

## **The impact of the Syrian crisis on the growth of political Islam in Central Asia**

**Document Type:** Research Article

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Received: 2020/05/22

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Accepted: 2020/08/16

### **Abstract**

Syria's political and security developments and the growth of Salafist and Takfiri groups and its political, economic, and cultural dimensions have disturbed all the Middle East equations. In this regard, the role of radical Islamist groups, including ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, in the civil war in Syria and Iraq, along with changing the political and security equations of the Middle East, has also brought serious threats to international security. Given that the Central Asian region has been in the spotlight for a long time due to its geostrategic, geopolitical and geo-economic importance and in a sense, considered the heartland of the world; with facing many challenges such as ethnic and political crises, energy, drug trafficking, and terrorism, this is no exception. The Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIL led to a possible extension of the wave of Islamic extremism to the Central Asian region; To the extent that, many citizens and youths of the republics of this region have entered the stage of communication and cooperation with ISIL and the Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq. In this way, the present study seeks to explain the future of political Islam in Central Asia in light of Syrian political and security developments. Given the presence and command of some of the Central Asian Islamist groups in the Syrian civil war, the spread of the threat of terrorism in the Central Asian region, Understanding of these groups, their recruiting factors to ISIL, and recognizing the future scenarios of political Islam in Central Asia confirms the need for this research.

### **Keywords**

Political Islam, Central Asia, Futures Studies, the Syrian crisis, ISIL.

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## **Introduction**

In the analysis of Islamic movements in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, attention to the degree of competition and their range of influence, they have a special place. In the late 1980s, the majority of ethnicities and religions living in Central Asia, because of the policies that the Soviet Union had adopted, were somehow suppressed and consequently, the followers of the Islamic religion were in such a situation. This was a legacy of seventy years of communist rule that in the post-Soviet years, overshadowed many of the developments in the region. Nevertheless, at all levels, there were many potentialities and motivations for the role of Islam in society. In other words, groups, and movements with the motives for maintaining Islamic Identity, at the same time the Soviet Union had half-hidden activities. Thus, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, These pressures and religious repressions disappeared and the revival of Islamic identity in newly independent states intensified influenced by the internal and external developments in the Central Asian region. In fact, with the accession of Central Asian countries to the international community, their reaction to Islam came close to what else in the world, especially the Middle East, was religiously similar to the five countries of the region. Their common feature includes religious control policies, especially Islam, by the ruling elite and opposition to secular governments by radical Islamic movements. The Syrian civil war and the important role of the Islamists in the rise of the resulting developments in the entire Middle East, on the issues and problems of Central Asian countries, has a significant impact on its remarkable Muslim population, and its inefficient political systems. So, the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIL led to the extension of Islamic extremism to the Central Asian region; to the extent that, many citizens and youths of the republics of this region have entered the stage of communication and cooperation with ISIL and the Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and Iraq. In this way, the present study seeks to explain the future of political Islam in Central Asia in light of Syrian political and security developments. Given the presence and command of some of the Central Asian Islamist groups in the Syrian civil war, the spread of the threat of terrorism in the Central Asian region, Understanding of these groups, their recruiting factors to ISIL, and recognizing the future scenarios of political Islam in Central Asia confirms the need for this research. In this way, the present study seeks to explain the future of political Islam in Central Asia in the light of Syrian political and security developments that are examined in the following.

### **1. Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Political Islam**

Political Islam is a name that has been used among various names and titles for the currents of Islamic political thought. Words such as Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic awakening, Islamic radicalism and Islamism, and such titles, are words that have a lot of use. Researchers from Islamic movements have used various interpretations to explain this phenomenon. Concepts such as fundamentalism and radicalism cannot reflect the general nature of contemporary Islamic movements. Religious fundamentalism has a Western-Christian origin that is rooted in the Protestant Christian protest movement in the early 20th century in the United States and this respect, it differs from contemporary Islamic tendencies. Islamic radicalism is still in the Western mindset while still looking at the involvement of religious values in the political arena, in terms of ambiguity in the use of the word, it is also inappropriate in advising political thought or practice. Radicalism is an adjective used to describe political action and in some cases, it is also used as an adjective for thought. From this perspective, every thought can be posed in practice, moderate and radical tendencies are based on how the political action of the supporters of that thought. Therefore, words such as Islamism and political Islam prefer fundamentalism and radicalism (Lak, 2005: 148).

In other words, the location of political Islam and its related concepts namely Islamic tradition, Islamic resurgence, Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamic radicals at the heart of the attention of Western critics in recent decades, has led to extensive literature on the understanding of the identity of political Islam. Political Islam can serve as a tool for Islamists and also fundamentalists regardless of the differences between Islamologists regarding the application of concepts, be used to identify Islamic currents (Mostaghimi, Abraham, 1388: 339). In this regard, must be said that there is a great difference between Islamic politics and fundamentalism, and Islamic radicalism. Political Islam is a term that has been created against traditional Islam and belongs to the modern world. "Bobby Said" believes that the concept of political Islam is used more to describe those Islamic political currents that demand a government based on Islamic principles (Zolfaghari, 2011: 19). On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalism is a movement that believes in fundamental Islamic values and knows adherence and prosperity of the Islamic countries in returning to the values (Motalebi, Arayesh and Rahimi Emad, 2016: 126). Accordingly, the foundations of political Islam can be summarized as follows:

- 1.The comprehensiveness of Islam: Islam embraces all aspects of human life, and does not only include worship and the afterlife issues.
- 2.Relations between Religion and Politics: Based on the comprehensiveness of Islam, Islam includes political issues, and planning policy cannot exist outside of Islam.
- 3.Uprising to establish an Islamic government
- 4.Fight: The struggle and conflict can be used to establish an Islamic state (no ISIL).
- 5.Return to the Principles of Islam: To solve the problems and issues of the Islamic world, we must return to the basic principles of Islam (Massoudnia, Saldorgar, 2011: 184).
- 6.Western colonization as a factor for Muslim backwardness: The Islamists saw the backwardness of Muslims as the new content of the West and In this way, By touching on the sensitivities of the Ummah of Islam, they want to answer the Muslim backwardness (Hosseini Zadeh, 2007: 17).

In this context, to better explain the issues, should refer briefly to the typology of political Islam:

**Table (1): The typology of political Islam (at a macro level)**

<b>Political Islam</b>	<b>Features and Basics</b>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Political Islam Jurisprudential-Iranian</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Islam is a collection of indisputable religious teachings that are inviolable from the essence of Islam. Teachings such as justice, oppression, peace, jihad with invaders in the privacy of Muslims, anti-poverty</li> <li>2. Islam has directly emphasized the establishment of government and therefore, regardless of the concepts that have a social and political burden, Islam is a religious religion. The Prophet (s) of this religion, at the same time, has been the leader and the political ruler of his community.</li> <li>3. The establishment of an Islamic government is not unique to the Prophet (PBUH), and Islamic society is obliged to establish Islamic policy by relying on divine laws. Based on this attitude, Islamic politics does not materialize with</li> </ol>

	<p>lectures, preaching, and excitement. Islamic policy seeks to achieve the stated ideals in the discourse political of Islam, Systematization, strategy, law, and strategy imposed and In this matter, it is based on reason (Ansari, 2006: 27).</p>
<p><b>Salafi-Takfiri political Islam (Saudi Arabia)</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Following the appearance of the Quranic texts and the tradition and the opposition to tailor and interpretation: they use the Quranic texts in their method of expression and sought to draw the image of Islam based on their beliefs. So it can be said that the Salafis act is based on the appearances approach.</li> <li>2. They emphasize inviting and propagandizing and they are obligated to obey the ruling system as “Ole El-Amr” and any departure from it is considered against Sharia. They emphasized “Doing good and forbidding evil” and all political issues are evaluated based on halal and haram rules and not based on expediency and corruption. They are generally dogmatic and oppose any kind of modernization.</li> <li>3. Any injustice, debauchery, and guilty ruler to be out of Islam and society at that Sharia is not implemented, considered Dar al-Kufr and immigration regard it as a legal obligation. They believe in an armed jihad against the ruling systems and colonial countries and countering the global dominance system is at the top of the agenda.</li> </ol>

Source: Author

In recent years, and especially after the start of the Syrian crisis (2011), we saw the growth of extremist groups. Despite this, has taken place out of the conventional logic of the international system based on the balance of power; but they have recently become effective nongovernmental actors in the international environment; So that today groups and Salafi groups, as one of the main actors in the strategic regions of the world, such as the Middle

East, Africa, and Central Asia and the Caucasus and were introduced elements influencing the regional policies of regional and sub-regional powers. Indeed, the attitude of these groups to the international system, the ruling governments, and nations has led to the emergence of radical behaviors among them; all of them are based on Salafi's intellectual and ideological foundations. In other words, political Islam in Central Asia is often a function of the intellectual foundations of Salafi-Takfiri political Islam. Therefore, to clarify the matter further will be discussed the history of political Islam in Central Asia.

## **2. The history of political Islam in Central Asia**

Central Asia includes a region of Asia that in the contemporary era covers the political territory of the Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. This geographical range is limited to the north from Russia, from the east to China, from the south to Afghanistan and Iran, and from the west to the Caspian Sea. Central Asia is an important part of the Islamic world, separated by the Islamic world because of more than seventy years of communism. Central Asia was first captured by Muslims in Mu'awiya's caliphate. Sufism, after the capture of Baghdad by the Mongols (1258), became the main duct for the spread of Islam in Central Asia (Fawzi, 2012: 34).

After the arrival of Islam into this region, the flowering period of civilization began in Mesopotamia. After the arrival of Islam, Muslim religious missionaries have begun to establish schools and academic circles and quickly developed. But the arrival of the Russians in the nineteenth century caused conflicts among the people of the region due to the complexity of the national-Islamic identity (Aghaie and Damiri, 12013: 12). Thus, In the Soviet Union era, during the rule of the Bolsheviks, Islamic culture was severely suppressed. In principle, Marxism, which was the initial basis of the rule of the Bolsheviks, was incompatible with any religion but further orientations showed that most of the principles of Islamic culture, especially in the Muslim regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus, have been invaded. This de-Islamization was resettled through official anti-religious policies, Education reform, Denial of traditional and religious previous structures, a Russian-language program through language change, and the Russian population in these areas. The Soviet government tried to ensure the control of the affairs of Islam and Muslims through the creation of official institutions, at least formally maintaining Islamic leadership and in principle, within the same framework as the Bolsheviks, allowed to operate limitedly (Sanaei, 2006: 59).

But according to studies on the Muslim situation in Central Asia show that the Bolsheviks did not succeed in eliminating and breakdown down the "Unity of Islam". In this regard, should refer to the "Basmatian" uprising. The Basmatian leader was supported by nationalists of "Khoghand" and Muslims in this region and the link was created between them. In February 1918, this movement was developed and its centrality was in Fergana, which continued from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. In fact, it was a real point of conflict among Muslims and communists. The leaders of Basmati did not seek to create an Islamic state but they also used Islamic slogans to fulfill their goals. The main purpose of this uprising was to prevent Russian domination in parts of Central Asia that before the October Revolution of 1917, were under the control of the tsarist system (Koolaei, 2005: 168-175). Despite the suppression of the uprising in the late 1920s, this region (Ferghana) had a significant role in the years of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islamist and often fundamentalist currents. The history of Muslim groups and movements in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union comes back to the Basmati and uprising.

Anyway, in the face of the pressures and official Islam that supported the Soviet communist government, many Muslims, including Sufism, tried to revive Islam. This type of Islam, known as "unofficial or parallel Islam" includes actions and movements of Muslims, especially Sufism, were included: creating spontaneous religious beliefs among people, doing activities by clerics who were not recognized by the religious centers, maintaining communication with the sanctity of Islam and preserving Islam within the framework of traditions and ethnic customs (Sanaei, 1376: 81-82). This process continued until the end of the Soviet era. But with the start of Gorbachev's presidency, a new chapter was created in the revival of Muslim identity. Indeed, the implementation of economic reform programs (Perestroika) and political development (Glasnost), provided the background for the emergence and activity of Islamic movements, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Thus, with the formation of five independent republics in Central Asia and the revival of Islamic tendencies, this region witnessed fundamental changes that were unprecedented before that time. The Muslim peoples of the Central Asian region, which during the reign of communism, there were always conditions of oppression and repression, after independence, raised Islam as their new identity. In this way, Islam played a significant role in public life, and in late 1989, in the three Republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, the law was officially approved about religion that respected religious freedom and the legal rights of believers in it and declared readiness to cooperate with religious

organizations ...; also officially approved in 1989 that clerics in the region have a social and political role (Abolhassan Shirazi and Majidi, 1382: 90-92). In general, the revival of Muslim religious identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union arose through the revision and redefinition of national traditions during the process of political and cultural reconstruction of the country. In this way, Islamic values repressed during the Soviet era, became a cultural heritage approved by the governments of this region. On the other hand, due to this cultural heritage, increased demand for religious teachings and the construction of mosques and seminaries, and this, in turn, has become more complicated the organization of relations between the governments of Central Asia and the numerous ethnic groups in the region. Therefore, the Islamic revival shows challenges in the political systems of the region: First, the emergence of new Islamic movements that showed religious diversity in the region. The second refers to Wahhabism and Salafism that emerging states in the region have expressed concern over its escalation. It was a reaction to the threat of fundamentalist groups' activities. Because, on the one hand, they exploited the political open space of the post-Soviet period and independence, seeking to revive Islam and their gathering center was Fergana Valley. On the other hand, the political elite of the region began by limiting Islamic activities under the pretext of confronting fundamentalism and Salafism that had spread due to interaction with the countries of the Muslim world, especially Saudi Arabia. Thus, three expositions of Islamic trends in the Central Asian region emerged during the post-Soviet period:

1. **Traditional Islam:** The term traditional Islam here is used to describe a conservative and relatively actionable attitude towards religion, which defines the views of a large majority of Muslims in Central Asia. Therefore, the opinion of most observers, including Muslims abroad, is that Islam in the Central Asian region is still more of a kind of ethnic definition than a religious commitment, there is a strong sense of commitment to preserving the traditions of ancestors that can be described in various ways and includes different degrees of religious rituals. For some, this requires strict observance of certain rituals; but most people tend to show symbolically their Islamic identity (Fawzi and Payab, 2012: 39).
2. **Government Islam:** State Islam or Islam-backed government, the official Islamic state that has been in the Soviet Union since the 1940s, its institutions have been created limitedly. This type of Islam was completely controlled and allowed to legitimize and fill the ideological vacuum (unreliability of communism) and its activities (Koolaei, 2005: 196). This situation is about Islam in Central Asia, After the Soviet era, a continuation



of an attempt to exploit religion to meet the needs of the state and this reflects official policies toward Islam in the late 1980s. Today, the constitutions of all Central Asian countries respect the principle of separation of religion from politics; However, Islam throughout Central Asia has climbed to a degree as a state ideology.

3. **Radical Islam (Salafi):** Including active groups is trying to eradicate distortions in Islam and somehow go back to their true salaf. Islamic movements in Uzbekistan there are in this category, In Tajikistan, this trend of radical Islam (Salafi) was one of the causes of the civil war. The center of this type of Islam from the distant past (Basmati and uprising) has been formed in the Fergana Valley, and the most embraced figure of Salafi Islam can be seen in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Since the 1990s, this trend has come to be an extreme process and continues to operate. This current, calling for the overthrow of the Central Asian regimes and the establishment of the Islamic government in the manner of the Rashidin caliphs and the implementation of the Shari'a Meanwhile, the leaders of Central Asia, in particular the Uzbek government, have found fundamentalism as their main competitor (vessel Mozaian, 2006: 55-56).

In this regard, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of communist modernization programs provide a good foundation for the activities of Islamic fundamentalist groups. The remaining Communist leaders who, in the new circumstances, try to preserve their authority in the name of the leaders of national governments, found political Islam as their most competing rival (Koolaei and Khansari, 2015: 250). For this purpose, at the end of this section, to better understand the above issues, the following table shows the most important Islamic extremist groups in Central Asia.

**Table (2): The most important Islamic extremist groups in the Central Asian region**

<b>Movement or party</b>	<b>Features and Performance</b>
<b>Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goals: The overthrow of the secular state of Uzbekistan and the creation of an Islamic state</li> <li>• The ideology of Salafi Islam</li> <li>• Proceedings: Accused of the 1997 bombing in Tashkent, Accused of bombing and several kidnappings in 1999, 2014 attack on tomorrow in Karachi and other countries in the region</li> </ul>
<b>The Islamic Jihad Union</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goals: The overthrow of the Uzbek government, Fighting secular and non-Islamic manifestations in society</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ideology of Salafi Islam</li> <li>• Proceedings: The bombing of Tashkent's public facility and several other cities in 2004, Accused of having operational bases outside of Uzbekistan</li> </ul>
<b>Hizb ut-Tahrir</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goals: The return of Islamic life to the Islamic lands through the re-establishment of the "caliphate"</li> <li>• The ideology of Salafi Islam</li> <li>• Hizb ut-Tahrir believes that this caliphate should first be created in the Middle East due to its Islamic origins and then extended to other Islamic countries, including Central Asia</li> <li>• Proceedings: Recruiting for ISIL</li> </ul>
<b>Jumaat al-Tawhid and al-Jihad</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ideology of Salafi Islam</li> <li>• Proceedings: Committing terrorist crimes in Jalalabad and Osh in 2015, Accused of attacking the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan</li> </ul>
<b>Mujahideen of Central Asia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ideology of Salafi Islam</li> <li>• Proceedings: Participated in the military operations of the Caucasus Emirate (Northern Caucasus), which became one of the major militant units of the Islamic Jihad in North Waziristan in 2010.</li> </ul>

Source: Author

It is worth noting that in this study, given the highlight of Salafi Islam in Central Asia, Especially after the Syrian crisis, as well as the semantic relationship between political Islam and radical Islam (Islamic fundamentalism), In explaining the examples of political Islam in Central Asia, has been used its common form in international relations, namely Radical Islam. In other words, in this research, political Islam is synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism and its implications.

### 3. Syria crisis and political Islam in Central Asia

At the end of 2010 (Arab Spring), Syria was like a gunpowder storehouse. A young population, Unemployed and dissatisfied and the political atmosphere of this country, the background of the uprising against the government of Bashar al-Assad provided to Influenced by the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, and Libya. By expanding the scope of the conflict, Fundamentalist groups also entered the country's political arena, and this

conflict spread beyond the borders of Syria. What is clear is that the conflict in Syria is not based solely on internal dissent, but also the presence of radical forces in Syria reflects the widespread crisis in this country. The simultaneous presence of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other groups in other geographic areas, including Central Asia, shows that the extent of the Syrian crisis is far broader than its geopolitical space. Accordingly, the beginning of the Syrian civil war and the presence of jihadist groups along with Syrian opposition since 2011, have raised concerns among countries in the region and even at the international level. These concerns in Central Asia have risen sharply as one of the most important and vulnerable areas facing this crisis, after the Middle East region and in 2015, these threats culminated.

In other words, the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia, and dominoes form Including Egypt, Libya, Syria (of a different nature), Bahrain, Yemen, and other Middle Eastern and North African countries; has increased the possibility of extending these protests to Central Asia. Accordingly, given the Muslim status of all five Central Asian countries, types of ruling political systems [often authoritarian] and most importantly, the globalization of Islamic awakening; provide backgrounds of spread the Middle East and North Africa crisis to Central Asia. In other words, the possibility of long-term unrest in Eurasia in general and in Central Asia and the Caucasus in particular, Serious concerns have arisen about the possible formation of extremist Islam in the region and the occurrence of similar uprisings against these regimes (Abolhassan Shirazi, 2012: 11). Because, the five republics of Central Asian countries, are faced with problems like poor governance, corruption, young people, unemployment and employment and public discontent. Hence, the countries of Central Asia, due to similar cultural, social, political, and economic backgrounds, are under serious threat. Therefore, these similar features and the possibility to extend from the Middle East to Central Asia, Due to the proximity of the geography and adjacent to Islamic fundamentalist centers (Afghanistan), have caused concern to Central Asian political elites.

The spread of government corruption, poor governments, and political and economic instability are the factors and areas that have led to the spread of fundamentalism and the influence of terrorist groups, especially ISIL, in this region. So that many extremists use these weak points easily the religious sentiments of people to recruit them for their groups (Islami, Ayaz, 2017: 233). Namely, these factors, in turn, religious organizations and extremist groups to carry out their political programs, including fighting secular governments in the region, take advantage of this

opportunity and attracted many people. The most important Islamic extremist groups include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir supported by bin Laden. All countries of the region regard the existence and activity of these groups as a threat to themselves and fight these groups (Islami, Ayaz, 2017: 235).

In addition, the most important platform for the spread of political Islam in Central Asia, Saudi Arabia's influence on Wahhabi is in the region. Since the idea of Wahhabism is one of the sources of ISIL's introduction and has many similarities, can be said that ISIS's adherence and acceptance by the Central Asian nations are more consistent (Islami, Ayaz, 2017: 235). In this way, political Islam in Central Asia is identified by the following features:

1. Sufism and opposition to Salafi and Wahhabi currents
2. Educated religious scholars from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan... and the influence of Wahhabism and Salafism
3. Wahhabism in conflict zones and war and Salafism in the areas of social instability, corruption, and tyranny of the secular state
4. 4. The role of ethnic culture in areas near or far from Salafist and Wahhabism (Hosseini, 2013).

Accordingly, political Islam was first introduced by movements such as the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan and by a set of groups in Uzbekistan that was influenced by the teachings of Wahhabism, The members of the Uzbek groups later formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was considered a Taliban allied. Violent terrorist acts of this group always have been a concern of Central Asian governments (Karami, Azizi, 2013: 142).

In this regard, the developments that led to the emergence of ISIL show that the Islamic State (ISIL) is spreading its thinking and seeking to identify its identity with the creation of instability in its target areas. As it began with Syria's unrest and then also spread to Iraq with political instability in this country and Libya, also penetrated with a similar process. In central Asian countries, and in particular the Fergana region (given the centrality of the activities of the terrorist groups in the region) there is a good potential for expanding ISIL thinking. This vastly populated area is the dispute between the three countries is Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan and prone to ethnic violence, territorial disputes, conflicts over water resources, and radicalism. This issue, especially after the Syrian crisis and the emergence of ISIL, and the presence of jihadi forces from Central Asian countries added to the severity of this concern, is the political elite of the region relative to the occurrence of similar events in the Syrian Civil War.

Based on the findings of the International Center for Studies of extremism, a total of 360 Turkmen citizens fighting on the ISIL front. Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry confirmed that more than 500 citizens of this country are fighting in Syria and Iraq. Kazakhstan's security and intelligence services also show that about 400 Kazakh citizens are in the armed conflicts in Iraq and Syria. There is no detailed information on the exact number of Tajik citizens who have joined ISIL. This is even more complicated due to the lack of ethnicity of these people with their true nationality. Uzbek Muslim Council believes that about 200 Uzbek citizens are armed for ISIL. The number of these Uzbek fighters can be considered as 1500 citizens; because the core of many different groups, such as the Jamaat of Imam Bukhari, Tawhid, Jihad, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, is composed of Uzbek ethnic. Other Uzbek groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have expressed their loyalty to ISIL. Only 200 of the forces of this movement joined the Islamic groups of Afghanistan. Tajik President Emamali Rahman has announced that more than a thousand Tajik citizens have joined ISIL in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin has announced that about 5,000 to 7,000 Central Asian citizens have joined ISIL (Farhadi, 2017: 154-155).

However, there are disagreements over the number of Central Asian fighters involved in the Syrian conflict. For example, according to the “Soufan Group” report in the table below, by geographic regions of the world, the number of citizens who have been recruited by ISIL is estimated at 4,700 citizens. But officials from Central Asia and Russia believe that this figure is more than 4,700 citizens from this region. Because of the distribution of ethnic and religious populations in Central Asia, The exact assessment of these statistics is challenged. According to the “Soufan Group”, jihadist forces from Russia and Central Asia are ranked third after the Middle Eastern and European citizens.

**Table (3): Number of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq based on geographic regions**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Total attracted by the end of 2015</b>
<b>The Middle East and North Africa</b>	+16200
<b>Eastern Europe</b>	5000
<b>Former Soviet republics (Central Asia and the Caucasus)</b>	4700

<b>Southeast Asia</b>	900
<b>Balkans</b>	+800
<b>North America / Australia</b>	+400

**Source:** The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: The Soufan Group, December 2015)

In addition, the activity of the Russian-language ISIL Channel, "The Euphrates Channel", recently launched (2015) to mobilize jihadi forces from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia; which in turn is a challenge to the future of political Islam in the region. Russian is the third most widely used language (after Arabic and English) in ISIL propaganda. ISIL also publishes audio, video, and written files in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Kazakh and Tajik languages. The recent military defeat [in the Middle East] has made ISIL change its recruitment strategies. ISIL is continually looking for new ways to attract new members from among Central Asian citizens and is trying to influence the minds of Central Asian citizens by presenting a picture of social justice in their territories (Farhadi, 2017: 155). For this reason, from the perspective of Russian politicians, the growth of radical Islamism affected by the Syrian crisis is considered a serious challenge to political Islam in the Central Asian region. In fact, according to the idea of "Khorasan province", ISIL has paid special attention to this area in its macro map.

### **Conclusion**

Central Asia is susceptible to accepting, absorbing, and expanding Islamic extremist thoughts for several reasons. These countries have not completed their favorable development in many cultural, political, security, and economic factors and still facing serious challenges. On the other hand, the adjoining countries of Central Asia with Afghanistan have faced the penetration of extremist thoughts (Salafi and Takfiri) from the country with a serious threat. This issue intensified in particular, after the start of the crisis in Syria and the recruitment of Central Asian Jihadist forces by ISIL . Therefore, it is likely that in the future years, this region will become the "center of the global crisis." In general, it's not easy to figure out future scenarios in critical areas. In other words, the future cannot be predicted definitively. But about the issues of previous discussions and the history of Islamism in the Central Asian region, the scenarios for the future of political Islam in Central Asia can be outlined below:

- Development of Salafi, Takfiri, and Wahhabi ideas in the region, especially in the Fergana Valley, Also the activities of other extremist groups and extremist thoughts in this region.
- ISIL's misuse of the issue of succession of political elites in Central Asia for their benefit (ISIL) and dominate the Central Asian region and create the "province of Khorasan"
- Insecurity and instability in Central Asia and the weakening of regional governments (the creation of another Middle East or another Afghanistan)
- Civilian and sectarian war and tension between extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban and with ISIL
- Cooperation and convergence between the leaders of Central Asia and Russia and Iran and other regional and sub-regional powers (America and Europe) to fight terrorism, Especially after the start of the Syrian crisis and the successful performance of Iran and Russia
- The defeat of ISIL in Central Asia and its displacement to other areas (East Asia, Southeast Asia, etc.)

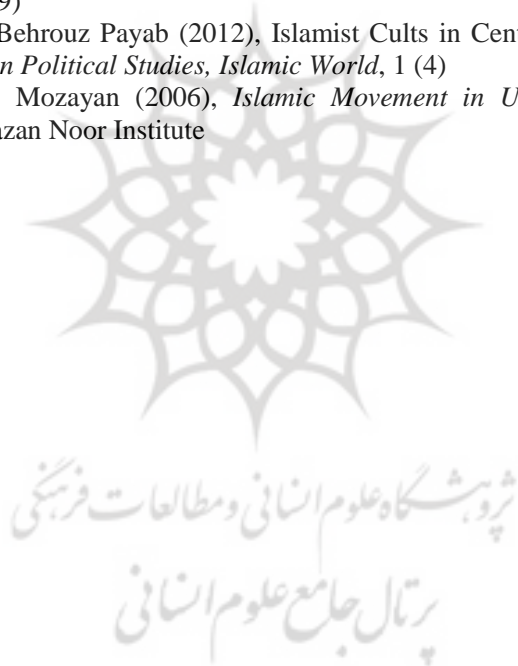
Finally, it must be admitted that the scope of the crisis in Syria and Iraq, has expanded to North African countries including Libya, Bombings in European countries, Attention to the Balkans, penetration, and recruitment in Pakistan and more seriously in Afghanistan [and recently (2017) explosions in the United States] and Central Asia. The region because of the existence of Political and economic instability, The inefficiency of governments, poverty, unemployment, the weakness of religious thought, and superficial perceptions of Islam have provided grounds for the presence and influence of ISIL (Islami and Ayaz, 2017: 244). Therefore, the most likely scenario facing the Central Asian region is the development of Salafi, Takfiri, and Wahhabi ideas in the region, dominating the Central Asian region and creating the "province of Khorasan", the creation of another Middle East or another Afghanistan, civilian war and conflict between extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban with another and with ISIL and cooperation between the leaders of Central Asia, Russia, Iran and other regional and sub-regional powers (America and Europe) and the defeat of ISIL in Central Asia and its displacement to other areas (East Asia, Southeast Asia, Balkan,...).

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