

From Jihadism to Transnational Crime: The Evolution of the IMU Threat and ISIS Affiliates in Central Asia

Otniel Hizkia Simbolon

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Ariel Mochammad Septianto

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Egi Aryo Pamungkas

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Fadlhan Firyal Ginanjar

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Dewi Triwahyuni

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Sylvia Octa Putri

Universitas Komputer Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or IMU is a militant group based in Central Asia. This group has been linked to regional jihadist movements for more than two decades. Over time the IMU changed its form because its ideology became weaker and military pressure continued to increase. The group also began to use the Islamic State or ISIS brand to strengthen its image. This paper explains how the IMU changed from an ideological jihadist group into a transnational criminal actor. This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analytical methods. The data comes from academic sources international agency reports and security policy documents. The findings show that ISIS influenced the IMU's strategy. The IMU began to combine jihadist activity with organized crime. The group became involved in narcotics trafficking human smuggling and other illegal funding activities. This change shows how jihad became closely connected with criminal activity. This transformation has made the IMU a hybrid actor. The group now operates between terrorism and organized crime. This condition makes security responses in Central Asia more difficult. This paper argues that governments cannot rely only on traditional counterterrorism policies. They also need tools to reduce transnational crime in order to respond to the threat more effectively.

Keywords: IMU, ISIS, Central Asia, Jihadism, Transnational Crime

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or IMU is an Islamist militant organization that emerged in Central Asia at the end of the 1990s. In its early phase, the IMU mainly opposed the secular government of Uzbekistan. The group also aimed to establish a state ruled by Islamic law or Sharia in the Ferghana Valley and nearby areas. Therefore, its early agenda focused mostly on domestic political and ideological change. Over time, the IMU became more active and expanded its operations into neighboring countries. This development showed that the group's activities were not limited to one country. One of its most notable actions occurred during the Batken Conflict in 1999. At that time, IMU fighters attacked security forces in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This event showed the group's growing role in cross-border militancy and regional security issues. In the mid-2010s, several factions within the IMU publicly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State or ISIS. This marked a new stage in the group's development. It also expanded the IMU's network, which had previously focused mainly on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Wikipedia, 2026). The alliance with ISIS showed that Central Asian jihadist groups could adapt to changes in global jihadist movements. This adaptation appeared in their strategy, operational patterns, recruitment methods, financing, and transnational activities.

Conversely, in modern terrorism studies, the link between terrorist acts and transnational crime is often discussed through the concept of the crime-terror nexus. This concept explains the reciprocal relationship between terrorist organizations and organized crime networks, which are utilized to support their operations, including in aspects of funding, logistical support, and network expansion (Makarenko, 2004). Thus, this concept helps explain how non-state actors such as the IMU are able to adapt in an era of globalization, where the movement of ideologies and resources across borders increasingly facilitates their operational transformation.

Inspecting the advancement of the IMU from a classic jihadist group to a more advanced entity is important. Again, its involvement in cross national criminal activities over its affiliation with ISIS indicates an important shift in its movement behavior. Thus, an investigation of this change is important to apprehend the act of evolving security menace in Central Asia and their cause on regional stability.

In line with this, this paper purpose is to analyze the IMU's evolution from a regional jihadist movement to an actor involved in cross national criminal chains. This research also examines the IMU's affiliation with ISIS and its connection to security dynamics in Central Asia. Through this discussion, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of current threat patterns in the region. The findings are expected to offer a useful basis for formulating more appropriate security response policies in Central Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Militant activity has continued to rise in Central Asia. This trend reflects changes in the pattern of security threats across the region. Based on previous studies, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or IMU has often been described as a militant opposition group that emerged from political repression and social inequality in Uzbekistan. Therefore, its rise cannot be separated from the internal conditions that created resistance within the country.

According to scholars such as Collins (2006) and Roy (2004), the early radicalization and activities of the IMU can be explained through two main factors. The first factor is the group's adoption of Salafi-jihadist ideology. The second factor is its goal of overthrowing authoritarian rule. These ideological roots and political objectives played an important role in shaping the early direction of the IMU.

However, more recent studies show that the IMU's development is more complex than this explanation suggests. Research indicates that groups such as the IMU continue to adapt to changing global and regional conditions. This adaptation appears not only in their closer links with transnational jihadist networks but also in their changing strategies and operational patterns (Clarke, 2021). Therefore, the development of the IMU needs to be understood through both internal factors and external influences.

Recent studies on transnational illicit networks also show a growing connection between militant organizations and illegal economies. Shelley (2014) and Croissant and Sulaimanov (2016) explain that groups like the IMU have

become linked to drug trafficking, goods smuggling, and human trafficking. These illegal activities help militant groups survive, expand, and maintain their operations. This shows a shift in which militant groups are no longer driven only by ideology. They also combine ideological goals with material interests that support their long-term existence.

This trend is further supported by recent studies which argue that hybrid financing has become a key feature of contemporary militant groups (Europol, 2022). In this model, militant organizations use both ideological narratives and criminal activities to sustain their networks. As a result, groups such as the IMU operate not only as ideological movements but also as actors connected to transnational crime.

A split that fully assimilated the IMU's ideological loop, with their predicament in transnational crime. Research into the effect of ISIS affiliation on threat dynamics across Central Asia, both structurally and long-term, thus far remains limited. This article aims to fill this gap with an account of the gradual transformation of the IMU from a regional jihadist organization into a multifaceted entity that combines principles of militant doctrine and criminal strategies (ICG 2022).

On the basis of the militants utilizing violence to obtain their political, ideological or religious objectives through immediate fear in society, we recognize this phenomenon as terrorism. The basic elements of an ideology, a closed organizational structure, and violence as the means of political discourse (Hoffman, 2006; Schmid, 2020). Contemporary jihadism comes from a Salafi-jihadi understanding of jihad as a physical war against an enemy who is believed to be opposed to Islam. This ideology has proliferated through transnational networks and frequently used local conflicts as a vehicles to pursue global ends (Hegghammer, 2010; Gerges, 2021).

The IMU first emerged as a local jihadist group that fought against the secular Uzbek government. However, as security pressure increased, the group began to change. It became more adaptive by building cooperation with international networks such as Al-Qaeda and later ISIS. This shift shows how jihadist movements can adjust to weaknesses and changing conditions in their surrounding environment (Rashid, 2002; Clarke, 2015; Weiss, 2022).

The utilization of organized crime strategies to finance operations has gradually been adopted by terrorist organizations. This is known as the crime terror nexus, where ideological pursuits intersect with illicit economic endeavors (Makarenko, 2004; Basra & Neumann, 2020). After its loss of the territorial base, the IMU resorted to narcotic traffic in Afghanistan and smuggling activities across Central Asia for alternative funding. The link with ISIS further cemented patterns of criminalization in the group (Clarke, 2015; UNODC, 2018; UNODC, 2022).

Regional Security theory rests on the notion that security threats are geographically concentrated and mutually linked among the states in one region. Third, Barry Buzan precisely says that a state security cannot be separated from the dynamics of its surrounding region through 'Regional Security Complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Cooley & Heathershaw, 2021)'. This makes Central Asia a 'vulnerable region' with long border problems, comparatively weak state capacity, and geographical proximity to Afghanistan, a centre of war and narcotics (Allison 2004; UNODC 2023).

The IMU's metamorphosis into its own quasi-ISIS was accompanied by cross-border security threats impacting the stability of nations such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to other major regional players like Russia and China (Clarke, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2016; ICG, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology following a case study design that examines the changing nature of the threat posed by IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) at it relates to its affiliation with ISIS (Islamic state) within Central Asia. This research seeks to gain in-depth contextual understanding of ideological transformation, organizational change, and a complete shift from local jihadism into participation in transnational crime which is why a qualitative approach has been chosen.

This paper addresses the IMU in three parts: (1) changing presentations of the IMU's ideology and strategy from its founding until it swore allegiance to ISIS in July 2015, (2) changes to its organizational structure and chain-of-

command after aligning with ISIS, and (3) an analysis of transnational crime commitment by the IMU regarding narcotics trafficking, smuggling and cross-border logistic networks. Consequently, this study takes into consideration, as well the scales of terrorism but also how militancy meets criminal economy in Central Asia.

Research data is a secondary data obtained through documentary studies. The data source range from academic journals, international security research institutions reports, government policy documents to those produced by international organizations and terrorism monitoring agencies. It also drew on investigative news articles and reports published by regional think tanks to supplement the understanding of recent group dynamics. The data collection was performed through systematic literature review; and the selection criteria included relevance, source credibility, and publication period.

Descriptive-analytical techniques and process tracing were used to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis was used to explain the development of the IMU's agenda and its affiliation with ISIS within broader regional security dynamics. Process tracing was then used to examine the causal links behind the IMU's transformation from a state-focused jihadist movement into a transnational criminal actor.

This study also applied the crime-terror nexus as its conceptual framework. This framework helps explain how changing financial needs, military pressure, and regional geopolitics shaped the IMU's evolving strategies. To strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings, this research used source triangulation by comparing different reports, academic publications, and policy documents. The interpretation of data was also carried out carefully because terrorism studies are often influenced by political bias and security narratives. Through this method, the study aims to provide a structured and balanced analysis of the IMU's changing threat pattern and its implications for security stability in Central Asia.

Terrorism can be understood as the use of violence or threats to achieve political, ideological, or religious goals. Its purpose is not only to attack direct targets but also to spread fear among a wider society. Hoffman (2006) explains that terrorism usually has several key features, including ideological motivation, closed organizational structures, and the use of violence as a tool of political communication.

Modern jihadism is closely linked to Salafi-jihadist ideology. This ideology views jihad as an armed duty against those considered enemies of Islam. Hegghammer (2010) argues that this understanding spreads through transnational networks and uses local conflicts to support broader global objectives. In this context, the IMU first emerged as a jihadist group operating in Central Asia against the secular Uzbek regime.

However, increasing security pressure eventually pushed the IMU to adapt. The group built alliances with international jihadist networks such as Al-Qaeda and later ISIS. This development shows the flexible and adaptive nature of jihadist movements, especially when they face military pressure and changing regional conditions (Rashid, 2002; Clarke, 2015).

As UNODC (2010) specifies transnational organized crime means structured, market-driven transnational criminal divestiture in a few examples narcotics trafficking, weapon trafficking and human trafficking. When they mature terrorist organizations tend to use organized crime techniques to fund their activities. The connection between ideology and the illegal economy (Makarenko, 2004) is referred to as the crime-terror nexus.

Following the loss of its base of power, the IMU turned to Afghan narcotics trafficking and smuggling across Central Asia as a means of financing. The ties to ISIS cemented the organization path of criminalization (Clarke, 2015; UNODC, 2018)

DISCUSSION

Military Pressure Leads to IMU Organizational Transformations

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) which is a local jihadist movement targeting the civil government in Uzbekistan has been founded by the end of 1990s. But the U.S. and its allies military action in Afghanistan after 2001 really degraded the IMU's safe haven provided to them by the Taliban government. The loss of sanctuaries meant

the IMU had to divide its organization, moving its network towards Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands.

In the case of IMU, extended military pressure rendered it incapable of executing conventional cross-border missions (as in Batken conflict). Thereafter the group started taking up a survival tactic by linking with other militant networks and over-the-locally conflict economy as a funding source (Zenn, 2020). That was a transition from being a local insurgency to being able to operate as a more adaptable and decentralized organization outside the region.

Internal fragmentation also diluted the ideological coherent of the organization. With the exception of some field commanders who saw more pragmatic strategies as their way of sustaining the group including working with cross-border smuggling networks and those criminal groups at play in northern Afghanistan. The phenomenon illustrates that when faced with greater security pressures, jihadists groups often resort to criminal activities as a means of subsistence (Clarke 2021).

Even before the IMU made its way onto ISIS's formal organization chart, it had already effectively transitioned from ideology-driven to pragmatism-focused and resource-find network seeking protection.

How Oath of Allegiance to ISIS by IMU Shakes up Group Structure.

A fraction of the IMU formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, specifically the ISIS Khorasan Province (ISKP) apparatus that is operating out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The overall strategy behind this approach was driven by the deteriorating ties between the IMU and Taliban who regarded Afghanistan national priorities higher than the global jihad project at that particular time (Clarke, 2021).

The IMU's affiliation with ISIS helped the group regain part of its lost ideological legitimacy among international militants. ISIS offered a more attractive narrative of global jihad through digital propaganda and transnational recruitment networks. This narrative appealed to young militants who were searching for a broader jihadist identity.

As a result, several IMU members and supporters joined ISIS-linked operations in Afghanistan. Some also became involved in ISIS activities in the Middle East. This shift shows how ISIS influenced the IMU's ideological direction, recruitment patterns, and transnational mobility (Zenn, 2020).

The promise also sparked conflict with the Taliban, for whom ISIS was seen as a competing sovereign entity in Afghanistan. Fighting between pro-ISIS groups and the Taliban killed or scattered many IMU fighters, stripping the group of most of its central command structure.

Now, instead of a ranked organization to be taken down the IMU became small cells linked loosely together along with regional networks from ISIS. The decentralised nature of these threats challenges counter-terrorism because they become diffused and difficult to identify (Lemon, Heathershaw & Megoran 2021).

Shifting to Transnational Crime

The loss of a territorial base and infighting has led some IMU members to move into criminal economies. With Afghanistan, the global center of drug production, militant groups can tap into cross-Central Asian drug smuggling routes to Russia and Europe. Criminal networks have long made use of this smuggling route and is also utilized by militant groups to fund their operations (Zenn, 2020).

Encompassing narcotics trafficking, IMU networks are also said to be engaged in human smuggling and false document migration of laborers from Central Asia to Russia and the Middle East. These activities help militant networks make money and broaden the diaspora of their operational networks away from conflict zones.

This change in strategy mirrors the nature of the crime-terror nexus, where terror groups are no longer solely sustained by ideological support and now depend on criminal activities for organizational survival (Makarenko, 2004). As applied to the IMU, this transformation indicates that ideological objectives and economic rationales are starting to collide. Therefore, the challenge of the IMU is not just a security threat by only terrorism, but also to worldwide and public disruption through international criminal acts.

Multimodal IMU: An Example of Hybrid Actor in Threats to Regional Security

This evolution of the IMU tells us that at least part of non-state security actors can be both traditional criminals

or terrorists, but mixing jihadism and organized crime. Within this, the distinction between terrorist organizations and criminal groups becomes more opaque.

This stance opens new security threats from within Central Asian countries. It raises the level of threats that settle not only in armed attacks but also, on the brink of years to come, with these economic chains being assaulted and collapsing state sovereignty across borders and trade routes. While, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan too are an easy target for smuggling and militant recruitment due to their limited security quota (Lemon 2021).

Militant recruitment has also shifted outside of the region, targeting Central Asian immigrant workers that in Russia and Turkey. This indicates that development of the IMU and dynamics of terrorism within Central Asia cannot be separated from development in cross-national crime.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The evolution of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or IMU shows a major shift. The group changed from a domestic militant organization into a group connected to global jihadist networks and transnational crime. At first the IMU focused on overthrowing the Uzbek government and establishing an Islamic state. However growing military pressure limited political space and the difficulties of operating in Afghanistan pushed the group to change its strategy and methods.

The year 2015 marked an important turning point in the IMU's development. During this period the group built closer ties with the Islamic State or ISIS. This affiliation strengthened the IMU's claim as part of global jihad. It also gave the group access to wider international networks for propaganda recruitment and financing. This transformation shows that militant groups are not static. They can adapt to changes in global politics and regional security conditions.

This research shows that the IMU's activities reflect the crime-terror nexus. This concept explains the connection between terrorism and organized crime. The group used narcotics trafficking smuggling and other illegal economies as a strategy to survive. As a result the IMU can no longer be seen only as an ideological threat. It also operates as part of a transnational criminal ecosystem. This ecosystem takes advantage of weak border control and fragile institutions in Central Asia.

This transformation has several important implications. First security threats in Central Asia have become more complex and cross-border in nature. These threats involve ideology illegal economies and transnational networks. Second the IMU's link with ISIS increases the risk of digital radicalization and cross-border mobilization. This risk may spread beyond Central Asia. Third a security approach that relies only on force may strengthen feelings of injustice and marginalization. Extremist groups can use these feelings to support their narratives.

The development of the IMU reflects how militant groups adapt in a globalized world. The line between jihadism and transnational crime has become increasingly unclear. Because of this responses to the IMU and similar groups require a more comprehensive long-term and multidimensional security approach.

REFERENCES

- Akhantayeva, S., & Mussabekova, A. (2024). Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia: An Overview of Radical Groups. *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 4(4), 86–100.
- Akhmetov, T. (2021). Radicalization and state responses in Central Asia: The case of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. *Central Asian Affairs*, 8(2), 147–168.
- Allison, R. (2004). Regional security cooperation in Central Asia: From NATO to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56(3), 463–483.
- Berdal, M., & Lilleør, H. B. (2018). Financing Jihad: Uncovering the links between terror and organized crime in Central and South Asia. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 11(3), 22–41.

- Clarke, C. P. (2021). Trends in terrorism: What's on the horizon in the post-ISIS landscape? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33(6), 1235–1252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1761428>
- Collins, K. (2023). *Making Extremists: The Uzbek Jihad Moves to Afghanistan. Politicizing Islam in Central Asia: From the Russian Revolution to the Afghan and Syrian Jihads*. Oxford University Press.
- Collins, A. (2006). Islam and militant Islam in Central Asia. In R. Rotberg (Ed.), *Battling terrorism in the twenty-first century* (pp. 187–214). Brookings Institution Press.
- Giustozzi, A. (2019). ISIS in Afghanistan and the Islamic State's expansion in Central Asia. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(7), 567–584.
- Gunaratna, R., & Weismann, I. (2012). Terrorist Financing and Resourcing: The way forward. In R. Gunaratna, W. Tan, & D. Subramaniam (Eds.), *Terrorist Financing in Southeast Asia: Counter-Measures and Challenges* (pp. 45–63). Imperial College Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2016). *Central Asia: Islamist mobilisation and regional security*. Brussels: ICG Asia Report.
- Jackson, R., & Sinclair, S. (2020). Crime-Terror Nexus in Global Perspective: Understanding Interactions Between Terrorist and Criminal Groups. *Global Security Studies*, 11(1), 1–19.
- Karagiannis, E. (2014). *Militancy and Political Violence in Central Asia since 2001*. Routledge.
- Kyrgyz, M., & Sharipov, B. (2022). Smuggling and Extremism: The Economic Drivers of Radical Networks in the Fergana Valley. *Central Asian Journal of Security*, 5(1), 58–78.
- Lemon, E., Heathershaw, J., & Megoran, N. (2021). Security practices and authoritarian regionalism in Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey*, 40(1), 1–19.
- Makarenko, T. (2004). The crime–terror continuum: Tracing the interplay between transnational organized crime and terrorism. *Global Crime*, 6(1), 129–145.
- Rashid, A. (2010). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Shelley, L. (2014). *Dirty entanglements: Corruption, crime, and terrorism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stern, J., & Berger, J. M. (2017). *ISIS: The State of Terror*. HarperCollins.
- UNODC. (2018). *Afghanistan opium survey: Cultivation and production*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- Zenn, J. (2020). ISIS in Afghanistan and the evolving threat to Central Asia. *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 11(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1506>
- Zenn, J. (2019). Islamist Militancy in Central Asia: New Trends and Future Threats. *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 10(1), 1–19

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Otniel Hizkia Simbolon, email: otniel.44322044@mahasiswa.unikom.ac.id
Otniel Hizkia Simbolon is an International Relations student at Universitas Komputer Indonesia
Ariel Mochammad Septianto, email: ariel.44322054@mahasiswa.unikom.ac.id
Ariel Mochammad Septianto is an International Relations student at Universitas Komputer Indonesia
Egi Aryo Pamungkas, email: egi.44322067@mahasiswa.unikom.ac.id
Egi Aryo Pamungkas is an International Relations student at Universitas Komputer Indonesia
Fadlhan Firyal Ginanjar, email: fadlhan.44322071@mahasiswa.unikom.ac.id
Fadlhan Firyal Ginanjar is an International Relations student at Universitas Komputer Indonesia
Assoc.Prof. Dr. Dewi Triwahyuni, S.IP., M.Si email: dewi.triwahyuni@email.unikom.ac.id
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dewi Triwahyuni, S.IP., M.Si head of Department of International Relations at the Indonesian

Computer University since 2018. Started her career as a lecturer since 2005. She obtained his Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees in the same field of International Relations. As a professional lecturer and has a Certified International Qualitative Researcher (CIQaR), Dr. Dewi Triwahyuni actively conducts research and writes scientific papers with a focus on International Relations, U.S. Foreign Policy and Cybersecurity. Currently she is also active as a board member of the Indonesian International Relations Association (AIHI) and a reviewer at the Global Political Studies Journal (GPSJ) Indonesia Computer University, Intermestic Journal of Padjadjaran University, and Journal of International Relations (JHI) Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta.

Sylvia Octa Putri, email: sylvia.octa.putri@email.unikom.ac.id

Sylvia Octa Putri, S.IP.,M.I.Pol, Lecturer and Researcher at the Department of International Relations, Universitas Komputer Indonesia's (UNIKOM). Holds master's degree in international relations from Universitas Padjadjaran (UNPAD) and bachelor from Universitas Komputer Indonesia. Currently serving in two roles that demonstrate a commitment to academic, as the Editor-in-Chief of Global Political Studies Journal (GPSJ) and as the Coordinator of Quality Assurance for the Department of International Relations. Research expertise is centered on contemporary global political economy, with a publication record in international journals and conference proceedings on topics including economic diplomacy, digital economy, paradiplomacy, and East Asia Studies.