.

In Central Asia, there is a saying that "Uzbeks know how to make money out of thin air." There is even a joke about when the American astronaut Neil Armstrong first landed on the moon, he met there Uzbek



The leader of Malhama Tactical Abu Rofiq

who trading in the Lunar Bazaar. In the genes of the peoples of Central Asia, where the Great Silk Road lay, historically there is the ability to trade. The natural flair did not fail Abu Rofiq: he found a unique opportunity to make money from the Syrian war.

The company has been working with the al Qaeda-affiliated Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Ajnad al Kavkaz, Jaysh Muhajirin wal-Ansar, and other groups, even Ahrar as-Sham. I am not a military specialist and cannot assess the quality of MT's tactical trainees on the use of various types of weapons and fighting in urban combat. But MT's instructors use popular Russian-made 7.62 mm machine gun, US-made modern sniper rifles, helmets with night vision goggles and the expensive military

equipment that the armies of Central Asia cannot afford. The other equipment shown in the videos, like the first-aid kit, is also of high quality, used often in US army and its allies.

Malhama produces equipment for other jihadi groups, manufactures accessories for the PKM, vests and grips, widely used in Syria. This means that MT's business is doing well and its leader has enough connections somewhere to guarantee himself a supply line of such type.

The MT leader actively used the online crowdfunding urging sympathizers to donate money to continue Jihad and training the Mujahideen. At the same time, currencies of all countries were accepted, even bitcoin, QIWI and Yandex. Money electronic transfers.

Russian hunt for the leader Malhama

With the acquisition of fame and the growth in the number of clients, the real hunt started for the MT leader from the Russian special services, the Assad regime and ISIS. The MT leader considers Moscow and Damascus enemies of Islam who destroy peaceful Muslims in Syria. Moscow has special claims to the MT leader. As shown the attempt to kill former KGB agent Skripal in the UK, Putin will pursue his military, who have betrayed the oath. Despite Moscow's refusal, Sukhrob Baltabaev is a former military of the Russian Army.

In addition, he inflicts sensitive blows to Russia. In a recent interview, the MT's head stated that the Mujahideen Hayat

Tahrir al-Sham, who had been trained by Malhama, had made an attack in Tarabiya, Northern Hama, and killed four high-ranking Syrian officers and seven Russians on November 10, 2018. ANNA-News Agency confirmed this information.

MT has also been vocal about its opposition to ISIS. On 20 June, Abu Salman posted on his Twitter account an anti-ISIS message saying: "We must kill them all, ISIS is evil and we have to do something to wipe them out".

For security reasons, the MT leader appears in the media in masks, or with a scarf tied on his face. According to BBC, the first MT leader Abu Rofiq was killed in February 2017 in a Russian air strike in Idlib. After that Abu Salman Al-Belarusi on Twitter called himself a new MT commander who is Uzbek from Belarus and served as senior sergeant of the 103 Airborne Brigade of the Belarusian Army in Vitebsk. But the Belarusian side did not confirm this information.

But according to the Russian media Abu Rofiq did not die. In order to mislead the Russian special services he spread false information about his death, and now he took the pseudonym Abu Salman Al-Belarusi. That is, Abu Rofiq and Abu Salman Al-Belarusi are one and the same person, that is, Sukhrob Baltabaev from Kyrgyzstan. After comparing the audio and video performances

of Abu Rofiq and Abu Salman Al-Belarusi, we concluded that the voice belongs to the same person. The authorities of Russia and Central Asia have identified Sukhrob Baltabaev and continue to closely monitor his relatives.

Ideological views of Malhama Tactical

The ideological views of the MT leader contain the outfit's mixture of Salafi ideology with the privatization of war because money plays an important role for him in his project. But he cannot be counted among the radical Wahhabis, who are ready to die as Shahid in the name of Allah. His various speeches showed that his level of knowledge of the Quran, Hadith, and Surah, the basics of Tawhid and Fiqh, is not very deep.

Perhaps because of this, he avoids the Central Asian Salaf-Jihadi groups Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad, Katibat Imam al-Bukhari and Turkestan Islamic Party, who fight in Idlib. In ideological terms, he does not represent a big threat to Central Asia's countries, because he is not able to conduct propaganda and recruiting campaigns. But he can be described as a jihadist who has close views with al Qaeda and performs his tactical tasks on technical training for jihadists.

Thus, MT was a new phenomenon in the Islamic world which has laid the foundation for the

professionalization of Jihad. But without ideological doctrine, it is difficult to predict the continued "successful functioning" of the world's first jihadi contractor. Therefore, it can be expected that the turbulent development of Jihadism and the fierce competition of terrorist groups will force MT to adopt the radical Salafi ideology and join a certain terrorist group. The history of radical Islamism has shown that the Wahhabi world will not accept those who do not have a deep ideological doctrine of Jihad. In the future, we can expect that the radical principles of Jihadism will force MT to go beyond earning money. MT is already gradually abandoning the concept of money...

Central Asian Jihadists between Turkey and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Frustrated by Jihad Islamists looking for ways to the West

After the signing and implementation of the Sochi Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib between Turkey and Russia there is a noticeable anxiety among al-Qaeda linked-Central Asian jihadist groups, who are fighting in the north-east of Syria against the Bashar Assad's regime. Over the past two months, the military and propaganda activities of these Sunni Salafi armed groups have significantly weakened. Some militants turned the corner and moved to the territory of Turkey, and are looking for opportunities to return to a peaceful life

During a recent trip to Turkey, I visited the Zeytinburnu region in Istanbul, in which a large Uyghur diaspora from Chinese Xinjiang lives. As I was informed, one of the Uyghur mili-

tants of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), after moving to Turkey for fear of being discovered by the Chinese special services, is trying to migrate to Europe or the US under the guise of refugees from Xinjiang. But the problem is that during the fighting in Jisr ash-Shugur in northwestern Syria, he lost his passport, and today is in Turkey illegally.

Recently, a researcher known for his controversial ideological views, a fellow at the Middle East Forum Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi interviewed another TIP fighter from Tajikistan Abu Osaid, who wants to return to peaceful life and migrate to Europe. Abu Osaid, who was born in Tajikistan in 1988, believed in the ideology of al-Qaeda, made a Hijrah (migration) to Syria with his wife to conduct jihad against the kafirs and protect the values of the Islamic Ummah.

He went through the hell of captivity, fought side by side with the Uighurs, then became disillusioned with jihad and is now looking for ways to migrate to Europe, where he hopes to get an education, get a job and become a legal resident among Christians.

These two episodes from the life of the two Salafis indicate a certain mood among the Central Asian jihadists in Idlib, who dream of going to the West. It turns out an interesting tragicomedy: some Central Asian Islamists want to wage a holy war for the “purity of Islam” and the establishment of a Caliphate in the Middle East, but they certainly want to live in the homeland of “crusades” in Europe or in the US. At the same time, there is a great danger that in the case of migration to the West, former members of al Qaeda will continue their jihadist activities and there is no guarantee that they will not commit a terrorist act on the orders of their religious patrons. Therefore, counterterrorism and religious extremism specialists should carefully monitor the movements of members of the Salafi-Jihadi groups from Syria to the West.

The al Qaeda's crossroads

It should be noted that currently in the province of Idlib stationed such as foreign Salafi-jihadi groups from Central Asia's Fergana Valley and the Chinese province of Xinjiang, Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), Katibat

Imam al-Bukhari (KIB), the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) and Katibat Ghuraba al-Turkestan (KGT). The total number of Uzbek, Uyghur, Tajik and Kyrgyz militants are about 4-5 thousand.

KTJ and TIP coordinate all their military operations in Syria and conduct them under the leadership of the most powerful single insurgent organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), former al-Nusra Front. Practically they became an integral part of HTS. Uzbek militants KIB have closer cooperation with the National Liberation Front (NLF) — a rebel coalition in Syria formed in May 2018 under Turkey's auspices. But all of them are united by their belonging to the Salafi ideology of al Qaeda.

Despite the fact that al-Nusra Front and al Qaeda formally broke off their relations in 2016, the Central Asian groups did not withdraw from al Qaeda and consider his leader Ayman al-Zawahiri their ideological leader. This is a unique case in which they coordinate their military and religious activities with both al Qaeda and HTS. Thus, the Salafi-jihadi groups of Central Asia became the connecting bridge between al Qaeda and HTS after their quarrels.

Today there is double pressure on the al Qaeda-linked Turkic and Russian-speaking Salafi-jihadi groups from the former Soviet Union in Idlib: from the Turkish special services and his

favorite rebel coalition NLF on the one hand, and HTS on the other. Each side is trying to pull them over to its side and use their armed potential in their own interests as the Idlib gambit.

As is known, in accordance with the Sochi Memorandum, Turkey is working to set up a demilitarized zone of a depth of 15-20 km in Syria's Idlib region, the withdrawal of terrorist groups, including al-Nusra and heavy weapons from the buffer zone between rebel and government fighters and al Assad's allied Iran-backed groups. As part of this operation, the Turkish intelligence services held talks with all armed groups of the Syrian opposition and al Qaeda-backed Salafi-Jihadi groups, including the HTS and his foreign fighters divisions from Central Asia. In this situation, the Uyghur and Uzbek jihadi groups are trying to keep the “middle ground” by not openly opposing the Turkish initiative, but at the same time not breaking off their close relations with the HTS to please Ankara.

Despite the double pressure, the Central Asian Islamists managed to maintain their ideological loyalty to al Qaeda, who after the fall of the Islamic state became the leader in world Salafi-Jihadi Movement. Therefore, none of the Central Asian militant groups in Idlib made an official statement over the Sochi Memorandum. Only the leader of the Imam Bukhari Jamaat, or KIB, Abu Yusuf



Muhajir wrote on Telegram under the pictures of the presidents of Russia, Iran and Syria that “Jihad is not commerce since the honor of Muslims is not for sale. The enemies of Islam will not succeed in destroying the religion of Allah.”

There are several factors that the Uzbek groups KTJ and KIB, as well as the Uyghur militant units TIP and KGT will not be able to openly conflict with Ankara.

First, thanks to the common religious, linguistic and cultural identity of the peoples of Central Asia and Turkey, the Islamists of the Fergana Valley and Chinese Xinjiang received the hidden support of Ankara

when crossing the Turkish-Syrian border. Erdogan’s Turkey allowed more than 20,000 foreign fighters from Russia, Central Asia, Caucasus and China to pass through her borders to join Salafi-Jihadi terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq from 2013 to 2016. In the event of the capture of Idlib by the Bashar al-Assad army and the fall of the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition, the Turkish territory remains the only transit zone for the Russian-speaking foreign fighters to leave Syria. Therefore, they do not want to burn bridges that will serve them in the future.

Secondly, at the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011-14, Turkey considered jihadists

from Central Asia as a pro-Sunni force capable of fighting to remove Bashar al-Assad from power. The Turkish authorities have allowed wounded fighters from Central Asia to be treated in the hospitals of Turkey. In 2014 the leader of KTJ Abu Saloh was wounded in the eye in fighting against the Syrian government forces and then was treated in Turkey.

Thirdly, still act the logistics infrastructures of the TIP in Turkey among Uyghur’s diaspora, where collect financial aid from its businessmen for those who are on the Hijrah. The favorable attitude towards the Uyghurs is also due to the position of Turkish President Erdogan, who said that “Eastern

Turkestan is not only the home of the Turkic peoples, but it is also the cradle of Turkic history, civilization, and culture. The martyrs of Eastern Turkestan are our own martyrs.”

Considering all these factors, Erdogan’s security services today are trying to influence the leaders of the jihadist groups of Central Asia in order to pull them under the NLF’s umbrella. As we already know, Ankara uses the armed potential of the NLF not only fight against the al-Assad regime but also to fight the Kurdish military unit YPG along the Turkish-Syrian border. On November 6, 2018, the Ebaa news agency reported that Turkey called on the NLF members to prepare for the battle in the Eastern Euphrates against the Kurdish YPG units. NLF already participated in the military operation “Olive Branch” to liberate Syrian Afrin from Kurdish groups in February-March 2018. Pro-Turkish Jaish al-Sharqia, one of the NLF’s major factions, has declared its readiness to fight the Eastern Euphrates with Kurdish groups. Therefore, it is possible that in case of joining the NLF, the Uighur and Uzbek jihadists will have to conduct fight against the Kurdish troops. According to religious and ideological views, Central Asian jihadists have always been against Kurdish Communists.

It should be noted that with the help of financial and military leverage, Ankara managed to rally around 30 Sunni Islamist

rebel groups around the NLF, including Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki. Today, the total number of NLF fighters is about 100,000, a third of whom are associated with al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Daily Beast, Turkish National Intelligence (MIT) has been deeply involved with the al Qaeda affiliated groups. Therefore, joining the NLF will not cause any ideological differences for al Qaeda-backed TIP, KTJ and KIB.

However, Central Asia’s Salafi-Jihadi groups are also under pressure from HTS, which does not intend to release them from its control. The military wing of the HTS said to Ebaa news agency that those who leave ribat (guard service at the border for the protection of Dar al-Islam), will give up arms or violate the bayat (oath of allegiance to an emir) will be considered traitors and will face severe punishment in accordance with Islam.

In its statement on the Sochi Memorandum, which is titled, “The Syrian Revolution Will Not Die”, HTS thanks all those who have supported Syrians and appreciate who saved liberated areas, including Central Asian Mujahideens who have “emigrated to join us.” HTS seeks to reassure the foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria, implying that they won’t be sacrificed to meet the demands of international actors. HTS refused to surrender heavy weapons and promised to con-

tinue jihad against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Russia and Iran. Thus, HTS became a serious obstacle to Ankara’s ambition to create its autonomous protectorate in the north of Syria and reduce Kurdish influence in the border area.

Because of the intransigence of its leaders, the HTS today has made many enemies. The tension between pro-Turkish groups and HTS has reached such a level that the NLF Ninth Division is ready to launch an offensive. The al-Assad army and Iranian-backed Shia militias consider HTS to be their main enemy that is spreading terrorism and preventing the establishment of peace in Syria.

Despite the Sochi Memorandum, armed clashes between HTS and the Syrian Army occur every day. In this situation, the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups became hostage to the ambitions of Abu Mohammed al-Jolani.

Idlib’s Trap

Today the financial position of TIP, KIB and KTJ has deteriorated markedly. External sponsors from Arab countries substantially reduced their economic assistance. The internal resources of these groups are at the verge of exhaustion. The influx of new militants from the Caucasus and Central Asia has almost stopped. The work of recruiting new jihadists from among labor migrants in Rus-

sia, Fergana Valley, and Chinese Xinjiang are not being conducted. In this situation, some deserters who managed to escape from their commanders and cross the Turkish-Syrian border are trying to leave for the West.

In October 2018, the leader of al Qaeda-backed Junud al-Sham group, ethnic Chechen militant Muslim Abu Waleedal-Shishani (Murad Margoshvili) made an appeal to the World Muslim Ummah. He acknowledged that the Salafi groups from the post-Soviet space in Idlib are going through a difficult period, some Majaheeds have come back, closing the doors of a holy Jihad. Therefore, he asked them not to hurry to leave Sham, because all is not lost. He called on the World Muslim Ummah to make donations for "the lions of Allah who migrated to Sham and protect the honor of Islam.

"The desperate appeal of al-Shishani witnessed the nervous situation among Salafi-Jihadi groups from Russia, Central Asia and China in Syria.

Today Central Asian jihadists are in Idlib's trap, where NLF and Turkish special services breathing down their necks, the al-Assad's army, Iranian Shia militias and the Russian air force attack in front, and a Khawarijis(al Qaeda uses the term "Khawarij" as a synonym for 'extremist' to describe members of the ISIS)of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi strike from behind.

Turkey's flirting with al Qaeda

The prospect of the continued presence of the Central Asian al-Qaida branches in Syria depends on the future actions of regional players – Russia, Turkey and Iran on the Idlib scene. In any case, they all understand perfectly well that the

Sochi Memorandum is temporary. Moscow and Ankara declare that it was necessary to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis. But for Damascus the deal in Idlib was necessary to gather strength and al-Assad will try to seize the last stronghold of the opposition by force. And then, to protect not only Idlib but also to retain control over the Syrian border region by Ankara, the military potential of al Qaeda-linked Central Asian jihadists will be required.

But as al Qaeda's Afghan experience and September 11 tragedy showed, flirting with this global Sunni terrorist organization and using its forces to achieve situational gains can lead to serious religious and political upheavals in the Middle East and Central Asia in the future.



What will happen to the Central Asian jihadists in Idlib after the Sochi Memorandum?

It became obvious that, the persistent calls and strict warnings from the UN, the United States, the EU and Turkey about the inevitability of a catastrophe and mass casualties in the event of a military operation on the Idlib Province, the last major rebel holdout in western Syria and home to about four million people, has begun to bear fruit. A military operation in Idlib was cancelled and the world sighed with relief.

The Price of Peace in Idlib

On September 17, 2018, in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Ankara and Moscow signed a memorandum to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Syria's Idlib region to separate government and rebel forces, in which acts of aggression are prohibited. The memorandum provides for a "withdrawal of all radical fighters" from Idlib including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Moscow and Ankara also agreed on the withdrawal of "heavy weaponry from this zone," including tanks, multiple-launch rocket systems, and rocket launchers belonging to all armed opposition groups by October 10.

The demilitarized buffer zone will extend between 15 to 20 kilometers (9-12 miles) deep into Idlib. Russia and Turkey will conduct joint patrols along the zone's perimeter.

Ankara's diplomatic victory is that the National Liberation Front (NLF) — a rebel coalition in Syria formed in May 2018 under Turkey's auspices — will remain in Idlib as a "new owner". The NLF includes Sunni groups Ahrar al-Sham, Nur al-Din al-Zenki as well as several factions battling under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, which Western countries consider "moderate armed opposition."

According to The Sochi Memorandum, Moscow, Damascus and Tehran have practically recognized NLF as the only moderate armed opposition in Syria.

The Sochi Memorandum, which at the last minute stopped the bombing of Idlib, completely suits Ankara. De facto, Turkey is expanding its presence deep into Syria, and takes the political and economic management of Idlib into its own hands, as was done in Afrin. In the past Turkey conducted a military operation, code-named Olive Branch, against the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria for more than two months, in order to achieve the conquest of Afrin. However, in contrast, Ankara has now seized Idlib as a result of its diplomatic initiatives. It should be expected that in the near future Ankara will immediately begin to establish pro-Turkish self-government by Idlib province.

Today more than 60 percent of the Idlib province is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, former al Qaeda linked Al Nusra Front. According to The Washington Institute, HTS has 30,000 combatants. It should be noted that in order to turn Al Nusra Front into a serious political player in the intra-Syrian conflict and in order to avoid international sanctions, the group's leader of Abu Muhammad al Julani in July 2016 announced that he would break off their ties from al Qaeda. HTS has managed to expand

its political and governance efforts, coordinating them through a civilian-run "Salvation Government" in Idlib. The group has expanded and energized initiatives to provide core services, from education and healthcare to electricity and water.

Now Turkey will seek the transfer of the reins of political, military and economic government by the province from HTS to NLF. But a clear mechanism for the transfer of power has not yet been developed. It is not excluded that a new redistribution of spheres of influence in the province may be accompanied by armed conflicts between "new" and "old" owners. A significant share of the HTS budget came from customs and tax collections in the territory of "Salvation Government", arms smuggling and human trafficking along the border with Turkey.

But the most difficult challenge for Turkey is cleaning radical jihadists out of Idlib, first of all, from HTS. Ankara has taken on an excessive responsibility for separating the moderate opposition from the Islamist extremists in Idlib which is not easy to implement. If Turkey manages to withdraw weapons from armed members of al Qaeda, HTS, Uyghur, Uzbek and Chechen Salafi-jihadi militants, and drive them all out of Idlib, then a new impulse will be given to the world struggle against Islamist radicalism. Then Erdogan, who positions

himself as a defender of Sunni Islam in the world, would strike a tangible blow to the ideology of ISIS and al Qaeda.

On the other hand, if Ankara is able to include all foreign terrorists and jihadists from Central Asia and China in Idlib into the National Liberation Front and the NLF becomes for them a new "amir", then the Sochi memorandum would become the next survival tool for these al Qaeda linked radical groups.

Foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union and China in Idlib

Syria's northwest, long a hotbed of armed resistance and the heartland of al-Qaeda-linked operations, has become a real-life shelter for Uyghur, Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz militants and their families from Central Asia. The militants from the former Soviet Union and Chinese Xinjiang are the largest foreign jihadists in Idlib Province.

Which Russian-Speaking Foreign Salafi-jihadi groups operating in Idlib were ready to defend the "Sham's Liberated Lands" (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham calls these lands his possession) from attacks by the Assad army and pro-Iranian Shia militant formations?

The Turkistan Islamic Party is one such group, mainly consisting of Uyghur Islamic fighters from the Chinese province of Xinjiang. The Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan

established in the 80s of last century in Chinese Xingjian was later renamed into the Turkestan Islamic Party and since 1997 it has been known to be based in Afghanistan. Since then, TIP is actively cooperating with the terrorist groups al Qaeda and Taliban. The amir of TIP is Abd al-Haqq al Turkistani. In February 2012 Uyghur militants moved to Idlib province and together with Al Nusrah Front are fighting against government forces of Bashar al-Assad. The al Qaeda's jihadi doctrine is the basis of the TIP's ideological platform. From 8 to 10 thousand Uyghur militants with their families are concentrated in Jisr al-Shughur.

Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad is affiliated with the Al Nusrah Front and its ancestor al Qaeda. The Salafi-jihadi group includes citizens of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Abu Saloh (Sirojiddin Mukhtarov) is the amir of the group who was born in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. He speaks emotionally, confidently and often quotes the Quran. Abu Saloh is a faithful and aggressive propagandist of the al Qaeda's ideology. He organized jointly with the Uyghur terrorists from the Turkestan Islamic Party the explosion in the Bishkek-based Chinese embassy in August 2016 in Kyrgyzstan. Also, the Federal Security Service of Russia has accused him of organizing an explosion in the metro of St. Petersburg on April 3, 2017. The approximate number of the KTJ

militants is about 400 people, mostly Uzbek jihadists.

The Katibat Imam al-Bukhari detachment was created in Afghanistan on the basis of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and pledged loyalty to the Taliban. After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2012 KIB moved to Syrian Idlib Province and distinguished itself as one of the major rebel groups fighting against the regime of Bashar Assad. Today one group of the KIB's jihadists is based in Afghanistan and fighting together with the Taliban. Abu Yusuf Muhojir, the Uzbek militant from Tajikistan, is the amir of the group.

About 300-350 militants are known to fight in the KIB. The US State Department designated KIB as global terrorist organizations on March 22, 2018. KIB takes a close position by its military and ideological views to the al Qaeda linked Al Nusrah Front and Ahrar al-Sham. Later both groups formally announced the break in their relations with al Qaeda, although their ideological jihadi platforms did not change. Despite the fact that KIB claims to be an "independent" faction, al Qaeda's radical Salafism and militant Takfirism are the fundamental basis of the jihadi ideology of the KIB. During the bloody conflict between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham led by Al Nusrah Front and the Syrian Liberation Front headed by Ahrar al-Sham in February 2018, KIB took a neutral stance and tried to play

an intermediary role in their reconciliation.

4. The so-called "Chechen groups", which have been formed from the inhabitants of the North Caucasus of Russia and Georgia are also involved in this conflict. Today in Idlib there are groups from the North Caucasus calling themselves "independent" factions Ajnad al Kavkaz (lider – Rustam Azhiev), Junud al-Sham (lider – Murad Margoshvili), Jaish al-Ussrah (lider – Peizulla Margoshvili), Jamaat Katibat Ibadar-Rahman (lider – Tarkhan Gaziyeu) and Liwa al Muhajireen wal Ansar, which are part of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

The number of militants in these Russian-speaking groups from the North Caucasus are much less than the Turkic-speaking Salafi-jihadi groups from Central Asia. Unlike the Uzbek and Uygur jihadist groups, there is no singular identical ideological doctrine among the "Chechen groups". As a result, they did not always enter into a coalition with Syrian opposition groups of local Arabs and did not accept the ideology of the global players of the world jihad.

After analyzing ideological platforms, it can be concluded that all these foreign Salafi-jihadi groups from Central Asia, Western China and the North Caucasus, which are stationed today in Idlib, have two factors in common.

First, they all have close cooperation with Al Qaeda and consider his leader Ayman al-Zawahiri their ideological leader.

Secondly, they coordinate all their military operations in Syria and conduct them under the leadership of the HTS. Practically Uzbek and Uighur militants became an integral part of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The jihadists of Central Asia became the link between Al Qaeda and HTS after their quarrels.

So far, neither the HTS, nor the Central Asian jihadists, nor the militants from the North Caucasus have expressed their opinion on the Sochi Memorandum

Where will the Central Asian jihadists go, if they leave Idlib?

After the signing of the Sochi Memorandum, the fate of the foreign jihadist groups in Idlib became dependent on Turkey. Now, the Turkish armed forces will apply pressure on foreign

radical groups to leave the territory of Idlib for the creation of a 15-20 kilometer demilitarized belt by October 15, 2018, in order to fulfill the provisions of the memorandum. North Caucasus and Central Asian jihadist groups will react to Turkish pressure based on the positions of HTS. That is, they will follow the example of the HTS, the largest and well-armed group in Idlib.

First option. HTS surrenders its heavy weapons, dissolves itself and integrates into the Turkish backed National Liberation Front. In this case, Chechen, Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz jihadists will look for ways to stay in Idlib and join the NLF. But Russia and China will be opposed to this path and will likely present an ultimatum to Ankara for their detention and transfer.

The second option. If the HTS does not agree to disarm, then the intervention of the Turkish Armed Forces in Idlib will become inevitable. If conflict

flares up between the HTS and the Turkish military, the North Caucasus and Central Asian jihadists will likely not interfere in it and will try, as far as possible, to leave Syria and move to Afghanistan to join the Taliban. It is unlikely that the kinship of Uzbeks and Uyghurs to the Turks will prevail over their religious-political jihadi ideology and cause them to disarm.

The third option. After the establishment of the pro-Turkish government in Idlib, led by the moderate opposition of the NLF, Russia and Turkey would jointly conduct military operations to eliminate Chechen and Central Asian Islamists.

In conclusion, it is likely that a decision about the future of the foreign Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria is drawing closer to a resolution each passing day.

Central Asian Jihadists under Al Qaeda's & Taliban's Strategic Ties

At the time when the Uzbek authorities held an international conference on Afghanistan on March 26-27, 2018, and the Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov hosted the Afghan Taliban delegation led by the Movement's political chief Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai on August 6-10, 2018, Taliban-backed Uzbek Salafi-jihadi groups continued their military operations against the Afghan government forces. Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's diplomatic efforts to establish a direct dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban have not yet produced the desired result.

Moreover, these two important events in Tashkent city could not diminish the terrorist activity of jihadist groups from the Ferghana Valley, which are under the dual patronage of al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The dispute between the UN and the US about the al Qaeda's and the Taliban's strategic ties

Monitoring of the Central Asian Salafi-jihadi groups activities showed that since 2018 al Qaeda-linked Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB) has stepped up its participation in the terror attacks against the Afghan Armed Forces. This Uzbek terrorist group has a high level of trust among the leaders al Qaeda and Taliban and has become a link in their strategic ties.

The ongoing strategic ties between al Qaeda and the Taliban were also noted in the United Nations' twenty-second comprehensive report, which was published on July 27, 2018. The UN Security Council emphasized that "Al-Qaida and its affiliates remain stronger than ISIL,



ИМОН АЛ БУХОРИЙ КАТИБАСИ МУЖОХИДЛАРИ "ХАНДАҚ" АМАЛИЁТЛАРИДА

Militant of Katibat Imam al Bukhari in the joint terror operation Khandak with the Taliban

while its alliance with the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan remains firm despite rivalry from the local ISIL affiliate" (page 3, section "Summary").

In this regard, it should be noted that the Pentagon and some high-ranking generals maintained that the strategic ties between al Qaeda and the Taliban were terminated. The US Department of Defense in its biannual report "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan" in June 2018 wrote that "...there is no evidence of strategic ties between the two organizations and the Taliban likely seeks to maintain distance from al-Qa'ida" (page 26, section "Threats from Insurgent and Terrorist Groups").

However, the UN report and the KIB activities show that the strategic ties between al Qaeda and the Taliban continue to function successfully. KIB is

not the only group from Central Asia that is affiliated with al Qaeda and conducts terror operations under the Taliban's leadership in Afghanistan. The authors of the UN's report devoted a whole paragraph to jihadist organizations from Central Asia, which play a key role in strategic cooperation between al Qaeda and the Taliban. Citing information provided by its Member States, the UN its report claims: "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan still commands about 500 fighters in Afghanistan, concentrated in Faryab, Sari Pul, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces. Around another 500 Central Asian fighters are distributed between Khatibat Imam Al-Bukhari, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, Islamic Jihad Union... The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement commands 400 fighters in Badakhshan" (page 15-16, section "Central and South Asia").

As an expert who is researching an ideological doctrine of the Central Asian Salafi-jihadi groups, I want to note that the above facts in the UN report may require some adjustment. First, of all the above-mentioned terrorist groups, only Katibat Imam al-Bukhari and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, more commonly known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) from northwest China, today jointly conduct attacks against the Afghan government forces.

Secondly, the presence of Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) militants in Afghanistan raises serious questions for experts on Central Asia. This Salafi-jihadi group, which consists of Islamists from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is fighting alongside other al Qaeda-linked groups in Syria and has not yet formed its branch in Afghanistan. Although KTJ is a strong mouthpiece of al Qaeda

in the Central Asian region. The KTJ's leader Abu Saloh became an effective mechanism in spreading the ideology of al Qaeda in the Ferghana Valley and the recruitment of new militants.

Thirdly, after the killing of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's (IMU) leader Usman Ghazi and his more than 100 militants by the Taliban for the betrayal to ISIS at a base in Zabul Province, the group was practically extinct. In June 2016, a new faction of the IMU announced itself, denouncing ISIS and expressing its loyalty to the Taliban and al Qaeda. But after this incident, al Qaeda and the Taliban leaders do not strongly trust the new IMU faction. Therefore, the IMU is unable to become an effective player in strengthening strategic ties between al Qaeda and the Taliban. Among the Central Asian jihadi groups who fight in Afghanistan, only KIB, TIP and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) have the highest confidence among al Qaeda and the Taliban leaders.

Uzbek jihadists in a double embrace

It is known that KIB has two branches. The group's main fighting force of more than 500 militants, led by leader Abu Yusuf Muhojir today is based in the Syrian province Idlib. Despite the fact that KIB positions itself as an "independent" faction it is closely connected with Ahrar al Sham who has had al

Qaeda operatives embedded in its own ranks. The KIB's second branch is concentrated in Afghanistan, which positions itself as an integral part of the Taliban. Even the emblem and the name of the KIB branch are closely associated with the Taliban. It is known that the Taliban refers to itself as "the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" and has the website under the same name. With the Taliban's consent KIB leaders gave their branch the name "Katibat Imam al Bukhari of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". After pledging an oath of allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar, KIB became a reinforcing factor of the strategic ties of the Taliban and al Qaeda. It should be noted that the US State Department designated KIB to the list of global terrorist organizations on March 22, 2018.

KIB's Media Center is located in Idlib, which promotes the activities of both branches in the social media. In his propaganda materials and public speaking during Jumu'ah (congregational prayer on Friday), KIB leader Abu Yusuf Muhojir regularly makes reference to the religious preaching of the founder al Qaeda Osama bin Laden and the group's current amir Ayman al-Zawahiri. Radical Salafism and militant Takfirism are the fundamental basis of the jihadi ideology of the KIB. In accordance with the ideological doctrine of KIB, the group considers its goal the construction of an Islamic state in Central Asia, the overthrow of the

regime of Bashar al-Assad, and the protection and spread of Salafi-jihadi ideology around the world by force. Also, Abu Yusuf Muhojir describes with admiration the military successes of the Taliban Mujahideen and calls them "the faithful warriors of Allah."

Since the spring of 2018, Uzbek jihadists, together with the Taliban, have conducted more than ten terror operations called Khandak and Mansuri. After each terrorist attack, the KIB's Media Center published video and photo materials on the captured military equipment, weapons, and cited the data of the killed soldiers of the Afghan Army on the Telegram channel. For example, on July 18, 2018, the Media Center reported that "in the framework of the joint Operation Khandak, the Mujahideen of Kathibat Imam Bukhori neutralized four military personnel who had undergone military training NATO and destroyed one infantry fighting vehicle and 3 Hummer." At the end of the information, the KIB confirmed its loyalty to the Taliban according to the Bay'ah (oath of allegiance in the world of jihadism). This indicates that the KIB continues its historical fealty to the Taliban and al Qaeda.

As the recent battles for the city of Ghazni have shown, the Taliban has been able to significantly increase its combat readiness and expand its presence to the borders of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and



Snipers of Katibat Imam al Bukhari in Afghanistan

Tajikistan. This means that Uzbek jihadists are closer and closer to their homes, where they intend to create an Islamic Caliphate. The KIB, IJU and TIP continue to attract followers, gain battlefield experience and make international connections.

The Central Asian countries seriously fear that the Taliban's dominant role in the intra-Afghan war can inspire the jihadists from the Fergana Valley into terrorist attacks in their homeland. But the "Stans" governments do not have military, political and economic levers to pressure the Taliban so that it refuses patronage over Uzbek and Uyghur Salafi-jihadi groups. The Afghan peace conference in Tashkent and the ongoing talks between Uzbekistan and the Taliban do not give much optimism that the terrorist threat KIB, IJU and TIP will decrease in the future.

Since 2001, there have been many attempts to organize a negotiation process with the "moderate" wing of the Taliban in various formats. International conferences were held under the aegis of the UN, like the Tashkent one. Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri has sworn allegiance to the Taliban's new amir, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada in June 2016. Therefore, it can be expected that the strategic ties between the Taliban and al Qaeda will continue in the future, and their patronage over the Central Asian Salafi-jihadi terror groups will not interfere.

Causes and consequences of jihadism

In conclusion, it should be noted that the UN statistics on the number of Central Asian jihadists is very conditional. Counting al Qaeda backed Sunni radical group's member-

ship in Central Asia and the Middle East is a difficult task. In practice, their number is several times higher. In my opinion, the controversy over the continuation or termination of al Qaeda's and Taliban's strategic ties in Afghanistan, as well as the allegation of a quarrel between al Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria is of secondary importance. Despite internal contradictions and temporary conflicts for leadership in the jihadist world, al Qaeda, the Taliban and ISIS united by the common extremist Salafist-takfiri ideology. The purpose of this ideology is the construction of the Caliphate in the world and the struggle with the crusaders of the West.

The UN in its report was unable to name the exact number of Sunni Muslims who share the Salafi-jihadi ideology. While the ideology of Salafism and Wahhabism is alive, the number of Islamist terrorists in the world can only grow, and jihad cannot be stopped. After analyzing the UN's and the Pentagon's reports it can be concluded that world powers are struggling not with causes, but with the consequences of jihadism. But the fight against the ideology of radical Islamism is primarily a responsibility of the Islamic world.

The armed conflict between ISIS and al Qaeda has reached its climax

How Central Asian jihadists kill each other in Syria?

Exactly one year ago, on July 10, 2017, the Islamic state citadel of Mosul city was liberated and, as a result, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi solemnly announced that the Caliphate in Iraq had finally and irrevocably fallen. More than three months later, on October 17, 2017, the Kurdish combat units of the Syrian Democratic Forces, with the support of the aviation of the international anti-terrorist coalition led by the United States, drove out the Islamic State from the Syrian city of Raqqa.

But, as the terrorist attacks carried out by the supporters of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in July 2018 in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Canada showed, the Islamic state managed to regain its strength over the past year and further expanded the geography of its military opera-

tions. While victorious fanfares sounded, ISIS fighters successfully mastered the tactics of guerrilla warfare and deeply integrated into the Sunni population of the Middle East and Central Asia. Pinpoint terrorist strikes clearly indicate that the victory over the Islamic state is still far away and the jihadists are determined to take revenge. Today ISIS is conducting an intense offensive guerrilla war not only against Western countries and government regimes in the region but also against the Taliban and armed groups of alQaeda, who are its ideological rivals for leadership in the jihadist world.

In this brutal and intra-factional war between ISIS Islamist groups on the one hand, and al Qaeda and Taliban on the other hand, the jihadists of the Central Asia's five countries, called the "Stans", are actively participating. Islamists from the Fergana Valley, because of

ideological confrontation, were divided into supporters of al-Baghdadi and Ayman al-Zawahiri and often commit terrorist acts against each other in Syria.

According to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-affiliated information agency Ebaa, on July 9, 2018, an attack was carried out in Syria's city Idlib against the amir's house of the Central Asian terrorist group Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad Abu Saloh. As a result of the attack, his wife and four-year-old son were killed. The Uzbek jihadists' leader himself was not injured. Security officer Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Anas al-Sheikh said that the house of Abu Saloh was attacked by an armed Khawarij (al-Qaeda uses the term "Khawarij" as a synonym for 'extremist' to describe members of the ISIS), who was detained by the security forces of the city after hot pursuit. During the interrogation, a member of the Islamic state confessed to the crime. He was recruited by ISIS in Turkey. Later "Khawarij" was executed, Ebaa agency reported.

This is not the first victim among the Central Asian jihadists as a result of an armed confrontation between ISIS and al-Qaeda. On April 27, 2017, during the evening prayer in the mosque of a Syrian city of Idlib, leader of the al-Qaeda-backed Katibat Imam al-Bukhari Sheikh Salahuddin was killed by an ISIS militant who was from Uzbekistan.

The Islamic State distributed the following statement via Telegram messenger in this regard, "The emir of detachment of Katibat al-Imam Bukhari, Sheikh Salahuddin, was punished according to Sharia law for all the betrayals he committed." Two ISIS terrorists from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who murdered the Sheikh Salahuddin were detained and executed.

Lately in the northwestern province of Idlib, which is the last stronghold of the Syrian armed opposition, terrorist attacks of ISIS militants on military and religious sites al-Qaeda-backed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham sharply intensified. Lately in the northwestern province of Idlib, which is the last stronghold of the Syrian armed opposition, terrorist attacks of ISIS militants on military and religious sites of al-Qaeda-backed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham sharply intensified.

Terrorist organizations from Central Asia such as Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad, Katibat al-Imam Bukhari, as well as Uyghur groups from Chinese Xinjiang, the Turkestan Islamic Party and Katibat al-Ghuraba are located in Idlib. All of them were affiliated with al-Qaeda and were fighting within the largest jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The Salafi-jihadi ideologues of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham are making efforts to transform the Idlib province into an emirate ruled under Shariah.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 229 jihadists of al-Qaeda were assassinated by ISIS terrorist attacks. Of these, 153 fighters belong to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, al-Qaeda-linked jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Izza, and other factions operating in Idlib. 25 jihadists of Uzbek, Uyghur and Caucasian nationalities have been assassinated in the same ways.

Caliphate rising from the ashes

On July 12, 2018, ISIS' media center Amaq issued the message with three images from an improvised explosive device attack in Idlib city. The target was Sheikh Anas Ayrout, the President of the Court of Appeal in Idlib, a longtime opposition figure and senior Sharia official who played a key role in the formation of the Syrian Salvation Government. Based on Shariah rule the Syrian Salvation Government is a civil authority formed in Idlib province in early November 2017 and backed by the rebel coalition Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

A pinpoint attempt on such a high ranking religious and political figure indicates that the explosion was not accidental or chaotic. The al-Baghdadi militants have studied the possible routes of Sheikh Anas Ayrout and easily identified his car. They received from the Syrian Salvation Government information about when he would travel on this route.

From this, it can be concluded that the Islamic state succeeded in introducing its agents into the military and religious structures of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and created a complex network of underground cells throughout Syria, including the Idlib province.

On July 13, 2018, the Islamic State's propaganda machine released the information with several photos about the assassination of the Turkey-backed Sultan Murad Division rebel group's leader Abu Ahmed al-Sansawi in Idlib city. ISIS' photos clearly showed that the killing was a targeted assassination, during which the terrorists confidently pursued the car of al-Sansawi. This once again testifies that the underground ISIS network is organized at a high level, and they have mastered the tactics of guerrilla warfare.

The Media Center Amaq almost daily reports about Islamic state's successful armed attacks on the positions of the "enemies of Islam" Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the province of Idlib. Indeed, the guerrilla attacks and terrorist acts of the supporters of al-Baghdadi not only complicated the life of al-Qaeda-backed jihadists in Idlib, but they also caused a more serious threat to the security and defense of the entire armed Syrian opposition, than a possible attack by the Assad army and Iranian proxy Shiite militias with the support of Russian aviation.

On July 25, 2018, ISIS gunmen committed the bloodiest attack in Syria's history in the southwestern Sweida province, killing 215 people and injuring 180 people. The sad reality is that the fighters of al-Baghdadi survived the air strikes of the Western coalition and today continue to pour out streams of blood in Sham. They are trying to prove to the outside world and the entire Sunni jamaat that, despite the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, the military, human and organizational potential of the ISIS remains high.

Today, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Central Asian Salafi-jihadi groups have to fight on three fronts: with the armed forces of the Assad regime, the Iranian controlled Shiite proxy units and ideological opponents of the Islamic state. If the war with the first two is outlined by a clear front line, then the fight against ISIS is conducted as an invisible guerrilla war.

Since 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham regularly conducts a security campaign to identify ISIS clandestine cells and eliminate its agents in the province of Idlib. But it is very difficult to solve the problem of ensuring the security.

To intimidate those who support the emir of the overthrown Caliphate al-Baghdadi and those who sympathize with him, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham began to publicly execute the ISIS prisoners of war.

On July 14, Anas Sheikh, a security officer in Idlib, told Eba news agency that in the village of Sarmin, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham executed 8 ISIS members led by their commander Abu Barra Sahili. As evidence, the group's propagandists published a photo of executed terrorists.

On July 24, Eba agency reported that HTS militants destroyed a large cell of the Islamic state in the village of Jisr Shugur in the west of Idlib. As a result, the deputy amir of ISIS in Idlib Abu Said al-Shishani was captured and immediately executed. His photo was published on the Eba website.

Abu Said al-Shishani was the brother of ISIS military minister, Abu Omar al-Shishani (real name Tarkhan Batirashvili), a well-known Chechen terrorist and the closest military adviser to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The US Treasury Department added Batirashvili to its list of "Specially Designated Global Terrorists", and the US government announced a reward up to \$5 million for information leading to his capture in 2015.

A sacrifice of the pure Islam

It should be noted that according to the direction of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Central Asian jihadist groups avoided publicizing public executions of their enemies. But the difficult situation caused by the terrorist attacks of ISIS, apparently,

forced the ideologists of al Qaeda to change the tactics of their propaganda.

In response, the jihadists of the Islamic state staged a wave of terror in the province of Idlib, as revenge for the murder of their members. They named their operation in honor of the murdered commander Abu Barra Sahili. Such a tradition was initiated by al Baghdadi himself. Earlier, ISIS carried out a military operation in honor of the lost military minister, Abu Omar al-Shishani, and in honor of the official spokesperson and senior leader of the Caliphate, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani.

The ideological rivalry and armed conflict between al Qaeda and ISIS for the leadership in the jihadist world has reached its peak. As is known, both terrorist groups are fighting for the purity of Islam. Both seek to establish Sharia laws,

create an Islamic caliphate and to spread it around the world. ISIS ideologists consider the supporters of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham apostates and kaafirs (infidels). Al Qaeda described the supporters of the Islamic state as Khawarij (the early Islamic sect that was involved in the disruption of the unity of the Muslims and rebelled against the Khalifah).

From the analysis of ISIS activities over the last six months, it can be concluded that, firstly, the group leaders are trying to compensate for the loss of the Caliphate with abundant terrorist acts behind enemy lines and by expanding the geography of "the holy war." Secondly, the supporters of the Islamic state managed to create at an advanced level an expanded underground network among Sunni Muslims in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Yemen and Egypt.

Thirdly, the publication of statements and press releases in the Amaq News Agency show that terrorist acts in different countries and regions are managed from a single ISIS center.

From a practical point of view, fighting between jihadists of the Islamic state and al Qaeda is beneficial to all countries that are fighting Islamist extremism and terrorism. A long and bloody confrontation will undoubtedly weaken the human, technical and financial potential of both Salafi-jihadi groups.



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