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RADICALIZATION AND THE UZBEK DIASPORA IN THE WAKE OF THE NYC ATTACKS

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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Introduction

The October 31, 2017 truck-ramming attack in Lower Manhattan was the first lethal jihadist attack in New York City since September 11, 2001. The attacker, mirroring the vehicular terrorist attacks that have troubled Western Europe in recent years, used a rented truck to drive down a bike path, killing eight before being shot, apprehended, and hospitalized.¹ Soon after, authorities identified the suspect as Sayfullo Habibullaevich Saipov, a 28-year-old national of Uzbekistan.² Saipov reportedly came to the United States in 2010, and settled in the Tampa, Florida area, before moving to Paterson, New Jersey.³ Business records and other accounts show that he also had ties to Cincinnati and Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.⁴ Reportedly, Saipov left a note at the scene of the attack detailing his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State (IS).⁵

The suspected attacker's revealed country of origin immediately raised questions from the

media, analysts, and authorities over what role, if any, the situation in Uzbekistan and Central Asia more broadly played in Saipov's radicalization. For some, the attacker's allegiances and his Uzbek origins were sufficient to declare his case to be one aspect of the broader mobilization of Uzbek IS supporters worldwide. Yet others, including New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, pointed to the U.S. domestic context in evaluating what drove him to commit the attack. In a press conference, Cuomo claimed that "after [Saipov] came to the United States is when he started to become informed about ISIS and radical Islamic tactics".⁶

What we know about Saipov so far points to a necessary debate within the academic literature on radicalization amongst Central Asian, and Uzbek communities specifically, outside of Uzbekistan. Edward Lemon and John Heathershaw argue that what occurs in "transnational spaces of migration is...more important than root causes in Central Asia" when it comes to mobilization to violent extremism.⁷ This type of research, even in much larger Central Asian diaspora communities

¹ *Reuters*. 2017. "Suspect in Deadly New York Truck Followed Islamic State Plans: Police," November 1. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-new-york-attack/new-york-city-police-investigate-reports-of-shooting-in-manhattan-idUSKBN1D02QU>.

² *Ibid*.

³ Kilgannon, Corey, and Joseph Goldstein. 2017. "Who Is Sayfullo Saipov? From Truck Driver to Uber Driver to Terror Suspect." *The New York Times*, October 31, 2017, sec. N.Y. / Region. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-manhattan-truck-attack.html>.

⁴ "We Warned Him Over His Radical Views." 2017. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. November 1, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/new-york-terror-suspect->

[acquaintance-shocked-aggressive-behavior/28829385.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/new-york-terror-suspect-acquaintance-shocked-aggressive-behavior/28829385.html).

⁵ Reuters, "Suspect in Deadly New York Truck Followed Islamic State Plans"

⁶ Merle, Renae, Devlin Barrett, and Mark Berman. 2017. "New York Truck Driver Planned Attack for Weeks and Carried It out in the Name of ISIS, Police Say." *Washington Post*, November 1, 2017, sec. Post Nation. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/01/new-york-attack-probe-expands-to-uzbekistan-as-possible-militant-links-explored/>.

⁷ Heathershaw, John, and Edward J. Lemon. 2017. "How Can We Explain Radicalisation among Central Asia's Migrants?" *OpenDemocracy*. May 1, 2017.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/edward-lemon->

in Turkey and Russia, is nascent; in the United States context it is even more limited.

This analysis offers some context to broader factors that may have played a role in Sayfullo Saipov's radicalization. It provides a brief overview of the IS-related wave of mobilization amongst Uzbeks, comparing the situation inside and outside Uzbekistan, and clarifying several misconceptions about radicalization in these communities. With these trends in mind, the analysis also documents past instances where members of the Uzbek diaspora in the United States were involved in terrorism cases. From these assessments, it highlights a few underexplored factors that analysts might consider when trying to document links between members of diaspora communities and international terrorist organizations like IS.

Uzbek Mobilization to Jihadist Groups: Methodology and Misconceptions

Sayfullo Saipov's case is not the first incident of an ethnic Uzbek or Uzbek citizen committing a jihadist attack outside Uzbekistan. On New Year's Day in 2017, Abdulkadir Masharipov, a citizen of Uzbekistan, opened fire on New Year's revelers at the Reina nightclub in Istanbul, killing 39.⁸

john-heathershaw/can-we-explain-radicalisation-among-central-asia-s-migrants.

⁸ Arslan, Rengin. 2017. "Abdulkadir Masharipov: Who Is Istanbul Gun Attack Suspect?" *BBC News*, January 17, 2017, sec. Europe. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38648350>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Nechepurenko, Ivan, and Neil MacFarquhar. 2017. "St. Petersburg Metro Attack Included Many Students Among

Reportedly, Masharipov was a seasoned fighter who participated in jihadist movements prior to the Syrian conflict, including training in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁹ On April 3, 2017, a bombing struck the metro system in St. Petersburg, Russia, killing over 15 people.¹⁰ The alleged attacker was named as Akbarjon Jalilov, a 22-year old ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan.¹¹ Four days later, Rakhmat Akilov, a 39-year-old citizen of Uzbekistan whose asylum request had recently been rejected in Sweden, drove a hijacked truck into a crowd of people in central Stockholm, killing five and injuring 14.¹²

These three men shared connections to Uzbekistan or the Uzbek diaspora and committed jihadist attacks, but the rest of their stories are strikingly dissonant. Masharipov was the only individual found to have a legacy of participation in jihadist organizations prior to committing the attack; the other two seemed to have adopted radical beliefs upon arrival in their host countries. According to some sources, Akilov began to lash out when his asylum request was denied in late 2016.¹³ Jalilov, unlike the others, was a citizen of Kyrgyzstan, despite being ethnic Uzbek. Al Qaeda, not the Islamic State, claimed Jalilov's attack, stating that he was directed by Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to commit the

Victims." *The New York Times*, April 5, 2017, sec. Europe. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/europe/st-petersburg-metro-attack-russia.html>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *BBC News*. 2017. "Rakhmat Akilov: The Truck Attack Suspect," April 10, 2017, sec. Europe.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39552691>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

bombing.¹⁴ Not much is known about Jalilov's life prior to the attack, besides that he was a sushi chef at a St. Petersburg restaurant after moving there with his family in 2011.¹⁵

The profiles of these attackers highlight critical flaws within the current discussion of the jihadist mobilization of ethnic Uzbeks. In the wake of each of these attacks, articles and analyses inevitably decry Uzbekistan as a "hotbed of jihadist recruitment" or an "exporter of terrorism". They usually cite not only the ethnicity of the attacker but also evidence, drawn from several reports on foreign fighter travel, that documents the seemingly extensive number of foreign fighters in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan from Uzbekistan.

First, as highlighted above, the extent of these individuals' connections to Uzbekistan are either unclear, limited, or non-existent. Central Asia's diverse landscape makes conflation between citizens of Uzbekistan and ethnic Uzbeks an analytical mistake. Thousands of Uzbeks live in neighboring countries and have citizenships there rather than in Uzbekistan.¹⁶ Even those who are both ethnic Uzbeks and citizens of Uzbekistan may have spent a considerable portion of time

outside of the country, including experiencing events in diaspora that may have contributed to their radicalization.

Reliable figures on foreign fighter travel from Uzbekistan are few and far between and range drastically, depending on the source.¹⁷ A recent report by The Soufan Center, for example, cites an article that claims that more than 1,500 Uzbeks have traveled to fight for jihadist groups in the Middle East.¹⁸ It also includes a range of additional estimates, including a figure from the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan that 200 of its citizens are fighting in IS. Another report from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) found that more than 500 Uzbeks were fighting for the group.¹⁹

So far, there has been no independent, objective, and external accounting of how many Uzbeks have traveled to Syria and Iraq to support jihadist groups, or how many supporters remain in Uzbekistan.²⁰ In fairness, this undertaking would be costly, massive, and would likely pit researchers against stringent restrictions on reporting on these matters in several relevant countries. However, many existing assessments

¹⁴ Nechepurenko, Ivan, and Rukmini Callimachi. 2017. "Website With Qaeda Ties Publishes Claim on St. Petersburg Bombing." *The New York Times*, April 25, 2017, sec. Europe.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/world/europe/st-petersburg-metro-al-qaeda.html>.

¹⁵ Nechepurenko and MacFarquhar, "St. Petersburg Metro Attack Included Many Students Among Victims"

¹⁶ Heathershaw and Lemon, "How Can We Explain Radicalisation among Central Asia's Migrants?"

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Barrett, Richard. 2017. "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees." The Soufan Group.

<http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf>.

¹⁹ Botobekov, Uran. 2016. "ISIS and Central Asia: A Shifting Recruiting Strategy." *The Diplomat*. May 17, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/isis-and-central-asia-a-shifting-recruiting-strategy/>.

²⁰ Existing estimates rely heavily on the government of Uzbekistan's figures. "Understanding Islamic Radicalization in Central Asia." 2017. *The Diplomat*. January 20, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/understanding-islamic-radicalization-in-central-asia/>.

uncritically repeat estimates based on opaque methodologies without disclaimers.²¹

In some cases, the government of Uzbekistan has utilized inflated foreign fighter counts to further create the perception that the country faces a severe risk from jihadist groups. In turn, the government uses fearmongering to solicit external counterterrorism cooperation, including funding. In addition, this has provided a pretext for crushing political opposition.²²

There is a near-consensus of academic research, however, that the risk posed by IS to Uzbekistan is slim. Since the 2014 declaration of the Caliphate, there have been zero terrorist attacks claimed by the group in the country.²³ Historically, while Uzbekistan has hosted domestic groups affiliated with Al Qaeda, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), their major nexus of activity has been across the border in Afghanistan and Pakistan as opposed to in Uzbekistan itself.²⁴ The government of Uzbekistan also has a history of claiming that Islamist movements, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) or local Islamist parties, are tied to foreign terrorist organizations.²⁵

Additionally, when research is conducted on a case-by-case basis of foreign fighters, a common thread is that many, if not most of the Uzbeks in Syria and Iraq are recruited from outside of Central Asia.²⁶ There are over two million ethnic Uzbeks living or temporarily working in Russia, with thousands more in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States.²⁷ A 2016 study found that a substantial percentage of the Uzbeks in Syria and Iraq cultivated connections that influenced their decision to travel while they were living or working in major Russian cities.²⁸

What do these issues entail for the case of Sayfullo Saipov? First and foremost, as the investigation develops, it is important to bifurcate his experiences in Uzbekistan and the United States, and determine exactly which factors in both countries may have contributed to his radicalization. Saipov, like the other Uzbek diaspora members who committed attacks in their host countries, split his formative years between Uzbekistan and a second country. He moved to the US seven years prior to committing his attack, and was unlikely to have been a hardened jihadist when he moved to the United States in 2010 at the age of around 21. It is likely to be the case that foreign fighter outflow and the political situation in Uzbekistan itself will

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*; Heathershaw and Lemon, "How Can We Explain Radicalisation among Central Asia's Migrants?"

²³ "Global Terrorism Database (GTD)." START. https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?chart=country&casualties_type=&casualties_max=&country=219.

²⁴ *EurasiaNet*. 2015. "Uzbekistan and Islamic State: Phantom or Foe?," November 13, 2015. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76101>.

²⁵ Karagiannis, Emmanuel. 2009. *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb Ut-Tahrir*. Routledge.

²⁶ "Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses." 2015. USAID. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Tucker, Noah. 2015. "Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia." *CERIA Brief* 6 (February).

<https://app.box.com/s/rea1h5419q4qqh3pp5vjdi7ev84e07oi>.

be largely irrelevant to determining the motives behind Saipov's attack.

Additionally, it is crucial to draw on the nascent field of radicalization in the transnational space, rather than solely consigning Saipov's case study into the categories of "radicalization in Uzbekistan" or "radicalization in the United States". More specifically, it is important to assess the impact of migration on critical issues that underlie the radicalization process, including identity and grievance formation, dissatisfaction with life in Western countries, socioeconomic situations, and the creation of networked connections to other like-minded individuals.²⁹

Ethnic Uzbeks and Terrorism in the United States

There are over 50,000 individuals born in Uzbekistan in the United States, according to the 2015 Census.³⁰ This number does not include ethnic Uzbeks born outside of Uzbekistan or with different citizenships. The major Uzbek communities in the United States are in the New York City metropolitan area, Philadelphia,

Houston, and Chicago, with smaller populations elsewhere in the country. Uzbek communities in America are religiously diverse (many of the Uzbeks in the New York area, for instance, are Jews from the city of Bukhara), originate from different cities and towns in Central Asia and elsewhere, and have varying levels of citizenship and socioeconomic status.³¹

There are a few notable cases of involvement of Uzbek Americans in violent extremist movements, some of which predate the rise of the Islamic State. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, several Uzbek men were arrested in the United States on charges of providing material support to the IMU and its offshoot, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). Both groups were Al Qaeda affiliates which were active in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region, but were staffed and partially led by ethnic Uzbeks.³² IJU directed attacks or attempted attacks in Germany, Turkey and in several Central Asian countries. They also targeted Uzbekistan, called for the removal of the sitting government, and carried out the 2004 suicide bombings outside of the US and Israeli embassies in Tashkent, the capital city.³³

²⁹ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2005. *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*. Rowman & Littlefield; Dalgaard-Nielsen, Anja. 2010. "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 (9):797–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.501423>; Hegghammer, Thomas. 2016. "Revisiting the Poverty-Terrorism Link in European Jihadism." presented at the Society for Terrorism Research Annual Conference, Leiden, the Netherlands, November 8. http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_poverty.pdf.
³⁰ Bureau, U. S. Census. n.d. "American FactFinder - Results." Accessed November 1, 2017. <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/page>

s/productview.xhtml?pid=AGS_11_5YR_B05006&prodType=table.

³¹ "Inside the Brooklyn Uzbek Community, After Several of Its Own Were Arrested Under Suspicion of Terrorism." 2015. New York Magazine. November 5, 2015. <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/11/isis-brooklyn-uzbeks.html>.

³² Steinberg, Guido. 2008. "A Turkish Al Qaeda: The Islamic Jihad Union and the Institutionalization of Uzbek Jihadism." Center for Contemporary Conflict. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/fachpublikationen/sbg_IJU_Strategic_Insights_ks.pdf.

³³ *Ibid.*

The first of these arrests occurred in 2011, when Ulugbek Kodirov, a citizen of Uzbekistan who was illegally residing in Alabama on a revoked student visa, communicated with an IMU member overseas about his plan to assassinate then-U.S. President Barack Obama.³⁴ In 2012, Kodirov pleaded guilty to material support of a foreign terrorist organization, making threats to kill the President, and illegal possession of a firearm.³⁵ He was sentenced to 15 years and eight months in prison.³⁶

Jamshid Muhtorov, a refugee from Uzbekistan who was living in Aurora, Colorado, was arrested in January of 2012 for attempting to travel overseas to join IJU.³⁷ Muhtorov communicated over email and telephone with his co-conspirator Bakhtiyor Jumaev, an Uzbek man living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and relayed messages from an IJU member. The two men allegedly collaborated to provide financial support for the IJU member, and additionally declared *bay'ah* (allegiance) to the group.³⁸ With the \$2,800 raised by the two men in hand, Muhtorov attempted to depart to Pakistan, but was apprehended at Chicago O'Hare airport and

arrested. Federal agents followed up with Jumaev in March of 2012 and arrested him as well.³⁹ Muhtorov was held without trial in Colorado for five and a half years before being released after a drawn-out legal battle in 2017; Jumaev's trial is set for January 2018.⁴⁰

Another case occurred in Idaho in 2013, when Fazliddin Kurbanov, also a refugee from Uzbekistan, was arrested during the planning stages of a major bombing plot targeting U.S. military facilities.⁴¹ Kurbanov discussed the attack with a facilitator for the IMU online and received instruction on bomb-making, telling the IMU member that he was angry about US military activity in Afghanistan and wanted to retaliate.⁴² When federal agents raided his apartment, they found explosive materials, including potassium nitrate, sulfur, and aluminum powder.⁴³ Kurbanov was convicted in August 2015 and sentenced to 25 years in federal prison, and was additionally charged with attempted murder of a federal

³⁴ "Plea Agreement". 2012. *USA v. Ulugbek Kadirov*. US District Court for the Northern District of Alabama. https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1915.pdf

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Uzbek National Sentenced to Nearly 16 Years in Prison for Threatening to Kill the President and Providing Material Support to Terrorism." 2012. FBI. July 13, 2012. <https://www.fbi.gov/birmingham/press-releases/2012/uzbek-national-sentenced-to-nearly-16-years-in-prison-for-threatening-to-kill-the-president-and-providing-material-support-to-terrorism>.

³⁷ "Second Superseding Indictment", 2012. *USA v. Jamshid Muhtorov and Bakhtiyor Jumaev*. US District Court of Colorado.

https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1932.pdf

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Narayan, Chandrika. 2017. "Judge Orders Terror Suspect to Be Released after 5 Years without Trial." CNN. June 27, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/26/us/terror-suspect-release/index.html>.

⁴¹ "Uzbek National Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison on Terrorism Charges." 2016. Department of Justice Press Release. January 7, 2016. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/uzbek-national-sentenced-25-years-prison-terrorism-charges>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

officer after he attempted to stab the prison warden in 2017.⁴⁴

In the current wave of IS-related mobilization, the landmark cases involving American Uzbeks are the February 2015 cases of Abdurasul Juraboev and Akhror Saidakhmetov. Both were U.S permanent residents of Uzbek descent; Juraboev was a citizen of Uzbekistan and Saidakhmetov a citizen of Kazakhstan.⁴⁵ The two men, who both lived in Brooklyn, New York, were planning to travel to Syria to join IS. If they could not travel, they resolved to commit an attack at home.⁴⁶ Both men discussed these plans on an Uzbek-language pro-IS site, *Hilofatnews.com*, and received advice from other Uzbek speakers on how to reach Syria.⁴⁷ To finance their travel, they relied on Saidakhmetov's employer, another Uzbek man named Abror Habibov. Habibov, in turn, reached out to several other Uzbeks in New York and Illinois to raise money for Saidakhmetov and Juraboev's plane tickets, and for money to buy weapons when they arrived in Syria.⁴⁸ He encouraged his co-financiers to "show their Uzbek support" for Saidakhmetov and Juraboev.⁴⁹

In total, seven Uzbeks—Saidakhmetov, Juraboev, Habibov, Dilkhayot Kasimov, Azizjon Rahmatov, Akmal Zakirov, and Dilshod Khusanov—were involved in the network.⁵⁰ The seven individuals had varying levels of residency status in the United States. Since their arrests, Saidakhmetov, Juraboev and Habibov have all pleaded guilty to the charges; Juraboev was sentenced to 15 years in prison in late October 2017.⁵¹

In the coming weeks, more will be known about the extent of Saipov's radicalization trajectory, including if he made any important connections in the United States. Interviews with members of the small Uzbek community in Stow, Ohio, where he once lived, seem to point to the attacker being "not very religious" when he arrived in the United States in 2010.⁵² Over time, he reportedly adopted increasingly conservative beliefs, which alienated him from other individuals in the community. A separate report from Saipov's time in Tampa, Florida quotes an imam who viewed him as angry and aggressive, and tried to direct him away from his extreme viewpoints.⁵³

⁴⁴ "Idaho Man Serving Sentence in Terrorism Case Indicted on Attempted Murder Charges Stemming from Attack on Federal Prison Warden." 2017. Department of Justice Press Release. May 25, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/idaho-man-serving-sentence-terrorism-case-indicted-attempted-murder-charges-stemming>.

⁴⁵ "Complaint and Affidavit in Support of Arrest Warrant", 2015. *USA v. Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev et. al.*, United States District Court, Eastern District of New York. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/Saidakhmetov%20Complaint%20%20Affidavit%20.pdf>

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "Defendant Charged With Conspiring and Attempting to Provide Material Support to ISIS and Al-Nusrah Front." 2017. Department of Justice Press Release. August 31, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/defendant-charged-conspiring-and-attempting-provide-material-support-isis-and-al-nusrah-front>.

⁵¹ *Reuters*. 2017. "Brooklyn Man Sentenced to 15 Years Prison over Islamic State Support," October 27, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-new-york-security/brooklyn-man-sentenced-to-15-years-prison-over-islamic-state-support-idUSKBN1CW2TN>.

⁵² RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty, "We Warned Him over his Radical Views"

⁵³ Mueller, Benjamin, and Michael Schwirtz. 2017. "Driver in Manhattan Attack Had Been Planning for Weeks, Police

Regardless of whether Saipov acted alone or in conjunction with a network, which must be established by further investigation, there are trends in the previous cases that could additionally be relevant to Saipov's. First, reports on some of these individuals claim they were not adherents of conservative Islam upon arrival in the United States. Fazliddin Kurbanov's family had converted to Christianity in Central Asia; it was not until he had lived in the United States for several years that he converted back to Islam.⁵⁴ Akhror Saidakhmetov, according to his attorney's sentencing memorandum, progressively adopted extremist beliefs well after arrival in the United States, mainly by consuming Uzbek-language material produced by individuals associated with the Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement (HuT).⁵⁵

Additionally, in all cases previous to Saipov's attack, Uzbeks who had lived in the United States for a significant period of time decided to reach out using digital communications technologies to Uzbeks (or at least, Uzbek speakers) overseas who were members of foreign terrorist organizations. Muhtorov and Jumaev reached out to an IJU website administrator, known only to them as "Muhammad".⁵⁶ Kurbanov used email and Skype to contact a IMU website

administrator.⁵⁷ Saidakhmetov and Juraboev were both active on an Uzbek-language pro-IS web forum, speaking directly to a forum administrator, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdodi Halifat Dovlati Islamiya" [an "Uzbekization" of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi Caliphate Islamic State].⁵⁸

If further investigation demonstrates Saipov's case as an extension of these two commonalities, it becomes difficult to make the case that he arrived in the United States already radicalized. The background factors that radicalized Saipov, whether they are individual, social, or material, may have less to do with Central Asia, and more to do with the United States.

Conclusion

A review of the handful of cases where Uzbeks in the United States were arrested for participation in violent extremist organizations, alongside the cases where Uzbeks in various countries committed attacks, are often assumed to be the direct result of "push factors" in Uzbekistan. On first glance, this is a convenient explanation, as it re-centers the debate away from the difficult topic of how Western countries should address homegrown violent extremism. This is not to say that push factors to violent extremism do not

Say." *The New York Times*, November 1, 2017, sec. N.Y. / Region. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/nyregion/driver-had-been-planning-attack-in-manhattan-for-weeks-police-say.html>.

⁵⁴ Putz, Catherine. n.d. "Uzbek Refugee Facing Terrorism Charges In the US." *The Diplomat*. Accessed November 1, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/uzbek-refugee-facing-terrorism-charges-in-the-us/>.

⁵⁵ "Defendant Akhror Saidakhmetov's Memorandum in Aid of Sentencing". 2017. *USA v. Akhror Saidakhmetov*. United

States District Court, Eastern District of New York. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/SaidakhmetovDefendantSentencingMemorandum.pdf>

⁵⁶ "Second Superseding Indictment", *USA v. Jamshid Muhtorov and Bakhtiyor Jumaev*

⁵⁷ "Uzbek National Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison on Terrorism Charges." Department of Justice Press Release.

⁵⁸ "Complaint and Affidavit in Support of Arrest Warrant", *USA v. Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev et. al.*

exist in Uzbekistan—like anywhere else, there are many—but in other cases where ethnic Uzbeks living outside the country committed attacks, these factors were largely irrelevant. In the case of Uzbek Americans, a re-focus on the unique impacts of the experience of migration on radicalization—such as individual grievances, network formation, and socioeconomic instability—could be warranted. These assessments should build from current debates about radicalization in Central Asian immigrant communities in Russia, Turkey, and elsewhere.⁵⁹

Despite the instinct to look towards Central Asia after an attack involving someone from the region, as we try to understand how and why Sayfullo Saipov radicalized, it is important to consider if and how his life in the United States may have contributed to his radicalization. If the latter is true, this would be consistent with the broader phenomenon of IS support in the United States. Of all 146 people charged with IS-related offenses in the country, over 80% were U.S. citizens or permanent residents, including Saipov.⁶⁰ While one should not discount the external threat to the U.S. from jihadist groups, the main challenge for law enforcement authorities will likely continue to be homegrown violent extremism.

⁵⁹ Heathershaw and Lemon, “How Can We Explain Radicalisation among Central Asia’s Migrants?”

⁶⁰ “ISIS in America”, 2017. *Program on Extremism*. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-america>