



Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Turkmenistan

Noah Tucker and Rano Turaeva

Key findings

International estimates produced by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) list the overall number of participants from Turkmenistan in all factions of the Syrian conflict at up to 360. Little or no concrete information is available about how many Turkmenistani serve in the ranks of ISIS, and these numbers have been questioned by many observers and the Turkmen government, which frequently denies the participation of any of its citizens in the Syrian conflict. The few instances in which press sources cite Turkmenistani participation in Syria and claim recruiting takes place inside Turkmenistan are almost universally Russian and affiliated with the state media. Unlike their compatriots from other Central Asian states, militants from Turkmenistan do not appear to be self-organized around ethnic or linguistic lines. No messages have been observed that target the population of Turkmenistan, one of the world's most isolated and consolidated authoritarian regimes.

Russian media and identified or likely state-funded information operations, however, have consistently advanced a narrative that active recruiting operations are taking place inside Turkmenistan – part of what is claimed to be an “unchecked Salafist religious revival” inside the country – and at times these sources have claimed that Turkmenistani comprised the largest proportion of Central Asian militants fighting in

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Iraq and Syria. As in neighboring states in the region, Russian language media and related information operations frequently make claims that cannot be corroborated by other sources and that emphasize an imminent threat presented by ISIS that can only be preempted by Russian protection, often perpetuating the narrative that ISIS is a puppet controlled by the United States.

Unlike all other states in the region – most of which, as discussed in previous reports, have largely attempted to balance Russian exaggeration of the ISIS threat to the region with the leverage against potential domestic opposition justified by those “imminent threat” narratives – the government of Turkmenistan and its state-supported media have flatly denied that ISIS could appeal to its citizens and protested against Russian reports to the contrary.

The Russian and Turkmen counter-messaging campaigns that present contradictory information about Turkmenistani citizens fighting in ISIS illustrate a stark case in which sophisticated state-funded or state-backed messaging operations can dominate discussion of a topic and significantly color, if not control, public perceptions online. These messaging efforts show the way states in the 21st century – even those as isolated as Turkmenistan – have come to see the Internet and social media as a tool for achieving their own goals, rather than a threat to those goals that earlier scholarship had hoped social media would evolve to become.

Overview: Turkmen in the Syrian Conflict

International estimates produced by ICSR list the overall number of participants from Turkmenistan in all factions of the Syrian conflict [at up to 360](#). Little or no concrete information is available about exactly how many Turkmenistani serve in the ranks of ISIS, and these numbers have been questioned by many observers and the Turkmen government, which frequently denies the participation of any of its citizens in the Syrian conflict. The few instances in which press sources cite Turkmenistani participation in Syria and claim recruiting takes place inside Turkmenistan are almost universally Russian and affiliated with the state media.

Unlike their compatriots from other Central Asian states, militants from Turkmenistan do not appear to be self-organized around ethnic or linguistic lines as sub-brigades within larger militant organizations and have no publicly recognized independent militant Islamist formation like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the al-Buxoriy Brigade or the ethnic Kazakh brigade in ISIS. No messages have been observed that target the population of Turkmenistan, one of the world’s most isolated and consolidated authoritarian regimes. The government of Turkmenistan led by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov pursues a policy of absolute neutrality, which precludes it from participating in anti-terrorist coalitions, cooperating with military operations in Afghanistan or regional security organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The government acknowledges the threat of militant incursion especially on its southern border with Afghanistan, but in contrast to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, it downplays and mostly ignores discussion of any potential territorial incursion from ISIS, preferring to promote an image of stability and security in a state so thoroughly consolidated that [all newspapers](#) are owned by the presidential administration or token pro-presidential unions and parties.

In spite of these estimates in the low hundreds put forward by ICSR and several Russian self-styled [think tanks](#), only a single individual, Ruashan Gazzakov (or Kazakov), has been identified as a citizen of Turkmenistan allegedly detained in Syria in 2013. A sudden flood [of Russian print and TV coverage](#) linked to a [video of unknown origin](#) that purports to be footage of Syrian security services interrogating several militants detained near the Turkish border. Versions of the video available on

YouTube and subsequent media accounts claim Gazzakov was recruited in Ashgabat by a “Salafi imam” and traveled to Turkey to meet a facilitator network that eventually led him to Aleppo. Under the notorious Chechen commander Umar Shishani – still serving as a leader in Jaysh Muhajareen wal Ansar (JMWA) before joining ISIS later in 2013 – Gazzakov allegedly became the leader of group that trained and equipped suicide bombers and included, according to Russian press claims, some 35 other Turkmenistani who were never identified.

It is important to stress that it remains unclear whether international organizations tallying Turkmen participation in the Syrian conflict are correctly differentiating between ethnic Turkmen natives in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey – Turkmen inside Syria have organized militant groups that participate as part of the anti-Assad coalition, for example – and militants or their families who have emigrated from Turkmenistan. Evidence observed from jihadist media by the Digital Islam project over the past two years would not support claims for an estimate larger than perhaps a few dozen Turkmenistani militants. No Turkmen language messaging targeting the public in Turkmenistan has been observed.



A typical illustration from Russian [media coverage](#) of ISIS and Turkmenistan that shows a menacing terrorist looming over the region from just outside the country.

interrogation” first appeared, and then again in the spring of 2015 when think tanks, analysts, local security services and Russian media began claiming that an ISIS invasion force had gathered on the Afghan-Turkmen border and was preparing to use Turkmenistan as a “corridor” for an imminent invasion of Central Asia that never materialized. As in neighboring states in the region, Russian media and related information operations frequently make claims that cannot be corroborated by other sources and that emphasize an imminent threat presented by ISIS that can only be preempted by Russian protection and that perpetuate the narrative that ISIS is a puppet controlled by the United States.

At the beginning of the first wave, the Gazzakov interrogation appeared in 2013 with a flurry of Russian “expert opinion” that frequently cited unnamed or “insider” sources and made claims that could not be verified with any other evidence. The video itself, reporting on which aired on several Russian state television networks, was sometimes attributed to the obscure Abkhazian Network News Agency (ANNA), a suspected Russian state information operation that frequently promotes

Russian Media and Information Operations Stress “Active Threat” Inside Turkmenistan and on its Borders

Russian media and identified or suspected [state-funded information operations](#) have consistently advanced the narrative that active recruiting operations are taking place inside Turkmenistan – as part of what is claimed to be an unchecked Salafist religious mobilization inside the country, at times claiming that Turkmenistani comprised the largest proportion of Central Asian militants fighting in Iraq and Syria.

Russian focus on the threat of Syrian terrorists or ISIS militants to the territory of Turkmenistan has come in two waves: First in 2013 when the video of the “Gazzakov

[pro-Syrian government perspectives](#) used as evidence to support pro-Assad arguments in social media groups or on forums that focused on discussion of the Syrian war like Adamalla.com.

“Expert analysis” from Russian sources – including identified information operations targeting Central Asia like StanRadar – shared on social media in response to the Gazzakov interrogation made a [somewhat unique claim](#) (in contrast to statements that usually support other authoritarian states in the region) that Turkmenistani authoritarianism was causing the country’s opposition to “radicalize.”

Coverage painted Gazzakov as a “canary in the coal mine” that warned of a sharp increase in “Salafism” in and around Ashgabat, with well-known commentator [Arkadiy Dubnov suggesting that, according to unnamed sources](#), several suburbs of the Turkmen capital were now “run” by Salafi vigilante groups who enforced Islamic dress codes. Dubnov’s sources alleged these groups bullied local residents into “chopping down their satellite dishes” and that even an informal group of officers inside the Turkmen Ministry of Internal Affairs had become Islamized and were protecting the “Salafis,” using their law enforcement positions to push society into conformity with Sharia law. Russian media sources similarly speculated that “radicalization” of Turkmen society could be driven by a variety of foreign actors even in hyper-isolationist Turkmenistan: Dubnov cites Persian Gulf “shaykhs who receive personal permission from the president” to hunt endangered species, others claim [the Turkish Sufi-inspired Gulen movement](#) may be secretly recruiting for jihadism, or that Qatar may be using “US control” over ISIS to “destabilize the situation” in Turkmenistan in order [to win a favorable pipeline contract](#).



A [typical meme](#) from the Facebook group “SMERSH” (named for the KGB’s counter-espionage bureau) that spins elaborate conspiracy theories to claim the United States “uses” terrorist groups like ISIS against even [isolated Turkmenistan](#). Interestingly, in this and other contexts these theories rarely offer an explanation for what the United States or other Western countries has to gain by “destabilizing the situation” in Central Asia – commenters in these groups take it for granted that the United States in particular has purely destructive motives and that this destruction [will somehow result in financial benefits](#) for the West.

When no evidence for claims of foreboding Islamization could be produced, Russian media abandoned discussion of Turkmenistan in relation to Syria until the spring of 2015, when a similar flood began of articles and “expert opinions” in Russia and across the region (except, significantly, in Turkmenistan) [claimed that ISIS](#) militants had identified [Turkmenistan as a “corridor”](#) for an [invasion of Central Asia](#) and were massing on the Afghan-Turkmen border. These claims were frequently shared on social media by [groups and actors who also promoted fiercely anti-American messaging](#) and promoted pro-Russia militant separatist groups in Ukraine, frequently tying the alleged [ISIS mobilization against Central Asia to the United States](#).

Turkmenistani State and Official Media Responses

Unlike all other states in the region – most of which, as discussed in previous reports, have largely attempted to balance Russian exaggeration of the ISIS threat to the region with the leverage against potential domestic opposition justified by those “imminent threat” narratives – the government of

Turkmenistan and its state-supported media have flatly denied that ISIS could appeal to the subjects of the *Arkadag* ('protector') or threaten the territorial security of the state. Although Ashgabat acknowledges a potential threat from non-state militant groups across the border in Afghanistan and has – according to independent social media reports – [increased military defense measures on the border in the past year](#), Turkmenistan's status as a neutral state limits at least the public options for cross-border military cooperation.



Typical images from popular groups like VK's "[Youth of Turkmenistan](#)" feature young women posing in front of national monuments rather than discussion of social or political problems.

Official and non-official outlets, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the state-supported news site Gundogar, [loudly protested](#) Russian allegations that Turkmen citizens were participating in the Syrian conflict at all, citing the lack of any specific evidence. The [Foreign Ministry issued an official statement](#) in 2013 denouncing Russian media outlets, including Rossiya-24 and Channel One, for running the Gazzakov story "without any proof" that he was a Turkmenistani citizen or providing specific information about his alleged former residence in the country.

In another [article](#) shared [widely](#) in [Turkmenistani groups](#) on [multiple social media platforms](#), an author at Gundogar who called himself a "lonely Salafi" satirized Dubnov's claims that Salafist groups enjoy free reign in Turkmenistan, claiming to have visited each of the neighborhoods that Dubnov named and lamenting that he not only failed to find any "fellow-travelers" but was repeatedly referred to mental health facilities when he asked local residents where he could find people or areas that matched Dubnov's descriptions.

Public responses on social media

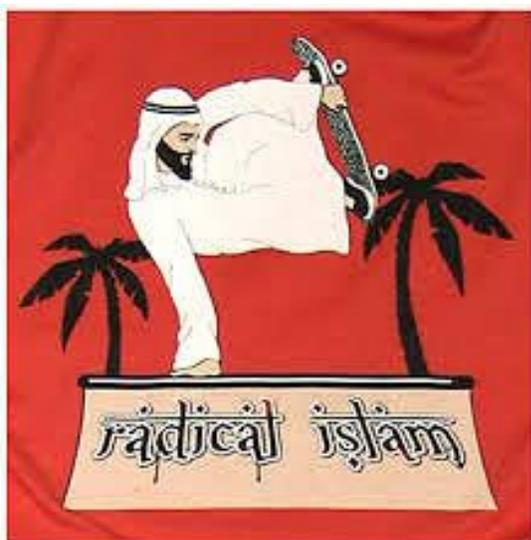
Public responses via social media in Turkmenistan and among Turkmenistani living in diaspora differ in some significant ways from responses in neighboring countries. The social media environment is considerably smaller and more cloistered, and in most cases social media users in Turkmenistani online networks are reacting to specifically Russian claims about the threat of ISIS that their own government flatly denies (and which do not appear to be strongly supported by other available evidence) rather than reacting to messaging from their compatriots or their actions in Syria. The little social media discussion that has been observed appears to focus on claims that the estimates of Turkmen listed by various international organizations as participants in the Syrian conflict are likely co-ethnics indigenous to Syria or Iraq and misattributed to Turkmenistan (a claim that has the additional appearance of plausibility given the stark lack of Turkmenistani messaging that stands in contrast to every other Central Asian state and perceived international ignorance about Turkmen in



general). Other users concede that the large number of Turkmenistani living in Turkey as students or migrant workers might be vulnerable to recruitment there even if they reject the idea of Salafist or jihadist recruiting inside Turkmenistan as ridiculous.

As in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistani social media networks are primarily based in Russia or hosted by Russian servers, and Russian remains the primary language context referenced by even the few independent media sources that exist dedicated to covering Turkmenistan [such as ChronoTM](#). As in the rest of the region (and in all developing countries) but to an even greater degree, internet and social media use is largely limited to relatively well-off youth in urban areas and to students and labor migrants abroad. [Large Turkmen](#) groups [exist](#) particularly on the Russia-based social networking site VKontakte, but these focus primarily [on pop-culture](#) and [dating](#) – two of the top five social networking resources accessed from Turkmenistan according to commercial analysis for example are [dating networks](#). Discussion of issues like international terrorism or politics in general is markedly more limited than in the rest of the region, which likely indicates that those users able to access social media on a regular basis in Turkmenistan are elites who are relatively content with their lives, which makes social media a particularly limited representation of public opinion in one of the world’s most isolated societies. Additionally, many ordinary Turkmenistani use free direct mobile-to-mobile communication platforms like WhatsApp and [Line](#) (a mobile application that includes its own social networking function) to communicate with family and friends.

Independent social media and forum discussion of allegations that Turkmenistani participate in the Syrian conflict or the threat of ISIS appears to be [relatively rare](#) and [often dismissive](#). Comments on versions of the video purporting to show [the Gazzakov interrogation](#), for example, dismiss the idea that the people depicted are from Turkmenistan at all, content that they were “forced” to participate in the conflict because of their relative weakness as economic migrants in Turkey, or were simply “brainwashed.”



Mocking responses like this from [Odnoklassniki](#) to claims that Islamic extremism is a building threat inside Turkmenistan highlight both the ridiculousness that users attribute to the claims by Russian commentators and the elite cosmopolitan status of those users who mock the claims using foreign idioms and cultural references.

Reactions to Russian media claims that Turkmenistani make up a significant part of the Syrian conflict are frequently mocking in their level of dismissal – a stance that is not difficult to support given the weakness of some of the claims. Similar to other regional contexts like Kazakhstan however, users seem to frequently deny that internal problems inside Turkmenistan may provoke some citizens or émigrés to seek radical solutions to radical political or economic disenfranchisement, which likely reflects both self-censorship and cloistering of social media use among relatively well-off youth. In spite of public dismissal of Russian claims, [human rights advocates have noted](#) that repression of religious groups appears to have increased in response to claims of potential “Salafist” support from religious groups inside the country.

Policy takeaways: Can Social Media Democratize Authoritarian States?

The case of Turkmenistan illustrates how little connection there may be between discussions on social media – which in the Central Asian context often take place among migrants or emigres and predominately among young people – and everyday life for citizens inside the country. This case study also draws out, in starker contrast than neighboring states because of the state's extreme isolation and lower social media penetration, the extent to which a significant portion of the discussion of ISIS is informed by Russian-language media and constructed around opinions and “expert commentary” (often “experts” citing “experts”) and starkly divorced from fact-on-the-ground, both in the region and in Syria.

Social media has been often hailed as a disruptive technology that flattens the media environment and creates opportunities for direct reporting and citizen journalism, particularly in an environment of harsh censorship and state or elite monopolization of the media. This, in many ways, is what makes social media so attractive to extremist groups like ISIS, not only allowing them to bypass censorship or prosecution and advance messages that contradict the interests of states, but even challenge the validity of the Westphalian state model and every post-WWII international legal convention. The flattening or disruptive effect of social media is therefore not always positive, and does not happen automatically or equally in all social contexts. It can be negated or even reversed when powerful actors (often states, such as [Russia](#) and [Azerbaijan](#)) use control of their resources to dominate social and online media in the same way they dominate traditional media. The flattening or democratizing effect of social media can be effectively countered when a powerful actor uses the medium to flood the information environment with distorted or deliberately falsified information to advance its own political ends.

The Russian and Turkmen counter-messaging campaigns that present contradictory information about Turkmenistani citizens fighting in ISIS illustrate a stark case in which sophisticated state-funded or state-backed messaging operations can dominate discussion of a topic and significantly color, if not control, public perceptions online. Neither the counter-messaging between the two sides, nor the vast majority of public activity on Turkmen social media can tell us much of anything meaningful about Turkmenistani drawn into the Syria conflict (assuming that there are some in perhaps very small numbers), what their motivations might be, or how they were recruited. These messaging efforts do show us, however, how states in the 21st century – even those as isolated as Turkmenistan – have come to see the Internet and social media as a tool for achieving their own goals, rather than a threat to those goals that earlier scholarship had hoped social media would evolve to become.