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Table of Contents

Vol. 8 No. 3 Spring 2025

Essays

- 6 A Proposal for a Trans-Caspian Development Bank
Carlos Roa, Charles Yockey, Ibrahim Mammadov
- 30 Sharks in the Muddy Waters
Terrorism and Mounting Global Disorder
Jahangir E. Arasli
- 48 Uncharted Rebellion
The Shifting Frontiers of Left-Wing Extremism
José Pedro Zúquete
- 62 A Region without Statelessness?
How Central Asia Proved It Is Possible
Sergiu Gaina
- 78 Progress in Ending Statelessness in Europe
Sam Mosallai
- 90 Climate Change, Vulnerable Groups, and
Data-Driven Policymaking
Selahattin Selsah Pasali

Review Essay

- 106 Introducing Hafiz Pashayev's *An Ambassador's
Manifesto*
Damjan Krnjević Mišković

Building the Middle Corridor's Future

A Proposal for a Trans-Caspian Development Bank

Carlos Roa, Charles Yockey, Ibrahim Mammadov

Diplomacy is not alchemy. Just as lead cannot be magically turned into gold, grand visions require practical tools to become reality. The Middle Corridor—a trade and transport route stretching from Central Asia across the Caspian Sea to the South Caucasus and onward to Türkiye and the European continent—is one such vision. The corridor has captured the imagination of policymakers and strategists, who seek to reorient global trade flows, diversify energy

routes, and diminish dependencies on geopolitical chokepoints like the Suez Canal. Yet, for all its potential, the Middle Corridor still remains more of an ambition than a reality, constrained by insufficient infrastructure, fragmented political coordination, and—perhaps most importantly, a lack of cohesive financial strategy.

For the Middle Corridor to succeed as a vital artery of international commerce, it requires more than bilateral agreements

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and fragmented investments. The project requires a dedicated institution capable of bridging its diverse stakeholders, financing transformative projects, and aligning growth with the twenty-first century's imperatives like digital innovation and climate adaptation.

A Trans-Caspian Development Bank (TCDB) could provide precisely the kind of focused and flexible framework needed to turn the Middle Corridor into a thriving economic corridor. By pooling resources and expertise from member states, private investors, and international partners, the TCDB would fill the critical gap between lofty ambitions and actionable progress.

The rationale for such an institution lies not only in economics but also in geopolitics.

As major power competition intensifies, the Middle Corridor has emerged as a crucial neutral alternative to trade routes dominated by major powers. Its development would not only empower regional keystone states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, but

also provide Türkiye, the Western Balkans, and the European Union with a more secure and sustainable connection to the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond. Yet this opportunity will slip away unless the region can generate the momentum, capital, and coordination needed to make the Middle Corridor competitive with established corridors like the northern land route and its maritime alternative.

The proposed Trans-Caspian Development Bank thus represents a once-in-a-generation chance to transform the Middle Corridor from an aspirational patchwork into a cohesive and competitive economic artery. By establishing a mechanism to finance large-scale infrastructure projects, attract private investment, and foster cooperation

among its diverse stakeholders, TCDB would provide the practical foundation needed to make the Middle Corridor viable. Yet the need for such an institution cannot be fully understood without considering the region's geopolitical forces.

A Trans-Caspian Development Bank (TCDB) could provide precisely the kind of focused and flexible framework needed to turn the Middle Corridor into a thriving economic corridor.

Geopolitical Context

To understand the transformative potential of the Middle Corridor, it is crucial first to examine the broader geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of the Silk Road Region—a vast expanse stretching from the Black Sea littoral to the peaks of the Altai Mountains, and from the arid sands of the Taklamakan Desert to the Fertile Crescent and the Persian Gulf. This region sits at the intersection of historical trade routes, emerging multipolar competition, and dynamic regional transformations.

Three key dimensions define its geopolitical context: *one*, the shifting balance of power among great powers; *two*, the increasing agency of regional states; and *three*, the growing viability of the Middle Corridor itself as a critical trade artery. A brief examination of each is thus warranted.

The first dimension of the Silk Road region's geopolitical context is *shifting great power dynamics*. This part of the world is experiencing an intensification of competition among major external powers—the United States, China, and Russia—each seeking to exert influence over its economic and strategic pathways. Building on a

concept put forward in 2011 by Nouriel Roubini and Ian Bremmer in *Foreign Affairs*, the U.S. Naval War College's Nikolas Gvosdev identified this phenomenon as part of the “G-Zero paradigm” in an earlier edition of *Baku Dialogues*, wherein no single power possesses the dominance to dictate outcomes, leading instead to fragmented spheres of influence and transactional politics. This strategic shift is particularly evident in Russia's declining leverage and China's rising footprint through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

For decades, if not centuries, Russia has viewed the Silk Road Region as its strategic backyard, particularly Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The region's critical role as a buffer zone—and, more recently, a transit hub for energy pipelines—cements its place in Moscow's foreign policy calculus. However, as Gvosdev argued in these pages, Russia's capacity to dominate what it calls “Eurasia” is waning due to two key factors: the resource drain of the conflict over Ukraine and the economic impact of Western sanctions. Once the dominant actor, Russia now faces challenges in maintaining its prevailing influence as countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan double their efforts to counter Moscow's still significant influence.

Russia's weakening hand in the region is evident in the shrinking importance of the Northern Corridor, which passes through Russian territory. Before 2022, it was the preferred route for land trade between Europe and China, carrying over 85 percent of cargo. The war in Ukraine disrupted this status quo. Sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and fears of over-reliance on Russia have driven the EU, China, and Türkiye to diversify their transit routes. This erosion of the Northern Corridor's overwhelming transport route dominance has exposed the limits of Moscow's leverage, incentivizing regional states to recalibrate their foreign policies.

In contrast, China has emerged as a major player in the Silk Road Region, driven by its need to secure overland trade routes and ensure access to critical resources. Launched in 2013, BRI exemplifies Beijing's ambition to connect Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Türkiye, and the European continent through infrastructure investments and trade agreements. The initiative is not merely an economic project, but also a strategic effort to circumvent U.S. maritime dominance—and thus implicit leverage over seaborne trade—and reshape the geopolitical landscape of the Silk Road region and its neighborhoods.

Thus, China's many investments in railways, pipelines, and ports across the core Silk Road region reflect its desire to build resilient trade networks. However, Beijing's efforts face challenges, including concerns (usually expressed by outsiders) over debt dependency and a scattering of local resistance to Chinese influence. Despite this, the scale of China's involvement dwarfs other outside actors, solidifying its position as the leading infrastructure financier in the Silk Road Region.

Then there is the United States. Since the dissolution of the USSR, Washington has largely viewed the region through the lens of its counterterrorism and energy security strategies, meaning that its engagement has remained limited. In more recent years, Washington's focus has shifted toward managing competition with China and Russia on a global scale, often relegating the Silk Road Region to a secondary priority. However, initiatives like the C5+1 framework signal renewed interest in fostering regional cooperation, albeit without the scale of investment or strategic focus demonstrated by Beijing. Like most other important outside actors, the U.S. also has not yet taken any steps to institutionalize its engagement with the entire core of the Silk Road region—that

is to say, conceptually to bring together Central Asia and the South Caucasus, although a recent reorganization of the State Department's bureaucracy points to what would be a welcome shift. Azerbaijan, in particular, needs to be understood as “the cork in the bottle of Central Asia,” in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski.

The U.S. approach is constrained by geography and competing priorities. Unlike China and Russia, the United States lack direct access to the region, which limits its ability to exert influence. Nevertheless, programs like the Blue Dot Network and the EU's Global Gateway initiative (supported by the United States) highlight the West's attempts to counterbalance China's BRI by promoting transparent and sustainable infrastructure projects. These efforts remain nascent, but they indicate a recognition of the Silk Road Region's strategic importance in an evolving global order.

The second dimension of the Silk Road region's geopolitical context is the *rising agency of regional states*. The fragmentation of major power dominance has coincided with the increasing assertiveness of regional states, particularly those in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. As Damjan Krnjević Mišković has written in an

earlier edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the “strategic logic informing [...] admittedly embryonic plans now being laid [by some of the regional actors themselves] call to mind older arrangements in other geographies: ASEAN, the Nordic Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the original European Economic Community.” Krnjević concluded that the “Silk Road region stands a chance of no longer remaining merely an object of major power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others; it is, rather, on the cusp of becoming a distinct, autonomous, and emancipated subject of international order.”

On the right side of the Caspian, Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are leveraging their geographic centrality to pursue multivector, “independent,” or “neutral” foreign policies, balancing relationships with China, Russia, Türkiye, and the European Union. Astana, for instance, has invested heavily in modernizing its rail and port infrastructure, positioning itself as a critical transit hub between Europe and Asia. Similarly, Uzbekistan's reforms under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signal a broader shift toward economic liberalization and regional integration. These stratagems have allowed Central Asian states to attract infrastructure

investment while maintaining sovereignty over key economic and security decisions.

Meanwhile, on the left side of the Caspian, the South Caucasus has similarly seen a reconfiguration of its geopolitical alignments, driven in part by Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War. Buoyed by its decisive victory, Azerbaijan has consolidated its territorial integrity and gained greater freedom to pursue independent foreign and economic policies, leveraging its strategic location and energy resources to deepen ties with Türkiye, the European Union, and other global partners.

Armenia, meanwhile, has been more deeply affected by this reconfiguration. Once a cornerstone of Yerevan's foreign policy, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) did not come to Armenia's defense during the 2020 war, on the basis of the logic that the conflict over Karabakh did not infringe on that country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This failure, compounded by Armenia's growing isolation within the CSTO framework and Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine, caused Yerevan to explore alternative partnerships, including closer ties with the United States and the European Union, and

enhanced economic and diplomatic engagement with Iran and India.

For its part, Georgia has leveraged this reconfiguration to try to strike a more realistic balance between its Euro-Atlantic trajectory and the realities of its immediate geopolitical circumstances. While Tbilisi remains cautious about antagonizing Moscow—as seen in its recent elections, in the context of the Ukraine conflict and Georgia's own unresolved issues in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—the weakening of Russian influence in the South Caucasus leaves the door open for more opportunities to engage deeper with the West along similar terms to those laid out recently by the Indian external affairs minister: “We look for partners, we don't look for preachers. Particularly, preachers who don't practice at home what they preach abroad.” Georgia, like Azerbaijan, is a key access point for the EU to Central Asia, and this objective reality needs to be taken seriously in Brussels, as it has increasingly been by Chinese concerns.

The third dimension of the Silk Road region's geopolitical context is the *Middle Corridor's emerging potential*. Amid these shifting dynamics, the Middle Corridor—formally known as the Trans-Caspian International

Transport Route—has grown significantly in relevance since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted traditional trade through the Northern Corridor (as mentioned previously) and heightened concerns about the EU's over-dependence on Moscow.

The Middle Corridor offers a strategic advantage by bypassing Russia and Iran, providing a politically neutral route for trade between Europe and Asia. Although the corridor faces infrastructure bottlenecks and (for now) higher transit costs, the World Bank's 2023 report on the corridor and its viability projects substantial improvements by 2030, including halved travel times and tripled freight volumes. Investments in rail and port facilities, digitalization of customs processes, and the development of the Caspian maritime leg are key priorities for unlocking its full strategic potential.

More broadly, the corridor's development has garnered significant international support. For example, the EU pledged €10 billion in investments in early 2024. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, foreign direct investment in North and Central Asia reached \$24.8 billion in 2024—a 27 percent increase over the

previous year. Such influxes of funding underscore the corridor's growing appeal as a cornerstone of connectivity, aligning economic incentives with geopolitical imperatives.

The Middle Corridor's success, however, hinges on effective regional collaboration. Initiatives like the Astana International Forum, the Tashkent International Investment Forum, and the Trans-Caspian Forum provide platforms for dialogue and coordination among stakeholders. More recently, October 2024 saw the launch of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Coordination Platform, which is expressly dedicated toward “promot[ing] the corridor and coordinate efforts to implement priority projects in hard and soft infrastructure in Central Asia. It will also coordinate with investments and activities in the South Caucasus and Türkiye that are relevant to strengthening operational efficiency and seamless connections across the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor.”

Yet these initiatives alone are insufficient to overcome the Middle Corridor's significant challenges, including infrastructure bottlenecks, regulatory inefficiencies, and fragmented investment strategies across its diverse stakeholders.

A Trans-Caspian Development Bank could serve as the critical mechanism to address these issues, providing targeted financing for key projects, fostering regional economic integration, and aligning the corridor's development with broader trade and sustainability goals. The bank would ensure that investments are coordinated and strategically deployed to maximize the corridor's potential by uniting resources under a single institution. This necessity becomes even clearer when examining the current state of trade and infrastructure along the Middle Corridor, where gaps and inefficiencies hinder its viability.

The Middle Corridor at Present

The Middle Corridor, despite its strategic promise, remains constrained by a range of systemic inefficiencies that undermine its competitiveness. Efforts to modernize infrastructure and improve coordination have progressed markedly but still fall short of addressing fully critical gaps that

limit its viability as a reliable trade route. To move beyond its current status as a supplementary alterna-

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tive, the corridor must overcome significant efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and operational reliability challenges. Although somewhat outdated, the World Bank's late 2023 report, *The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to*

Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030, offers illuminating insights on this matter.

Start with the relative inadequacy of its physical infrastructure, particularly its ports and railways. Ports along the Caspian Sea, such as Alat (Baku), Aktau, Kuryk, and Turkmenbashi, are underutilized due to poor operational efficiency, limited connectivity to rail networks, and a lack of modern equipment. That said, there are notable signs of progress since the publication of the World Bank's report. The Port of Baku, for instance handled 7.6 million tons of cargo in 2024—a 3.2 percent increase from the previous year—and managed 76,775 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), reflecting

a substantial 73 percent rise in container throughput. That said, there still remain delays due to inefficient cargo handling and insufficient first- and last-mile connectivity. Similarly, Kazakhstan's ports have seen important capacity increases, yet issues such as high wind speeds and outdated navigation equipment frequently disrupt operations.

Meanwhile, railways, which form the backbone of the corridor's land-based transit network, are plagued by bottlenecks at critical nodes and along key segments. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, a vital link connecting the Caspian region to Türkiye and Europe, operates below its potential due to limited rolling stock, outdated signaling systems, and inefficiencies at border crossings. However, in May 2024, the completion of long-anticipated repairs, upgrades, and expansions to the Georgian section of the line significantly improved its throughput capacity—from 1 million to 5 million tons per year—marking significant milestone in the corridor's development. Though this is welcome progress, some structural issues persist elsewhere. For instance, the Almaty-Shu section in Kazakhstan, another critical segment, continues to struggle with congestion and infrastructure fatigue, resulting in delays that ripple throughout the

corridor. These sorts of deficits reduce the corridor's capacity and increase transit times and costs.

The corridor currently suffers from high costs and long, unpredictable transit times, which deter many potential users. Transit through the corridor presently takes three times longer than the Northern Route through Russia and still offers little advantage over maritime shipping, despite being more expensive. According to the World Bank, the average time to transport goods from Khorgos, China, to Constanta, Romania, via the Middle Corridor was around 50 days in 2022. This is comparable to maritime shipping, which is far cheaper and more reliable.

So, although the situation has improved compared to previous years, there is still significant room for further improvement. This is gradually being tackled. For instances, in early 2024, Middle Corridor countries jointly launched the Digital Trade Corridor (DTC) online platform, aimed at streamlining cargo movement by enabling operators to track shipments in real time and bypass some of the corridor's more burdensome bureaucratic procedures. Though there is more to be done, this represents a strong step toward greater transparency and operational efficiency across the route.

Current railway operations are fraught with inefficiencies. Inconsistent service standards across countries, despite interoperability in railway systems, and delays at transshipment points contribute to extended transit times. The imbalance in eastbound and westbound traffic further complicates logistics, as empty wagons often need to be repositioned, adding to costs and delays. Before the Ukraine war, Russia's rail network played a key role in balancing freight flows—a function that the Middle Corridor is still working to replicate. The year 2024, however, delivered signs of improvement; including the first direct container train from the Xi'an (China) to Baku (Azerbaijan) and its return service. The volume of Chinese cargo traffic through the corridor has grown around 160 percent since, prompting the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route International Association (TITR-IA) to open a permanent representative office in Xi'an following a March 2025 meeting in Baku.

The sea crossing, primarily at the Caspian leg, is also a bottleneck. A shortage of vessels, slow ferry operations, and high shipping tariffs make this segment particularly inefficient. For example, shipping rates between Aktau and Baku are disproportionately high relative to the short distance, exacerbating

overall costs. Delays at ports further compound the problem, with dwell times often exceeding global standards due to inadequate handling equipment and poor coordination among stakeholders. As with other issues, governments are moving to address this segment. Azerbaijan's government authorized a \$12 million investment into Baku's port to increase annual cargo capacity from 15 million to 25 million tons. Similarly, Kazakhstan's government plans to triple container throughput in ports of Aktau and Kuryk and boost their cargo capacity by 50 percent by 2028, making room for improvements in efficiency.

More broadly, since the Middle Corridor spans multiple countries—each with its own regulations, operational priorities, and investment strategies—the resulting lack of cohesive management is one of the corridor's most significant challenges. Coordination among national railway operators, port authorities, and customs agencies remains low, resulting in delays, inconsistent service quality, and increased costs. For instance, the absence of a unified operator overseeing end-to-end logistics means that shippers must navigate multiple agencies and standards, leading to inefficiencies at every stage of transit.

Border crossings are particularly problematic. Delays often occur due to misaligned customs procedures, inadequate staffing, and outdated systems. For example, the transition of goods between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan frequently involves lengthy inspections and duplicative paperwork, despite international agreements aimed at simplifying these processes. Surveys conducted by the World Bank highlight that poor coordination at borders is a leading cause of transit delays along the corridor.

Efforts to address these issues, such as establishing a joint logistics operator by Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, represent progress but remain in the early stages of implementation. Without a centralized authority to enforce standards and streamline operations, the corridor suffers from fragmentation that undermines its competitiveness.

The corridor's reliance on outdated and fragmented digital systems further exacerbates its inefficiencies. While many stakeholders have adopted modern IT solutions, these systems are not interoperable, leading to duplication of documents, delays at border crossings, and reduced transparency. Shippers often lack visibility into the status of their goods, making it challenging

to plan effectively and adding to the uncertainty of using the corridor. The aforementioned launch of a new unified online platform in early 2024 represents an important corrective step, but further progress is necessary.

The lack of digital integration is particularly evident in customs operations, where manual processes and inconsistent data requirements cause significant delays. For instance, shippers frequently report having to submit the same documentation multiple times due to a lack of standardized procedures. These issues not only slow down transit but also increase costs, as delays often result in additional fees for storage and demurrage. Digitalization efforts, though underway, remain relatively limited in scope. A more holistic and comprehensive approach to digital integration is needed to unlock the corridor's potential and align it with global standards.

Finally, the environmental challenges facing the Middle Corridor are also noteworthy. The Caspian Sea, for instance, faces long-term ecological risks due to declining water levels. Ports like Baku, Aktau, and Turkmenbashi will require significant dredging operations and adaptive infrastructure to maintain their functionality. Without

these investments, the corridor's maritime segment could face severe disruptions, undermining its reliability.

The Port of Baku at Alat will need to continue playing a foundational role in the corridor's performance and integration. As emphasized by Azerbaijan's national logistics strategy, Baku is positioned to serve a population of 140 million people within a 1,000 km radius, offering connectivity across East-West and North-South trade axes.

Azerbaijan has prioritized the development of Baku into a world-class intermodal logistics hub, and its collaboration with Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Turkmenistan continues to deepen. The port leads efforts to improve efficiency on both port and national levels, replicate best practices across Caspian ports, strengthen partnerships with Black Sea terminals, and expand its catchment into the EU, North Africa, and South Asia.

According to IEC International, freight projections for the corridor show that without additional

terminal and rail upgrades, capacity limits could be reached as early as the end of 2025 (for containers and fertilizer), and by 2030 for oil and general cargo. The corridor's backbone rail (BTK) is currently underutilized—serving 6.5M tons versus a capacity of 17M—and would benefit from targeted investment in rolling stock and line upgrades, particularly across Türkiye and the Balkans.

Overall, the Middle Corridor's current inefficiencies present a mixed picture. Incremental improvements and fragmented investments are certainly helpful; the volume of goods transported along the corridor reached 4.5 million tons in 2024—a 62 percent increase

from the previous year alone. This is the sort of growth that is enviable in other parts of the world, and should be recognized as such. Moreover, governments from

the region are still working to upgrade existing infrastructure, upgrade locomotives and vehicles, and integrate the various networks together. Yet at present, this will not suffice to transform the corridor into a reliable trade route that can effectively compete with maritime options.

The Port of Baku at Alat will need to continue playing a foundational role in the corridor's performance and integration.

Addressing the corridor's myriad challenges—spanning infrastructure, coordination, and financing—requires a bold, centralized mechanism capable of mobilizing resources, streamlining operations, and fostering regional cooperation. A Trans-Caspian Development Bank could serve as the institutional foundation to bridge these gaps, enabling the corridor to reach its full potential while aligning with the region's broader developmental and geopolitical objectives.

Conceptual Blueprint

For our proposed Trans-Caspian Development Bank to succeed, it must be designed as a robust, independent institution capable of channeling investment, mitigating risk, and coordinating regional infrastructure development. It cannot afford to be just another multilateral bureaucracy that issues reports and recommendations without real influence.

Rather, TCDB must function as a financial engine that directs capital

to the most impactful projects, ensures investments generate returns, and provides the institutional backbone the Middle Corridor currently lacks.

The first part of our proposal focuses on the Trans-Caspian Development Bank's *governance model*. A Board of Governors, consisting of representatives from each founding member state, would serve as the highest decisionmaking body of the TCDB. Each country would appoint one Governor—likely a finance minister, central bank governor, or high-ranking economic official—responsible for setting long-term strategic priorities. Their voting power would be

weighted based on their capital contribution to the bank, ensuring a fair balance between financial commitment and decision-making authority.

Beneath them, a Board of Directors would oversee the bank's operations. The board would

consist of 15 directors, with 10 seats allocated to the founding member states and five reserved for external investors who provide significant financial commitments.

This structure ensures that regional actors retain control while allowing for external involvement in a structured, non-dominant way. The President of the TCDB, selected on a rotating basis from among the founding members, would serve as both the bank's chief executive and chair of the board.

Supporting the President, a team of Vice Presidents would manage specific operational areas, such as infrastructure lending, green financing, private sector engagement, and digitalization initiatives. They would oversee project implementation, ensure financial sustainability, and work directly with recipient governments and private investors to move projects forward.

Unlike development banks that become bloated with administrative overhead, the TCDB must remain lean and results-driven. The core staff should be highly technical, with expertise in transport logistics, energy infrastructure, and trade facilitation—reflecting the corridor's unique needs. The bank must not become a bureaucratic haven for political appointments. Instead, it should actively recruit top financial experts and infrastructure specialists from both the region and institutions like the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction

and Development (EBRD), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The second part of our proposal focuses on how to fund the Trans-Caspian Development Bank. A new bank of this envisaged scale requires a solid financial foundation, drawing from multiple sources to maintain both independence and long-term sustainability. The TCDB's initial capitalization should be at least \$30 billion, with contributions from each founding member state. The allocation should be weighted based on economic size and trade volume within the corridor, meaning Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan would provide the largest shares.

Beyond state funding, public-private partnerships (PPPs) would be a crucial pillar of the bank's financial structure. Logistics firms, energy companies, and major infrastructure developers should be invited as non-voting investment partners, offering capital in exchange for long-term participation in projects. A Trans-Caspian Development Fund, managed under the bank's umbrella, could serve as a structured vehicle for these investments, reducing risk for private sector participants while ensuring that profits are reinvested into further corridor development.

The TCDB must also actively seek support from international financial institutions, particularly those with experience funding large-scale infrastructure projects in emerging markets. The AIIB, the EBRD, and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) should be natural funding partners. The AIIB and EBRD have already invested heavily in the Silk Road region, while GCF funding could be directed toward sustainable transport and renewable energy projects within the corridor.

The TCDB would issue bonds and syndicate guarantees to maintain financial credibility, allowing it to leverage its capital base and attract further investment. The Astana International Financial Centre could take the lead on this aspect, and perhaps others. The structure should include both paid-in capital (available for immediate lending) and callable capital, which acts as a financial safeguard to reassure outside investors.

The TCDB should also take advantage of sovereign wealth funds in the Gulf and other parts of Asia that are actively seeking infrastructure investments with long-term returns. By structuring regional investment funds, the bank could establish designated pools of capital for specific priorities, such as railway modernization or renewable energy integration.

The third part of our proposal is about membership and location. The founding members of the Trans-Caspian Development Bank should include the C5 (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), along with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. These countries collectively control the core trade routes of the Middle Corridor and stand to benefit the most from its development. Armenia could also be offered (retroactive) founding membership once it signs and ratifies peace and normalization treaties with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Beyond regional membership, the bank should also allow for non-regional investment partners, including relevant major powers like China, the EU, Russia, and the United States—along with lesser ones like Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These investors would provide financial contributions without direct governance rights, ensuring regional stakeholders maintain decision-making control.

However, this raises the issue of the TCDB's headquarters; it must be geopolitically and economically strategic, situated in a city that reflects both the region's economic reality and its long-term aspirations.

Some would argue that it should be Astana, as it is the capital of the largest economy in the Silk Road region, providing stability and regional centrality. Kazakhstan has the financial capacity and geopolitical leverage to lead such an institution. Others would point to Tbilisi, which offers proximity to European capital markets and investors, as well as a pro-business regulatory environment. But undoubtedly the natural hub of the Middle Corridor is Baku. Not only does it have a well-developed financial sector, is positioned at the critical maritime chokepoint of the Caspian, and is located at the heart of the Silk Road region, but, as Krnjević has put it, Azerbaijan is the “indispensable country for the advancement of the strategic energy and connectivity ambitions of all major outside powers in the Silk Road region—Western and non-Western alike.” In short, Baku is the logical choice for the TCDB's headquarters.

The fourth part of our proposal concerns the *strategic focus areas* of the Trans-Caspian Development Bank. The TCDB must be structured to fund projects that directly enhance the Middle Corridor's competitiveness, rather than becoming a generic infrastructure bank. Its investments should be targeted and highly impactful, with an emphasis on four areas.

First, *rail and port modernization*. The TCDB's first priority must be to expand and upgrade critical transit infrastructure, including increased rail capacity along the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars corridor, modernization of Kazakhstan's Almaty-Shu rail segment, and capacity expansion at key Caspian ports such as Baku, Aktau, and Turkmenbashi.

Second, *renewable energy integration*. A key opportunity for the corridor lies in developing large-scale wind and solar projects, particularly in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The two undersea mega-cable projects to carry electricity produced by renewable sources from the aforementioned three countries and Georgia to European markets speak directly to this point. Investments in electrified rail infrastructure would also reduce reliance on diesel-powered freight, aligning the corridor with global decarbonization efforts.

Third, *Caspian gas projects*. The TCDB should play a role in enhancing regional energy trade, particularly by improving gas export infrastructure in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Expanding natural gas storage facilities and pipeline interconnectivity would strengthen energy security across the corridor.

Four, *digital trade corridors*. Modernizing customs procedures and trade facilitation is as important as physical infrastructure. The TCDB should fund the development of a unified electronic customs system, blockchain-based cargo tracking, AI-driven logistics management tools, and the Digital Silk Road initiative to reduce transit delays and improve efficiency.

Qui Bono?

Beyond its direct financial impact, the TCDB would provide structural benefits that extend far beyond infrastructure development. For instance, centralized coordination would allow member states to pool resources, ensuring that regional investment is deployed strategically rather than in isolated and potentially redundant projects. Instead of competing for limited funds and managing disjointed infrastructure initiatives, countries could align their priorities through a single, structured financing institution.

Likewise, the bank would also enable targeted investments in the most critical areas of the Middle Corridor, focusing capital where it could generate the highest returns. By funding high-impact projects such as port expansions, railway

upgrades, trade facilitation programs, and standardizing funding and procurement practices, the TCDB would improve the corridor's overall efficiency and competitiveness while reducing waste and ensuring that capital is deployed efficiently. A well-run TCDB could cut through bureaucratic delays and corruption risks that often plague regional projects, helping to deliver results faster and more cost-effectively.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the bank would bring salutary benefits. It would serve as a vehicle for outside actors to participate in the region without direct political entanglements. Western investors, Gulf sovereign wealth funds, and Asian development institutions would have a structured, neutral mechanism to engage with the Middle Corridor, reducing the risk of geopolitical pushback while encouraging multi-stakeholder participation in regional development.

Finally, the TCDB would promote regional integration, fostering cooperation among countries that have struggled historically with fragmented policies and competing interests. A shared financial institution would create stronger incentives for collaboration, aligning national economic policies with broader regional growth objectives.

Building the Bank that Builds the Region

This essay has laid the conceptual foundation for the Trans-Caspian Development Bank. The need is clear, the framework is sound, and the potential impact is undeniable. But ideas, no matter how well-articulated, mean nothing without action. The next step is turning this vision into a reality, which requires political will, strategic partnerships, and a clear roadmap for implementation.

A financial institution of this magnitude cannot be willed into existence overnight. The formation of the AIIB took over two years of negotiations, coalition-building, and institutional planning before it was launched. The EBRD, another relevant model, required extensive diplomatic engagement to align the interests of multiple stakeholders. The Trans-Caspian Development Bank would need a similarly rigorous process that blends high-level diplomacy with targeted financial negotiations to secure both regional buy-in and international support.

The first step in this process requires assembling the right coalition of leaders, institutions, and private sector stakeholders to move the proposal forward. That means immediate action is needed to begin laying the institutional groundwork and securing early commitments.

The first concrete move should be convening a high-level conference on the TCDB concept, hosted in Baku—a natural convening force for this initiative and one of the most proactive countries in the region regarding infrastructure development. With its existing networks in Central Asia and Europe, Baku is the ideal location for bringing together regional policymakers, financial experts, and prospective investors. Doing so would solidify the argument for making this city the TCDB's headquarters.

This initial conference would serve multiple purposes. First, it would provide a venue to formally introduce the TCDB concept to a broad audience of policymakers and financiers. Second, it would allow for detailed discussions on

The need for the TCDB is clear, the framework is sound, and the potential impact is undeniable. But ideas, no matter how well-articulated, mean nothing without action.

key technical aspects, from governance models to capital structures. Third, and most importantly, it would generate momentum by compelling stakeholders to begin publicly engaging with the idea.

Simultaneously, an exploratory committee should be formed to conduct a formal feasibility study. The committee should include representatives from potential founding member states (enumerated above) as well as technical advisors from existing development banks and financial institutions. Its purpose would be to assess the capital requirements, operational structures, and legal frameworks needed to establish the bank. This process would also provide an opportunity to refine the proposal, ensuring that it aligns with the specific needs of regional economies and financial systems.

The TCDB should also be elevated as a key agenda item in upcoming high-level regional meetings. One way forward would be to present the idea at the Septemebr 2025 Consultative Meeting of the Presidents of Central Asian states, which has of late come to include the President of Azerbaijan as an “honored guest.” Invitations could easily be extended to the presidents of Georgia and Türkiye, as well as

perhaps others. Another would involve making TCDB a central agenda item at the next summit of the UN Special Program for the Economies of Central Asian Countries (SPECA). Raising at the next summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program would also make sense. Should major outside powers (e.g., China, the EU, the United States) decide to expand the “5” in their respective 5+1 meetings, then TCDB could also be raised there in a central way. A plethora of other such opportunities to promote the concept, such as discussing it at the Astana International Forum, also spring to mind.

Next, strategic partnerships that provide synergy ought to be explored. The reality is that no development bank can function without strong financial backing. While the TCDB would be led by regional states, attracting international investment would be critical to ensuring its long-term viability. Fortunately, there are multiple strategic partners and funding sources that align with the goals of the institution.

The EU’s Global Gateway initiative, which aims to mobilize €300 billion of public and private capital for infrastructure projects

in its various neighborhoods, presents an opportunity for securing financing for TCDB-backed projects. Brussels has already identified Central Asia as a key region for Global Gateway investment, and a well-structured regional development bank could serve as a natural intermediary for channeling EU funds into Middle Corridor infrastructure—assuming, of course, that Brussels will choose to look more strategically at the area between its own external borders and Central Asia.

Similarly, since 2015, Japan’s Partnership for Quality Infrastructure has sought to provide funding for sustainable infrastructure projects, particularly in regions where China’s BRI has left gaps. It has since grown into the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, which extends Japan’s infrastructure diplomacy globally. Additionally, Japan has been an active investor in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and its financial institutions, including the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), could play a role in co-financing TCDB projects.

Gulf sovereign wealth funds are another important source of capital. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have all

demonstrated interest in Central Asian infrastructure, particularly in logistics, energy, and industrial development. The TCDB could be structured to allow Gulf investors to participate as non-voting financial partners, allowing them to invest in long-term infrastructure projects without exerting direct influence over bank governance.

Beyond state-backed funding sources, the private sector would be an essential partner. Major logistics firms, energy companies, and infrastructure developers should be engaged early in the process. Companies that already have a vested interest in the Middle Corridor—such as DP World, which operates port infrastructure in Kazakhstan—should be approached as potential investment partners. The bank could also collaborate with global investment firms specializing in infrastructure financing, ensuring that projects backed by the TCDB meet commercial viability standards.

One of the most significant advantages of a development bank is its ability to de-risk private investment. By using concessional financing and guarantees, the TCDB could make Middle Corridor projects more attractive to institutional investors,

particularly those in Europe and Asia. The model used by the International Finance Corporation (IFC)—which blends public and private capital to support infrastructure projects—could serve as a template for structuring TCDB-backed investments.

Ultimately, the case for the TCDB is not just an economic argument—it is a geopolitical and strategic imperative. Without a dedicated financing institution, the Middle Corridor will remain a fragmented collection of national projects rather than a cohesive trade and infrastructure network. The region needs an entity capable of coordinating investment, standardizing regulations, and ensuring that infrastructure is developed to maximize regional connectivity rather than reinforcing existing bottlenecks.

There is also a narrow window of opportunity to establish the TCDB before external actors impose their own visions on regional development. China's BRI has already shaped much of the infrastructure landscape in Central Asia, and if regional states do not act

The TCDB is about creating the financial architecture necessary for long-term regional development centered on value-added energy projects, manufacturing, and strategic connectivity.

decisively, they risk becoming mere participants in a system designed elsewhere. The TCDB offers an opportunity to take control of the region's financial future, ensuring that investments

align with the interests of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Türkiye rather than being dictated by outside powers—not just China (and to a much lesser extent Russia), but the EU as well.

Just as institutions like the EBRD helped shape post-Cold War Europe by channeling investment into critical industries and infrastructure, the TCDB could help shape the next phase of Silk Road region cooperation and perhaps even point the way to some sort of integration. It is not simply about financing railway lines or ports; rather, it is about creating the financial architecture necessary for long-term regional development centered on value-added energy projects, manufacturing, and strategic connectivity. The Middle Corridor is an existing concept in diplomatic communiqués and policy papers. However, without a mechanism like the TCDB, it will struggle to reach its full potential.

The next steps are clear: think inclusively, convene the right stakeholders, secure early commitments, and begin the process of institutional design. The foundation is already there. It is now

up to regional leaders, investors, and policymakers to move beyond discussion and into action. The Trans-Caspian Development Bank is not just an opportunity—it is a strategic necessity. **BD**

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The Scientific Council of the COP29 Presidency

The Scientific Council of the COP29 Presidency is a distinguished scientific advisory body that brings together leading scientists, universities, and think tanks from around the world. Its mission is to provide scientific guidance, support international collaboration, and contribute to the implementation of the Paris Agreement. The Council plays a vital role in supporting the COP29 process by increasing access to scientific research and promoting meaningful academic and policy discussions on key climate issues.

Objectives of the Scientific Council of the COP29 Presidency

- Uniting leading academic institutions, research organizations, and think-tanks worldwide to raise awareness and improve access to cutting-edge climate science
- Facilitating access to scientific research to support the COP29 process and ensure that science remains at the core of climate discussions
- Strengthening cross-border research projects by fostering regional cooperation, diversifying geostrategic approach, and sharing best practices and technological advancements
- Organizing capacity-building programs for various stakeholders and actors, and enhancing cross-border cooperation
- Engaging students and young individuals in the action against climate change through education, outreach, and inclusivity

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Sharks in the Muddy Waters

Terrorism and Mounting Global Disorder

Jahangir E. Arasli

The international system is in increasing disarray, thanks partly to systemic and structural factors. The strategic competition between major powers and groups of states is growing sharply. One particular consequence of this process is an escalation in scale and scope of shooting wars and armed conflicts (e.g., in Europe and the Middle East) and other antagonisms on the edge of war (e.g., Taiwan, the South China Sea, and South Asia).

Moreover, the existing geopolitical alignments are shifting oddly. Neo-revisionism, expansionist foreign policies, and advanced territorial claims militarize international relations. With a reoccurrence of “utility of force,” the standing norms of international law are frying, and

WMD proliferation regimes and arms control treaties are crumbling. Trade wars and deteriorating growth prospects are increasing strains and risks to the global economy and individual states. Political and ideological polarization in societies, institutional decay, inefficiency of elites, and the rise of populism affect states’ stability. The challenges of climate change and emerging technologies remain unanswered and unsettled.

The combination of the aforementioned underlying factors, together with others, is fracturing the existing world order and producing uncertainty, volatility, and security meltdowns. In an environment in which state actors get fixated on the most coercive concerns—which are related both to accelerating global rivalry and

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the return of classical geopolitics—other imperative factors could remain in the shadows.

One of these is the phenomenon of terrorism. That phenomenon persisted at the very center of the international security agenda for almost two decades after Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the proliferation of global jihadist networks, and the advent of the homegrown terrorism anomaly in the West.

However, by the end of the 2010s, there was less evidence of terrorist activity on the strategic radar screen, especially after the fall of the “caliphate” proclaimed by the Islamic State (IS, formerly the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” or ISIS) in the Middle East. Furthermore, the start of the European War in February 2022 and the growing antagonism between revisionist and status-quo major powers caused the latter grouping to reorganize security priorities, efforts, and resources.

However, the terrorist menace

and yields strategic effects. The October 2023 mega-attack by Hamas against Israel from the Gaza Strip—a territory that it has completely controlled since 2006, a year after Israel’s disengagement—released the current cycle of the Mid-Eastern War whilst becoming a sobering warning that the threat

The terrorist menace endures in the back of the evolving grand picture. What is more, it indicates signs of renewal and yields strategic effects.

posed by terrorists and other violent non-state actors remains clear and present. The gravity and outreach of such actors fluctuate, ranging from those with trans-regional networks (like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State) and powerful, well-defined, and weaponized sub-state movements (like Hezbollah and Hamas) to small underground terrorist cells and individual self-radicalized “lone wolves” that lack a structural affiliation.

Nevertheless, the particular singularity of the current period is that the cumulative worldwide disorder and antagonism not only induces a resurgence of terrorism-related dynamics in different parts of the world, but it can also potentially integrate violent non-state actors into the pattern of the developing strategic competition between

major powers. In that context, the terrorism factor could hypothetically reemerge as a “utility tool” of major powers, as was the case during much of the Cold War.

This essay aims to help the reader navigate the current dynamics in the realm of terrorism. It focuses on the status and conditions of the terrorist threat in different regions of the world, including Russia, Afghanistan, Syria, the West, and the Global South. In addition, it analyzes the general trends in the field, including the potential re-emergence of the state-terror nexus and other influencing factors in the context of global antagonism.

Russia

On 22 March 2024, a group of Islamist terrorists struck the Crocus City Hall entertainment complex on the outskirts of Moscow. In total, 145 people were killed and over 550 were wounded in a shooting spree and premeditated arson fire. Noteworthy, the Kremlin dismissed warning intelligence indicators of the imminent terrorist attack in Russia, transmitted by the U.S. government, and the response of the law enforcement agencies at the moment of the incident was sluggish. Although the Islamic State promptly claimed

responsibility for the action, the Russian authorities tried to divert the public’s focus to what it alleged was an “Ukrainian footprint” in the massacre.

The details and circumstances of the Crocus attack reflect two intersecting trends that were forming in Russia in past years and then further aggravated by more than three years of war in Ukraine.

The first trend is migration. The demographic composition of Russia alters, and the ongoing war in Ukraine accelerates the transformative tendency. Hundreds of thousands of men were mobilized or volunteered for the war (and tens of thousands have been killed or injured). Scores left the country. As a result, the national labor force erodes and requires more hands. The Russian government tries to bridge the workforce gap by bringing in hundreds of thousands of immigrants, primarily from the Central Asian states and, more recently, from some countries of the Global South. There is no stable data on the number of new immigrants: estimates range from three and four to six million. The majority of them are ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz.

Like in many other countries, newly arrived immigrants

(synonyms in use include migrants and temporary residents) to Russia face an alien cultural environment, with many residing in adverse living and working conditions. In addition to low pay and daily travails, migrant communities in Russia remain under strict state control, including frequent police raids and arbitrary treatment by the authorities. Cultural frictions with the indigenous population produce societal tensions and have resulted in the radicalization of both immigrants and Russian nationalists. Over 60 percent of Russian citizens view labor migrants through a negative lens, and certain segments of the elite tend to capitalize on the issue of “countering the problem of migration” for political ends.

Against this background, temporary resident communities in Russia have turned into a “state within a state.” Their compartmentalization, coupled with subpar living conditions, has enabled the establishment of a permissive environment for the radicalization of certain segments of the migrant population. Many of the foreigners who arrive in Russia have been radicalized already; others become exposed to radicalization on the spot. In March 2025, the Russian National Security Council identified some 700,000 newcomers as “illegals,” indicating that an unspecified number of these

and other categories of migrants pose a “special risk.”

It is difficult to believe that terror entrepreneurs are not trying to tap further into such a vast potential pool of recruits. The recruiters of the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (IS-KP)—the regional affiliate of the globalized Islamic State terrorist-jihadist network—have already penetrated the Central Asian migrant communities in Russia. Their objective is to link certain individuals’ frustration and discontent with violent action through instruments of radicalization. The 2024 Crocus episode clearly demonstrates that terror recruitment propaganda works: the perpetrators were ethnic Tajik migrant workers.

The second parallel trend is the demographic growth of Russia’s indigenous Muslim population. If there were some 25 million Muslims in 2018, nowadays that number is even greater, given this diverse community’s high birth rate. Moreover, the socioeconomic conditions of most of the predominantly Muslim regions are adverse. For instance, Dagestan is an economically depressed province affected by high unemployment, poor living conditions, corruption, and ethnic clanship politics. On that background, the trajectory of Islamization is ascending.

One of the side consequences of that tendency is a steadily increasing challenge of radicalization and self-radicalization in certain segments of society. Uneducated and unemployed young people with no feasible life perspectives attend underground mosques (there are over 2,500 mosques in Dagestan—twice as many as there are schools, technical and vocational colleges, and higher education institutions). Radicalization takes place through many channels, such as *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, studies in *madrasahs* (religious schools) located in the Middle East, on-the-spot activities of Islamic charities, and, most of all, via Islamist online social media channels. The war in Gaza has also resulted in a radicalization pipeline; in November 2023, anti-Jewish riots vandalized the Mahachkala International Airport in Dagestan. There and elsewhere, self-organized vigilant groups enforce a strict Islamist dress code among tourists from other (non-Muslim) parts of Russia. Such and similar groups also form the nucleus of various social protests that are becoming more frequent in Dagestan.

The radicalization trend is precipitating the resurgence of homegrown terrorism. For instance, on 24 June 2024, a group of terrorists attacked a church, a

synagogue, and police in the towns of Mahachkala and Derbent in Dagestan. The attack toll was 20 people killed and 46 wounded.

The authorities try to counter the radicalization, but not with full success. The official “palace Muftis” are not as popular among the younger generation influenced by exiled radical online preachers. Furthermore, some who belong to the regional elites covertly support extremists in the context of clan politics by providing them with covert material support and shelter.

There are four trends to watch concerning the homegrown terrorist threat in Russia. Three of them are due to the delayed impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine and geopolitical competition.

First, the incarceration system represents a particular concern for the Russian authorities. Many inmates (both indigenous and migrant Muslims, as well as converts to Islam) are exposed to radicalization behind bars. The jail *jamaats* (cohesive communities with their own strict code of conduct) produce nuclei of future teambuilding and consolidated connections at large. The hostage-taking incidents and riot attempts in Russian jails in the summer of 2024 underscore a degree of prison radicalization.

Second, the factor of the war eventually would have a significant aggravating impact on the security environment, given the influx of a massive cohort of seasoned veterans and the circulation of weapons and explosives from the battle zone. Those returnees who fail to fit back into civilian life could end up joining extremist groups (whether of the Islamist or Russian nationalist variety). One potential outcome may be that the North Caucasus—primarily Chechnya and Dagestan—relapses again into terrorist violence, as was the case in the 1990s and 2000s. Another hypothetical effect could be the emergence of politically motivated violence in different parts of Russia. Additionally, the large number of migrants who are recruited to join the Russian army fighting in Ukraine may cause instability in their home countries upon their return.

Third, the war is overstressing Russia’s security services and law enforcement agencies, diverting their focus and resources from countering terrorist threats to war-related missions (such as reacting to Ukraine’s subversion campaign against war-related targets). According to official data, in 2024 there were 1,191 “terrorist” attacks of all kinds (compared to 410 in 2023), most of which were related either to Ukraine’s actions,

or to violent anti-war protests. Multitasking leaves more loopholes in the security system, which terrorist actors could exploit for their own purposes. The paradox is that heightened securitization does not necessarily mean heightened security.

Fourth, to attain its geopolitical ends, Moscow has increased discrete contacts with certain violent sub-state actors, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Ansarallah. Moreover, Russia decriminalized the Taliban in April 2025 by removing it from its list of terrorist organizations. All that is seen as a “red flag” for the global Islamic State (IS) network, which considers the mentioned movements as competitors (particularly through the lens of Sunni-Shia rivalry). The IS-Khorasan Province regional branch that challenges the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan is especially irritated, as seen from its statements. In addition, the previous Russian way of war in Syria, which as a rule did not make use of precision weapons, and, more broadly, its support of the now-defunct Assad regime remain in the jihadist propaganda narratives. All that motivates and incentivizes potential vengeance terrorist attacks in Russia. The bombing of the Russian embassy in Kabul in September 2022 was IS-KP’s warning.

Overall, in the observable perspective, the long war in Ukraine and its multiple effects could produce conditions that can potentially revitalize the terrorist threat inside Russia.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is reemerging as a center of gravity in the context of the terrorist threat in the Silk Road region, broadly understood, and South Asia. The collapse of the West-supported government and the return of the Taliban rule in 2021 created a security vacuum. The Taliban tends to perform now as a more or less reasonable actor regarding its external affairs. However, it has failed to stabilize the country and does not fully control all of Afghanistan's territory. Continuing chaos in the lawless areas breeds a nurturing environment for terrorist outfits operating under the umbrella of IS-KP, which acts as a centripetal magnet for local actors distressed by Taliban rule. In particular, the Pashtu-Tajik ethnic row has caused elements of the latter group to gravitate to IS-KP.

Currently, IS-KP represents the most able regional cluster of the

Islamic State that has remained active since the disintegration of the IS "caliphate" at the end of the 2010s. Its capabilities are further reinforced now by a migration of extremist elements from Syria. While fighting with the Taliban government forces, IS-KP is probably attempting to expand the area of control in order to reincarnate, in one form or another, the "caliphate" that was defeated in the Middle East. If it succeeds, parts of Afghanistan can turn into a terrorist "black hole" that projects domino-effect threats to the Central Asian states, Iran, Russia, China's Xinjiang-Uyghur region, and the South Asian countries.

Afghanistan and Central Asia are merging into a single strategic theatre for IS-KP.

The activities of the terrorist outfits on the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan are already visible and pose a threat to the stability of the mentioned states. Afghanistan and Central Asia are merging into a single strategic theatre for IS-KP. That, in turn, engages Russia in the threat contour and makes the region its "soft underbelly," providing the migration factor explained above.

Iran is in the special focus of IS-KP, whose ideological credos

include a strong sectarian (anti-Shia) line. From Afghan territory, the grouping has organized several terrorist attacks against Iranian religious shrines. Notably, these operations made use of recruited Central Asian states' citizens as suicide bombers. The attack in the Iranian city of Kerman on 3 January 2024—the deadliest terror attack since the 1979 Islamic Revolution—left over 100 people killed and almost 300 injured. The IS-KP threat projection from Afghanistan remains a hassle for Iran's government, which concurrently has to fight a proximate tribal terrorist insurgency in the province of Baluchistan, which borders Pakistan.

Syria

The 2023-2025 war cycles in the Middle East changed the region's strategic settings. The Hamas October 2023 terror attack from Gaza triggered an overwhelming Israeli response that first depleted the capabilities of Hamas and then of Hezbollah. The eradication of Hezbollah's military power became one of the main contributing factors to the downfall of Assad's regime and the takeover of Syria by what some chose to characterize at the time as a moderate Islamist opposition force. The new government has declared its intention to concentrate on the country's

(re-)building, domestic intercommunity concord, and nonviolent coexistence with Syria's neighbors.

The declarations and actions of the new regime in Damascus modify currents in the jihadist domain. The 13-year-long war in Syria led to the advent of a massive extremist cluster in the ranks of the anti-Assad opposition. The most radical one is a loose constellation of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) who migrated to the Levant from all over the world for jihad and caliphate-building. The current dynamic in the FTF realm is fluid and not too transparent; however, such jihadists are apparently not happy with the course of their leaders, including the rejection of confrontation with Israel and an unwillingness to proceed forthwith with what they call the "liberation" of Jerusalem.

Although some of the migrant jihadists can find a social lift in new conditions and even be promoted within the FTP system, the majority of them cannot return to their home countries for self-preservation reasons. Therefore, the best that those disenchanting armed elements (both foreign and local in origin) can do is to peel away from the mainstream structural body of the former Islamist opposition turned into a ruling force, and

defect to the vestiges of the Islamic State. The latter already shows some indications of a resurgence, especially after the largely unvetted release of thousands of prisoners from Syrian prisons as the *ancien régime* was collapsing and a new one was taking shape.

This distinctive worry is most associated with the Central Asian, North Caucasian, and ethnic Uyghur outfits operating in Syria. As said, their members can hardly return home, having already been identified by the respective security services of their countries of origin. However, they can relocate to the lawless areas in Afghanistan and nearby Pakistan, and their mere existence and propaganda outreach to target audiences will influence the security environment in their homelands anyway.

In a parallel development, the region's grand transformation effectively terminated Iran's strategic project of the "Axis of Resistance," the framework through which Tehran had previously recruited and deployed to Syria tens of thousands of fighters from the Shia communities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries. Some of those combatants have

now become "stray dogs" and have diffused, causing trouble in their own countries and beyond.

The sectarian aspect is a supreme peril for Syria's stability at the current stage. In the March 2025 troubles, "imported" jihadists were behind the most vicious crimes committed against the predominantly Alawite civilian population in the coastal region of Syria, as well as the attacks against members of Christian minorities. Because of a still porous interstate border, sectarian Sunni-Shia conflict can easily extend (again) to Lebanon. There is also a significant chance that Sunni jihadists will engage in violent confrontations with the well-armed Kurdish and Druze communities (in fact, the clashes between pro-government gunmen and Druze self-defense groups in southern Syria already erupted in early May 2025).

The West

The terrorist threat in the West has its own peculiarities. While in Russia extremists are performing in the collection of scattered autonomous micro-groups

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Many (would-be) terrorists based in the West are self-radicalized and spontaneously activated "lone wolf" grassroots actors.

embedded into local or migrant communities, many (would-be) terrorists based in the West are self-radicalized and spontaneously activated "lone wolf" (LW) grassroots actors. As far as micro-groups are concerned, they exist too; the internet, social media, and the free movement of people within the U.S., Canada, and the EU member states that belong to the Schengen zone facilitate their networking. Another distinction is the groups' composition, which includes first-generation and second-generation immigrants (many of whom are unstable, adrenaline rush-seeking teenagers under the age of 16) and indigenous Muslim converts (who are usually even more radical).

In the past two years, the wars in Gaza and Lebanon became a catalyst for many terrorist incidents on the European continent and in North America; in other cases, specific motives were not distinguishable and were probably induced by unceasing Islamic State propaganda. In that period, actual copycat attacks and foiled terrorist plots took place in Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy,

Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and some other countries.

Most incidents were low-tech, improvised LW attacks with the use of knives or ramming cars rather than firearms or explosives. In the notable episode, an IS-inspired former U.S. army veteran drove a car into a crowd in New Orleans on 1 January 2025, killing 15 and injuring 35 people.

Some plots aimed at high-visibility targets and mass casualties: in August 2024, an alert of a likely terrorist attack led to the cancellation of a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna.

Three emerging trends are relevant to the current and prospective terrorist dynamic in the Western world. First, given ascending left- and right-wing populist trends in various EU member states, the heightened risk of terrorism and violent extremism is becoming a sensitive factor with political significance and implications. The knife stabbings in Mannheim and Solingen (May and August 2024, respectively) and the Magdeburg car attack (December 2024) apparently contributed to the record-high result of the Alternative

for Germany political party in the February 2025 federal elections (its platform contains, *inter alia*, anti-mass immigration provisions, and the party was classified as an “extreme far-right entity” by the country’s federal authorities in May 2025).

Second, although the pro-Palestinian street and university protests of radical, usually far-left political movements did not result in the dawn of “global intifada” in the West, they inspired some individuals to commit violent acts. In a somewhat related and disturbing development, Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security reportedly outsourced the Foxtrot criminal network to attack Israeli and Jewish targets in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Copenhagen. A foiled attack on Israel’s consulate in Munich in September 2024 appears from this series.

Third, the long war in Ukraine has led to a galvanization of alleged Russian hybrid operations against some European countries in order to deter their support for Kyiv. Reports indicate that Moscow is outsourcing individual society

dropouts and criminal groups for such kinds of actions. It is possible to suggest that the same logic is potentially applicable to religious extremists and political radicals. Meanwhile, in April 2025, the Islamic State urged its supporters to commit attacks on the soil of Europe “while crusaders are fighting each other.”

Overall, in many European countries, issues of terrorism and (im)migration divide societies and empower radical-spectrum politicians on both the left and the right. Meanwhile, the risk of politically motivated anti-migrant, anti-immigrant, and anti-establishment counter-violence as a reaction to potential new attacks and government policies increases. A random event can launch the process, and the meddling of non-European state actors could aggravate the impact of terrorist acts, should they occur.

Rest of the World

The Global South remains persistently affected by a phenomenon of terrorism in the form of terrorist-criminal insurgencies.

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In Africa, the most intensive Islamist terrorist activities take place in the regions of the Sahel, Nigeria, and the Horn of Africa (the poorest areas of the world) and, to a lesser extent, in the northern and central parts of the continent. The insurgent movements operating in the Sahel tend to expand their outreach to the neighboring countries, towards the Gulf of Guinea and Lake Chad.

Unlike in the West with its urban lone-wolf actors and small groups, the African terrorist cluster is represented by large-scale paramilitary-type movements (“wolfpacks”), which exploit local systemic (social, economic, and cultural) root causes and draw their strength from the disgruntled segments of the population. Those movements fall under the auspices of two rival jihadist networks (the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda), who fight not only governments but also each other, competing for hearts, minds, and resources.

The terrorism factor produces perpetual insecurity and arrests the development of several African countries. Furthermore, it creates a permissive environment for the intrusion of foreign state actors, like Russia, which has already replaced one of the continent’s former colonial powers, France, but also the

United States, as a security provider in at least six African states.

In the Asia-Pacific region, Kashmir remains the most active flashpoint of terrorist violence, which projects risks to other parts of Indian territory. The most recent example is the terrorist attack against civilians in the India-controlled part of the region. The activities of Islamist extremist groups and the reciprocal actions of Hindu nationalists could trigger a new vicious cycle of violence, like they did in the past. Other less active or dormant Islamist terrorist groups remain present in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

In Latin America, terrorist tradecraft blends in with the criminal insurgency wars conducted by narco-cartels in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, as well as contiguous countries. Significantly, profit from drug trade and supplementary illicit enterprises are fueling other terrorist outfits’ activities far outside the Western Hemisphere. The most illustrative example is the mutually benefiting symbiosis between Colombian narco-terrorist organizations and Islamist terror movements in Africa in the transit of drugs to Europe.

Six Observations

There are six general factors related to the phenomenon of terrorism, which need to remain in the field of view at the current stage. One, *the status of global jihad*. The dynamics in the realm of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are fluid, although in different ways. Both networks have become de facto leaderless, confined to the regional loci, and engaged in rivalry.

Al-Qaeda's central core (founders and first-generation members) all but vanished with the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022. Most of its once powerful regional affiliates have weakened or ceased to exist and are waging "war by communiqués" rather than conducting terror operations. However, Al-Qaeda has already performed its historical mission by creating and progressing the global jihad's brand.

Since the defeat of the "caliphate" in its physical shape, IS operates in a more decentralized mode. Yet, the ideology behind it is not defeated. Its regional "provinces" are mostly active; in the first half of 2024, they conducted a total of 788 attacks that killed over 3,700 people. The recurrent empowerment of IS in Afghanistan and the Middle East back to the level of a "caliphate"

remains a risk probability. One of the most perilous patterns of IS's current strategy is inciting the sectarian schism in Islam, which it is trying to trigger through terror attacks against Shia targets.

Two, *global strategic competition's effects*. The return of a tough geopolitical contest and militarized international behavior increase the likelihood that opposing states and blocs could outsource "bad guys" as their proxies or utility tools to cause direct damage in the context of future hybrid wars. Certain indicators of such use of violent non-state actors (VNSA) are already visible.

Furthermore, the polarization of Western societies could precipitate a renaissance of political (anti-establishment) far-left and far-right terrorism, which opposite sides would exploit to drive a wedge in societal cleavages akin to or even more damaging than what was accomplished during the Cold War. Another semblance to that period is a transfer of power competition to the Global South (a.k.a., the "Third World") area in the form of support of proxy non-state actors.

Additionally, VNSA could act as international security spoilers in the context of strategic competition, provoking confrontations between

states: the most recent example is the terrorist attack in the Indian(-controlled) part of Kashmir in April 2025, which brought India and Pakistan on the verge of war.

Three, *fragmentation of the West*. The Trump Administration's "America First" foreign policy posture—which purports to put the country's redefined national interests above those of its allies whilst no longer making references to upholding the "rules-based international order"—has undermined not only the Western alliance but also the West's counterterrorism strategy and procedures.

The American revision of their past commitments to fight terrorism (such as an ongoing decrease of a military footprint in Syria and Iraq) could leave security vacuums in the geographic regions of concern. Besides, the decline of confidence and trust between Western allies complicates their cooperation in the counterterrorism field, especially intelligence data sharing.

Four, *the impact of the conflict over Ukraine*. The (temporary) end of hostilities would likely result in the release of hundreds of thousands of veterans by both warring sides. Some of those people (perhaps many), who have real combat experience and a potentially

deformed psyche, will become available on the global market of violence. Such a development could mark the start of a new wave of terrorism along either political, ethno-nationalist, or Islamist tracks.

Five, *terrorist modus operandi*. The securitization of the West, which unfolded after the 9/11 terrorist mega-attack, generally works in that part of the world. The plethora of measures taken continue to negatively affect terrorist tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Police intelligence, video and cyber surveillance, the use of detectors, sensors, and other technological instruments, stricter explosives control, together with many other measures, have made it possible to prevent or deter major terrorist plots on Western territory in the last few years. As noted above, the majority of the recent terrorist incidents were spontaneous attacks on random soft targets with the use of improvised means.

Nonetheless, the threat of distributed military-style terror attacks in areas playing host to large public gatherings remains. Attacks in Mumbai (2008), Paris (2015), and Kenya (2013-2019) are pertinent past instances. Such actions fit the IS concept of "cities red with blood" that aim for mass casualties and maximal political and publicity effects.

Tightly knit small groups have executed this type of mission. They consist of well-trained, battle-tested, and dedicated cadres (e.g., storm-troopers and suicide operators). Critical infrastructure and sensitive economic targets, such as energy facilities, airports, urban mass transit systems, and the tourism sector, also remain exposed to potential carefully planned attacks.

Six, *the technology factor.* Instrumental changes in terrorist TTPs could come with the fast progress of robotic warfare developed in recent armed conflicts, primarily in the Ukrainian theater. Modern technologies like aerial unmanned systems, naval uncrewed platforms, or long-range ballistic missiles will become available to VNSA very soon—if not already (the recent Houthi strikes against international shipping lanes and Israel speak to the latter point). They can be delivered from states or purchased on the free market (as happened with man-portable air defense systems in the 1970s). Weaponized commercial drones, modified for strike and/or reconnaissance-surveillance missions, are already in active VNSA use in

conflict zones ranging from the Sahel to Myanmar. It will not be long until terrorists start applying harassment drones to target large public gatherings and critical infrastructure nodes. A vast pool of skilled drone operators from currently active war zones around the world is already available, which could make it easier to transfer technology and experience to terrorist actors.

A related concern is the “digital front.” Terrorist actors will soon have access to mission-planning tools powered by artificial intelligence—again, if not already. In the meantime, the internet serves, even more than before, as an enabler and force multiplier in the field of online radicalization and recruitment, propaganda, fundraising, tactical expertise sharing, and operational coordination, not to mention cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure.

Second Wind?

Terrorism is a complex and transforming phenomenon that has gone through ebbs and flows throughout history. In the

The “terror sharks” will continue their hunting season in the muddy waters of global instability.

present conditions of global security meltdown, fragmentation of the geopolitical landscape, intensifying strategic competition, and shifting power balances, terrorism can get a second wind after a certain period of relative decline.

In the evolving security environment, “novel” terrorism will likely emerge as being internet-centric, spatially distributed, techno-enabled, and partially state-supported. At the same time, it will continue to gravitate to certain geocultural regions of the world and operate in the framework of countering-modernity ideological projects. Terrorism will have its chemistry with ongoing wars, armed conflicts, and crises, either performing as a proxy force of one

of the involved state parties or an autonomous third party.

Given evolving conditions, relevant state actors (and interstate organizations) will need to consider revising their counterterrorism strategies *vis-à-vis* the new incarnations of this phenomenon. However, it is essential to note that even the most effective strategies and their practical applications will not lead to the complete eradication of the terrorist threat; at best, such measures will mitigate it to an acceptable level.

That being said, even this outcome is presently impossible, given the circumstances. This implies that the “terror sharks” will continue their hunting season in the muddy waters of global instability. **BD**

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Uncharted Rebellion

The Shifting Frontiers of Left-Wing Extremism

José Pedro Zúquete

For readers of *Baku Dialogues*, a journal dedicated to fostering intellectual exchange across the Silk Road region, the study of left-wing extremism (LWE) offers a lens into global ideological currents that resonate even in this historically rich and geopolitically and geoeconomically significant area. The Silk Road region, stretching from the South Caucasus to Central Asia, has long been a crossroads of cultures, ideas, and political movements. Today, it faces many of the same challenges of radicalization and extremism that afflict other parts of the world, though often in unique local forms.

While much attention in security discourse has focused on right-wing

and Islamist extremism, left-wing extremism remains under-examined, despite its evolving presence and potential to influence social and political stability. This paper explores the shifting dynamics of LWE, a phenomenon that, while less studied, is no less relevant to understanding the ideological battles shaping modern countries—including those belonging to the Silk Road region—where anti-state sentiments, extreme environmental activism, and resistance to technological overreach could find fertile ground amid rapid development and historical grievances.

A recent academic inquiry into the state of research on counterterrorism and violent extremism

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noted that left-wing extremism was “largely ignored” by researchers, with respondents identifying this gap as significant. The under-researched nature of LWE stems from several factors.

First, insufficient research on LWE derives from a historical focus on right-wing extremism. The politics of memory, as studied by Western scholars, plays a key role here. The historical experience of fascism and Nazism, and the way their legacies are portrayed in collective memory, have convinced many that extremism from the right poses the most destructive threat to the sta-

bility of liberal democracies. This construction of collective memory, portraying right-wing extremism as the ultimate, dangerous “Other,” facilitates the perception of left-wing extremism as a lesser evil—justifying comparatively less attention and resources devoted to its study.

Second, ideological biases and priorities within Western academia and government bureaucracies influence the allocation of resources and focus on certain types of extremism over others. In

the case of LWE, the rationale in those circles is that its self-designated values—such as anti-discrimination, anti-racism, and anti-fascism—are more aligned with the values of wider society than those of other extremists.

Since they are seen as radicalizing a Western society’s core values rather than clashing with them, LWE is accepted as inherently

Today, the Silk Road region faces many of the same challenges of radicalization and extremism that afflict other parts of the world, though often in unique local forms.

less threatening. This deduction reinforces a more lenient view of left-wing extremist manifestations—which may not even be perceived as extremist by many Western or Western-influenced researchers—and justifies practitioners demoting it in the hierarchy of democratic and security threats.

Third, this research imbalance stems from perceptions of a reduced threat. In the last decades of the twentieth century—especially between the 1960s and 1980s—left-wing, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist political violence was rampant in the West and the developing world, often described as the “third wave” of terrorism. Compared to that period, the threat and lethality

of left-wing armed resistance today seem to have faded, along with their revolutionary ideological origins steeped in various interpretations of Marxism as well as one thread of the legacy of communist statecraft, namely the export of revolution through violent means.

The quasi-absence, especially in Western democracies, of abductions, bank robberies, hijackings, bombings, and murder campaigns help explain the limited attention from researchers and practitioners from the turn of the century to the present day. The widespread sentiment is that LWE is not as pressing a topic as it once was. This disregard has generated a significant blind spot regarding features of left-wing extremism, such as intimate knowledge of its milieus, internal dynamics, discourses, drivers of radicalization, and violent manifestations.

Arguably, this asymmetry between research on LWE and other forms of extremism might be justifiable given data showing that contemporary left-wing groups and networks have been less lethal than right-wing and Islamist groups in terms of political violence. However, a broader analysis—including violence during mass protests, riots, site evictions, confrontations with law enforcement, and

physical targeting of political rivals—reveals a more serious scope of left-wing political violence. This includes injuries, particularly to police officers and ideological opponents, rather than just fatalities.

The notion advanced by some scholars that “far-left violence is mostly about property” as a justification for less scrutiny should not obscure the reality of non-lethal violence or the possibility that lethal violence could reemerge or intensify in the near future. Moreover, the neglect of LWE as a subject of study has left many non-violent dimensions unexplored, such as vocal extremism and its consequences for sowing division, disillusionment, and extremism, and otherwise affecting the public sphere.

This neglect has been more pronounced in universities and social sciences departments throughout the West than in Western think tanks or intelligence agencies, which have tracked the phenomenon over the years. However, the Western academic landscape appears to be shifting, which will likely affect developments in academia in the rest of the world. An increasing number of scholars, mostly based in the West, are examining extremism on the left, with notable developments such as the publication of the first academic handbook on left-wing

extremism in 2023 and a spike in studies addressing both its ideological and non-ideological drivers.

A Vast Landscape

Before exploring current trends in left-wing extremism, one last issue warrants consideration: its definitional complexity. LWE encompasses a variety of ideological trends and belief systems, a challenge that has only intensified since the turn of the century. Traditionally, it has been divided into two major branches: communism and anarchism, with sub-varieties in between. Both, in different ways, strive for a utopian new order of a free community of equals, clashing with the world as it exists.

This landscape has grown more complex in the twenty-first century with the rise in the West of a new Identitarian left, driven by a radical-progressive ideology fixated on marginalized identities based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. At its core lies an intersectional battle against what is seen

by its proponents as an oppressive system that must be dismantled. This multiplicity of causes, often pursued simultaneously, amplifies the diversity and fluidity of LWE milieus.

With this rapidly evolving landscape in mind, what follows is a condensed overview of the major drivers and trends in contemporary LWE and potential new directions.

Directions in Left-Wing Extremism

Not all possible trends are covered here, but rather the most dominant and often interrelated ones. Some represent a continuation or intensification of older dynamics, while others have emerged in response to new societal and technological developments.

For clarity, they are grouped under three main categories of struggle (ideological-political ‘wars,’ culture ‘wars,’ and civilizational ‘wars’) though these struggles frequently intertwine.

This paper explores the shifting dynamics of left-wing extremism, a phenomenon that is relevant to understanding the ideological battles shaping modern countries, including those belonging to the Silk Road region.

Ideological-political wars come in the following sub-categories: the anti-state / anti-police duo, militant antifascism (or “Antifa”), and several others. Each will be surveyed in turn.

Anti-state militancy can be included under a broader definition of anti-government extremism (AGE), a term that researchers have typically applied to right-wing extremism, but which is equally relevant here. A defining feature of AGE has been its rejection of the state as violent, tyrannical, and evil—an authoritarian and exploitative system beyond redemption, seen as the source of systemic and civilizational crises where force against it is often deemed legitimate.

A recent Europol trend report highlighted that government agencies and their personnel are primary targets for left-wing and anarchist extremists. Closely tied to this is a deep-seated sentiment against the police, often viewed as the “attack dogs” of the system. A 2021 report focused on EU member states noted that clashes with police—whether during mass protests, demonstrations against political opponents, or evictions of squatters—are a

key driver of far-left radicalization. Attacks on off-duty police officers have also occurred.

This confrontation is often expressed through radicalized collective protests and street battles, epitomized by the direct-action tactic of Black Blocs, where targets include state and corporate property as well as police personnel. In France, where Black Bloc tactics have been prominent in anti-government protests, a National Gendarmerie report observed that the most common slogans used by militants express hatred of the state, law enforcement, and capitalism.

However, this anti-state stance can, in certain contexts, adopt a nuanced form when the state appears to align against left-wing extremists’ adversaries. In such cases, these groups strategically operate under the state’s umbrella, exploiting mechanisms that target their ideological opponents to advance their own agenda.

In the United Kingdom, the non-crime hate incident (NCHI) framework, which records perceived hostile acts without criminal charges, risks incentivizing

LWE encompasses a variety of ideological trends and belief systems, a challenge that has only intensified since the turn of the century.

left-wing extremism. Its low evidential threshold—relying on subjective perceptions of prejudice—enables activists to weaponize reports against right-wing figures, prompting police visits to their homes despite no crime. High-profile cases, like Harry Miller’s 2019 NCHI for “transphobic” tweets, highlight this potential for abuse. In 2020, a British judge condemned the practice, stating, “In this country we have never had a Cheka, a Gestapo, or a Stasi. We have never lived in an Orwellian society.” Such measures may embolden groups like Antifa to escalate from reporting to direct actions, perceiving state support for their “anti-hate” agenda.

Militant anti-fascism, or “Antifa,” is another major driver of AGE. This decentralized social movement blends communists, socialists, and anarchists in a self-designated countermovement aimed at resisting and defeating fascism through violence. Antifa operates through both street activism—using confrontational violence against far-right protests, gatherings, and individuals—and digital

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activism, such as “doxing” to disclose private information of far-right activists, aiming to silence and stigmatize them.

The Antifa proclivity for street violence, visible in settings from the United States to Western Europe and even Brazil, gained prominence during events like the 2020 protests and riots driven by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the U.S., where a study showed the presence of Antifa elements significantly increased the risk of violence.

Some researchers describe the violence perpetrated by Antifa elements as “reactive,” “restrained,” or even ethical, arguing it is justified as self-defense against the greater evil of fascism. However, this view overlooks the conceptual stretching of “fascism” into a blanket term denouncing any group or movement deemed hostile to the militants’ communist, anarchist, or radically socialist worldview, weakening the anti-fascist justification for violence.

The notion of controlled violence also fails to account for numerous injuries to police and

ideological opponents or instances where Antifa activists have used lethal weaponry. In Germany, for example, authorities have issued successive alerts about well-organized left-wing extremist violence, with the head of the Berlin Agency for the Protection of the Constitution warning that such groups would not shy away from killing if necessary.

In 2023, the national president of the same agency noted an unrestrained escalation of LWE violence against state power and political opponents, raising concerns about potential terrorist structures emerging. This has included physical assaults on Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) members, arson, property destruction, and even online “death lists” of AfD politicians with bomb-making instructions. In 2023, members of the “Hammer Gang,” a left-wing extremist group with a prominent female leader, received prison sentences for violent attacks on right-wing extremists, causing significant injuries.

In France, too, Antifa faces judicial scrutiny, as authorities target groups perceived to engage in violent antifascist activism, prompting defenses from far-left political allies. In 2025, the French interior minister announced a procedure to potentially dissolve the Jeune Garde, an

antifascist group founded in 2018 and active in seven cities with over 100 members. Authorities accuse the group of violent attacks on far-right activists, citing “Antifasquad” Telegram posts and a 2024 Paris metro assault.

This trend also reflects cumulative extremism, where the rise of one form of extremism catalyzes others to counter it, often spiraling into violence. In the U.S., the growth of the White nationalist Alt-Right spiked Antifa militancy, visible during the 2020 BLM riots. In Western Europe, rising far-right support creates a “state of emergency” in the Antifa mindset, though the intensity of this reciprocal radicalization varies by country.

Yet, it cannot be overstated that Antifa’s anti-state ideology is not absolute and can shift when the state targets their far-right adversaries, transforming it into a perceived ally. In such instances, left-wing extremists leverage state actions to justify and amplify their militant campaigns.

In Germany, the May 2025 decision by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) to label the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—the country’s largest opposition party—as a “confirmed right-wing extremist

endeavor” could spur left-wing extremism. Although the BfV claimed it had gathered “definitive evidence” in making the determination, less than a week later its officials suspended the classification while a court case continues and instead labeled AfD a “suspected case.” As both classifications enable surveillance and may signal state-sanctioned targeting of AfD (including cuts to state funding for its political activities), this could embolden Antifa and similar groups to escalate attacks on its members. Perceiving this as tacit approval, left-wing extremists might intensify street confrontations or digital harassment, viewing AfD’s marginalization as justification for militant anti-fascist actions.

Four additional trends bear mentioning in this context. First, off-the-grid clandestine LWE cells may reemerge in response to increased state repression, with signs of this in Germany.

Second, Antifa violence could spill across borders, as seen in 2023 when foreign Antifa militants, some linked to Germany’s Hammer Gang, attacked perceived neo-Nazis in Budapest. The German and Italian citizens that were involved in these assaults faced varied outcomes: some received prison

sentences, others face ongoing trials in Hungary and Germany, and one of the Italians, elected to the European Parliament on Italy’s Green-Left Alliance list, gained immunity. The alleged German leader, accused of orchestrating the attacks, remains at large.

Third, foreign fighters with combat experience abroad—such as a German citizen who fought in Syria and assaulted right-wing extremists, or a French citizen with Syrian links sentenced in Paris for leading a “terrorist conspiracy” against the state—represent a growing concern, though data remains scarce.

Fourth, broader anti-system goals are increasingly inserted into specific intersectional protests, such as the U.S. coalition against “Cop City” in Georgia, advocating extreme anti-police messages, or the storming of a Tesla factory near Berlin by activists aiming to “overcome” capitalism.

Beyond Europe, a wave of vandalism and arson attacks, prominent in early 2025, targeted Tesla vehicles, dealerships, and charging stations, particularly in the United States but also in Canada, reflecting a fusion of anti-corporate and anti-system sentiments prevalent in LWE milieus. These incidents,

which escalated following Elon Musk's appointment to lead the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under the new Trump Administration, reflect a fusion of anti-corporate and anti-system sentiments prevalent in LWE milieus. Within the LWE framework, these attacks align with broader anti-capitalist and anti-technological narratives, targeting Tesla as a symbol of corporate power and Musk as an influential political figure who has become associated with the Trump Administration, which LWE deplore.

Culture Wars

Culture “wars”—struggles over values, ideals, and the sociocultural future of societies—have long fueled polarization and extremism in the West and elsewhere. Today, a major cleavage revolves around the rise of a left-Identitarian movement, often termed “Wokeness,” identified by some scholars as a potential driver of LWE.

This belief system operates within a Manichean framework of good versus evil, uplifting historically marginalized groups while opposing a hegemonic system of oppressive forces like systemic racism,

white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. This mindset fosters a desire for purification, expressed in efforts to dismantle educational systems, cultural heritage, and monuments, and to censor or cast out adversaries.

These traits reflect monism—a dogmatic thought pattern where everything stems from one simple truth, and dissent is invalid—as well as features shared by both right- and left-wing authoritarianism, such as moral absolutism, preference for social uniformity, prejudice toward outsiders, and punitiveness toward enemies. This mental attitude increases the potential for political violence, moving beyond intimidation into physical attacks against the system and its supporters.

Emerging trends include violent advocacy for pro-transgender policies, with signs in extreme transgender activism like a notable presence in Antifa street confrontations, online calls for a “trans day of vengeance,” and instances like the fatal shooting at a Nashville Christian school by a trans individual, justified by the Trans Resistance Network as a response to the perceived “genocidal eradication” of trans people in America.

Civilizational Wars

Civilization “wars” come in two basic forms: climate activism and technology. Climate activism, though heterogeneous, intersects with left-wing extremist ideas and practices, including efforts to sway climate protection protests.

Eco-extremism, or violence to protect the environment, has a decades-long history but has remained marginal. Recent years, however, have seen the rise of eco-apocalyptic movements like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Last Generation, and Just Stop Oil, which adopt desperate, confrontational approaches to avert climate catastrophe.

These groups focus on non-violent disruptive tactics—blockades, traffic obstruction, and vandalizing art—but authorities have cracked down on their illegal activities, with prison sentences issued in 2023 and France briefly dissolving the collective *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* over eco-terrorism claims, a decision later annulled.

Within these groups, vanguardist thinking—self-representation as an epistemologically privileged group with

exclusive access to truth and a mission of ecological salvation—poses risks to democracy. Proposals from groups like Last Generation for climate governing bodies to rule populations and curtail freedoms undermine popular sovereignty. The coupling of anti-pluralism with anti-constitutionalism could break down democratic order.

Additionally, apocalypticism fosters a “last resort” mentality, with eco-terrorism seen as the only solution. A founder of Germany's Ende Gelände, classified as left-wing extremist by Berlin's Office for the Protection of the Constitution, predicted a more militant movement cycle, potentially resembling a “Green RAF,” akin to the Red Army Faction terrorist group of the 1970s-1990s.

Similar dynamics appear in the U.S. with eco-guerrilla networks like Deep Green Resistance, reflecting climate change as an ideological driver of terrorism and a “threat multiplier” in security research.

Another front targets technology itself. Anticivilizationism equates the techno-industrial system with evil, uniting primitivists, radical environmentalists, and insurrectionary anarchists inspired by Ted

“Unabomber” Kaczynski’s 1995 manifesto on technology’s destabilizing effects, titled “Industrial Society and Its Future.”

Today, critical infrastructures—power lines, pipelines, railways, and 5G networks—are targeted through sabotage and arson as part of a campaign against the “machine world.” In the 2020s, Europol’s TE-SAT reports—annual assessments of terrorism trends in the EU based on member state data—have consistently highlighted the increasing focus of left-wing and anarchist extremists on digital society, advanced technologies, and 5G infrastructure.

Beyond physical attacks, cyber disruptions are also possible. A recent U.S. Homeland Security assessment warned of emerging technologies like AI enabling new destructive methods against critical infrastructure. Anti-technology terrorism could extend to humans, as seen in Kaczynski’s bombing campaign and later actions like the Mexican group Individualists Tending Toward the Wild targeting bio-nanotechnology scientists, or an Italian

anarchist leader’s call from prison to maximize damage to the “megamachine,” including its human operators.

Waves of the Future

The late David Rapoport, a renowned U.S. scholar of political violence, had pondered whether the recent surge in right-wing terrorism might herald a “global Fifth Wave” of terrorism. Yet, the next wave may prove far more complex and ideologically tangled than those of the past, propelled by digital acceleration and a growing tendency toward a “mix and match” approach to ideologies, rather than the uniform adoption seen historically.

This shift fragments extremism into looser networks, lone actors, and hybrid ideologies, reshaping the terrain of radicalization. For left-wing extremism, this transformation is particularly evident in the “civilizational wars” embraced by many activists, united by a shared collapsesist vision. They see an ongoing collapse—driven by climate apocalypse and the

Ultimately, the interplay of technology, environment, and collapse holds the potential not only to escalate far-left extremism but also to forge strange new coalitions, redefining the terrorist waves yet to come.

techno-industrial system—as a call to dismantle the current order. This narrative cuts across traditional left-right divides, opening the door to fluid convergences among diverse individuals and groups, each with differing post-collapse visions but aligned in their declinist outlook and chaotic tactics. The fact that Kaczynski garners admiration from both eco-guerrillas and eco-fascists exemplifies this unlikely alignment, hinting at future possibilities.

Beyond the West, where these dynamics are most documented, states in the Silk Road region and elsewhere could draw comparative lessons from this ideological fluidity, as local grievances and global influences

might similarly blur boundaries and spawn unexpected alliances. Ultimately, the interplay of technology, environment, and collapse holds the potential not only to escalate far-left extremism but also to forge strange new coalitions, redefining the terrorist waves yet to come.

The resurgence of left-wing extremism, with its hybridized ideologies spanning antifascism, anti-technology sabotage, and intersectional radicalism, demands not only further research on what admittedly is a complex and fast-moving environment but also adaptive counterterrorism frameworks to ensure the stability of states and regions. **BD**

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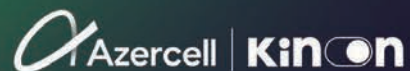
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A Region without Statelessness?

How Central Asia Proved It Is Possible

Sergiu Gaina

Imagine living in the country where you were born but never having the right to call it home. No passport, no identity document, no access to education, healthcare, or legal employment. Every visit to a government office ends the same way: “We have no record of you.”

For hundreds of thousands of people in Central Asia, this was their reality. Statelessness—where a person is not recognized as a national (citizen) by any country—left them in limbo, unable to fully participate in society. It meant exclusion from essential services, vulnerability to exploitation, and a life spent on the margins, with no clear path to change.

But things have changed. Over the past decade or so, Central Asia has led the world in ending

statelessness. The region has solved one-third of all statelessness cases globally—a clear demonstration that with sufficient political will and strategic action, this problem can be eradicated. Since 2014, more than 220,000 formerly stateless people in Central Asia have acquired nationality (citizenship), making it one of the most successful regions in the world in reducing stateless populations.

Two countries—Kyrgyzstan (in 2019) and Turkmenistan (in 2024)—have done something remarkable: they have resolved all known cases of statelessness on their territories. While new cases may still emerge, their numbers are expected to be minimal, particularly as governments continue strengthening legal safeguards.

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Statelessness in the region has its roots in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which left hundreds of thousands without citizenship. For many, administrative barriers, gaps in nationality laws, and complex bureaucratic procedures prolonged the situation. Some individuals lost their identity documents due to circumstances beyond their control, leaving them unable to work, travel, or access essential services such as healthcare. Others inherited statelessness, as their parents were also left without a nationality. Thanks to coordinated government action, external support, and sustained expert advocacy, Central Asia has moved from being a region with a significant stateless population to one that is leading efforts to resolve statelessness.

The adoption of the Ashgabat Declaration on Ending Statelessness in Central Asia in 2024 marked a turning point, reaffirming the region's commitment to ensuring every person has a legal identity. The Declaration outlines eight strategic directions, including enhancing statelessness determination procedures, ensuring universal birth registration, and facilitating cross-border citizenship confirmation.

Over the past decade or so, Central Asia has led the world in ending statelessness.

The impact has been profound. For some, acquiring citizenship meant securing legal employment and planning for a future that once seemed impossible. For others, it meant the ability to register their children, breaking the cycle of statelessness for the next generation.

As the world shifts from the UNHCR-led #IBelong Campaign to the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, Central Asia is at the forefront of efforts to make statelessness a thing of the past. The success of this region serves as an inspiration for the world, demonstrating that statelessness is not an impossible problem—it is a solvable one.

Two National Success Stories

Two countries—Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan—have demonstrated that ending statelessness is both possible and achievable through a combination of strong political will, targeted legal reforms, and collaboration with civil society and international organizations.

The Kyrgyz Republic made history in 2019 by becoming the first

country in the world to resolve all known cases of statelessness. This unprecedented achievement was the result of years of systematic efforts, which consisted of three basic elements.

First, *a nationwide campaign to identify and document stateless people.* With the support of UNHCR and civil society organizations, Kyrgyz authorities conducted extensive outreach programs, even in remote and hard-to-reach areas. Mobile legal clinics played a key role in ensuring that no stateless person was left behind.

Second, *strong partnerships with civil society.* The efforts of Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders, led by Nansen Award winner Azizbek Ashurov, were very important in this success. Their work, often carried out in collaboration with local government institutions, ensured that over 13,000 stateless people obtained Kyrgyz nationality.

Third, *legislative reforms to prevent future cases.* Kyrgyzstan implemented universal birth registration, ensuring that all children born there would receive birth

certificates regardless of their parents' status. The government also aligned its nationality laws with international standards, closing loopholes that previously led to new cases of statelessness.

The impact of these actions was immediate and profound. Once invisible to the state, thousands of people could suddenly access education, healthcare, and employment. For families that had been stateless for generations, acquiring nationality was more than a legal victory—it was the beginning of a new life with security and dignity.

In 2024, Turkmenistan granted nationality to its last known group of stateless people. The country also took important steps to prevent statelessness from re-emerging. Three of the most important will be briefly listed here.

First, *introducing one of the world's most detailed Statelessness Determination Procedures.* Turkmenistan created a strong legal framework based on good practices from France, Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, and Spain. This

procedure helped identify stateless people, issue them proper documentation, and support their access to citizenship.

Second, *acceding to both UN Statelessness Conventions.* In 2021, Turkmenistan became the first and (so far) only country in Central Asia to accede to the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. This marked a significant step toward aligning its legal framework on statelessness with international standards.

Third, *achieving universal birth registration.* Turkmenistan adopted laws to ensure all children are registered at birth, no matter their parents' nationality or legal status—an important step to prevent new cases of statelessness.

With these actions, Turkmenistan resolved statelessness in its territory and became a global leader in efforts to end statelessness. It was the first Central Asian country to join the new Global Alliance to End Statelessness and is committed to sharing its experience with others.

Other Central Asian Successes

While the Kyrgyz Republic and Turkmenistan were the first to resolve all existing statelessness cases, the three other Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—have also made important progress in reducing the number of stateless people and preventing new cases from arising.

Kazakhstan has taken several steps to address statelessness through legal reforms, targeted identification campaigns, and prevention measures. Three of the most important will be mentioned here.

First, *identifying and documenting stateless people.* In partnership with UNHCR and civil society organizations, Kazakhstan launched nationwide efforts to identify undocumented individuals at risk of statelessness or with undetermined nationality. Thousands

were documented, with many confirmed either as citizens or stateless persons eligible for legal status. This helped bring many people out of legal limbo and improved their access to rights and services.

Kazakhstan has taken several steps to address statelessness through legal reforms, targeted identification campaigns, and prevention measures.

Second, *introducing statelessness determination procedures.* Kazakhstan was the first country in Central Asia to adopt (in 2020) a statelessness determination procedure (SDP) without acceding to either of the UN Statelessness conventions. This shows that countries may follow different paths to tackle statelessness. Some, like Turkmenistan, accede to the conventions and then incorporate the standards into national law; others, like Kazakhstan, align their legislation as a first step toward possible accession. The Kyrgyz Republic followed a similar approach, becoming the second country in the region to introduce an SDP (in 2025) before joining the conventions. These procedures allow stateless people to be formally identified, access basic rights, and eventually apply for naturalization. Kazakhstan's early adoption of the SDP helped close protection gaps and provides an alternative option for other countries.

Third, *ensuring birth registration.* Legal changes now guarantee that all children born in Kazakhstan are entitled to birth registration, regardless of their parents' nationality or legal status. While the law

applies broadly, in practice, registration is more consistent for children born in medical institutions. Expanding outreach and ensuring flexible procedures remain key to reaching every child.

Kazakhstan's experience highlights the benefit of combining legal reform with practical outreach. Its efforts show that there is no single formula for ending statelessness—different strategies can be adapted to national contexts while moving toward the shared goal of inclusion and legal identity for all.

Tajikistan has made steady progress in reducing statelessness by introducing practical legal tools, expanding documentation efforts, and strengthening cooperation with UNHCR and civil society. Summaries of three of the most important outcomes follow.

First, *identifying people at risk.* Since 2014, Tajikistan has worked with UNHCR and its civil society partners to identify stateless people, those with undetermined nationality, or at risk of statelessness. By the end of 2024, over 60,000 individuals had been identified—about

Tajikistan's experience shows how flexible legal measures and outreach and documentation efforts can bring tangible results.

70 percent were women and girls. Most were found during targeted registration exercises in four regions. Over 90 percent of those identified received support to confirm or acquire Tajik citizenship.

Second, *providing legal pathways through an amnesty.* In 2019, Tajikistan adopted a law on amnesty for stateless people and foreigners residing in the country without formal legal status. The law, which remained in effect until 2022, created opportunities for individuals previously excluded from residence permits or citizenship procedures to regularize their stay and, where eligible, acquire nationality. It applied to various groups, including people with expired foreign residence permits, holders of USSR documents, undocumented individuals in border areas, and those lacking proof of nationality. As a result of its implementation, the law has helped resolve the cases of about 9,000 people.

Third, *building the foundation for future reforms.* Although Tajikistan is not yet party to either the 1954 or 1961 UN statelessness conventions, steps have been taken toward

accession. In 2023, the country's president signed a National Action Plan under the Human Rights Strategy, which includes the development of a statelessness determination procedure and consideration of joining the conventions.

Tajikistan's experience shows how flexible legal measures and outreach and documentation efforts can bring tangible results. Continued cooperation between the government and civil society has created momentum that may lead to deeper legal reforms and further reduce the risk of statelessness in the future.

Uzbekistan has made some of the most substantial contributions to resolving statelessness in Central Asia, reflecting the scale of its challenge and its strong commitment to inclusion. Among the many measures Tashkent has taken, three will be emphasized.

First, *establishing pathways to citizenship.* In 2020, Uzbekistan adopted important amendments to its citizenship law, allowing stateless people who had been permanent residents since before 1995 to acquire Uzbek nationality. This

Uzbekistan has made some of the most substantial contributions to resolving statelessness in Central Asia

reform offered a durable solution to tens of thousands of people who had lived in the country for decades without citizenship.

Second, *resolving the largest number of cases in the region*. Since 2014, over 93,000 stateless people in Uzbekistan have acquired citizenship—the highest number among Central Asian countries. This includes naturalized individuals and those whose citizenship was recognized under national procedures. Many had lived in Uzbekistan for decades, often as former Soviet citizens who had never obtained the nationality of a successor state. By addressing this legacy through legal improvements as well as targeted outreach, Uzbekistan has significantly reduced statelessness on its territory, with fewer than 20,000 people remaining stateless as of the end of 2024 and efforts continuing to resolve the remaining cases.

Third, *preventing future cases through birth registration*. Legal reforms introduced in 2018 guarantee that all children born in Uzbekistan can be registered at birth, regardless of their parents' nationality or legal status.

Uzbekistan's approach illustrates how sustained political will and inclusive legal reforms can bring transformative results. The country's

achievements are an important part of Central Asia's collective progress toward ending statelessness, and its experience offers valuable insights for other countries addressing similar challenges.

Remaining Challenges

Despite significant progress in reducing statelessness, Central Asia continues to face a number of complex and interlinked challenges, of which seven will be discussed below. While political will remains strong and the Ashgabat Declaration offers a coordinated regional framework for action, certain legal, administrative, and socio-economic barriers persist.

These issues risk leaving vulnerable people behind and also threaten to undermine the hard-earned gains of the past decade. Understanding these remaining challenges is essential to sustaining progress, ensuring everyone is included, and informing the next phase of action. Highlighting what still needs to be done to end statelessness provides a fuller picture of the journey from progress to permanence.

One, *statelessness determination procedures*. Among the most pressing challenges is

the incomplete or underdeveloped system of SDPs across several Central Asian countries. While Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Turkmenistan have formally introduced SDPs, their implementation varies in effectiveness. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, have yet to introduce procedures that align fully with international standards. The absence of these mechanisms leaves many stateless people without a pathway to recognition or legal status, often relegating them to live in legal invisibility for years.

The lack of a harmonized approach to SDPs also results in inconsistencies across the region. Without regionally aligned criteria for defining statelessness, individuals with a similar set of facts may be recognized in one country but not in another. This legal ambiguity is particularly problematic in cases involving people with ties to more than one Central Asian state.

While the shared Soviet legacy has significantly shaped documentation systems and citizenship frameworks, cross-border familial ties and mobility in this region predate the Soviet Union. Historically,

communities moved freely across what are now international borders, living, working, and intermarrying without encountering today's administrative barriers. These long-standing patterns of movement and residence mean that many people today have complex personal histories that do not neatly align with current legal categories, making it challenging to prove citizenship or qualify for it.

Two, *citizenship acquisition processes*. Acquiring citizenship in Central Asia can be long and challenging, especially for stateless people or those seeking naturalization. In most countries in the region, dual citizenship is not allowed. This

Highlighting what still needs to be done to end statelessness provides a fuller picture of the journey from progress to permanence.

means that individuals who wish to become citizens must give up their current nationality before applying. However, there are usually no legal guarantees that

their application will be approved. As a result, they may find themselves without any nationality during the process—a period of legal limbo in which they are effectively stateless. During this time, they may not be able to access basic services.

The absence of clear safeguards worsens this problem to ensure

that someone's original citizenship is only given up once new citizenship is officially granted. Without such protections, applicants risk being permanently excluded if their naturalization is denied or significantly delayed. The naturalization procedures themselves are often long, complicated, and hard to navigate. This uncertainty discourages people from applying, especially if they cannot access legal advice or afford the administrative costs.

The consequences of these obstacles extend beyond the people directly affected. Individuals who remain stateless cannot fully participate in society or contribute to the formal economy, affecting their well-being and broader social and economic development. The impact can also be passed down to their children. Unless governments address these gaps—through simpler and more inclusive procedures—the goal of ending statelessness in the region will remain out of reach.

Three, the burden of proof and legal complexity. Stateless people are often asked to show many documents to prove who they are, where they are from, or where they have lived. This is especially hard for people who have lived most of their lives without any official papers. They may be asked to provide documents like old Soviet

passports, residence permits, their parents' birth certificates, or letters from embassies saying they are not citizens of another country. For many, collecting all these papers is almost impossible.

They may give up on the process if they do not have free legal help or clear instructions in a language they understand. This problem is even worse in remote or rural areas, where legal support and government services are harder to reach. Also, as countries in the region move more services online, stateless people often do not have the digital skills or technology needed to use these systems. This can prevent them from registering or getting the help they need.

Four, a persistent gap in birth registration. Even though laws in Central Asian countries now require all children to be registered at birth, these laws are not always followed in practice. This is especially true for children born outside hospitals or to parents who do not have legal documents. In some cases, families must go to court to prove that a child was born. This process can take a lot of time, is legally complicated, and costs more than many families can afford.

When a child does not have a birth certificate, they are at

immediate risk of becoming stateless—especially in countries where being registered at birth does not automatically make a child a citizen. Without documents, these children might not know they are excluded until they try to start school, see a doctor, or apply for an identity card. In Tajikistan, for example, there are fees for registering a birth late, which can stop low-income parents from finishing the process. This creates a cycle where children grow up without legal identity and face many barriers later in life.

Five, lack of accurate and disaggregated data. One of the biggest challenges in addressing statelessness is that many stateless people are not counted in official data. They are often left out of national registration systems and household surveys. The Ashgabat Declaration calls for better data collection and more transparency, but putting this into practice is still uneven across the region.

National censuses are great opportunities to identify people who are stateless or undocumented. But because Central Asia is a vast region, with many people living in remote areas or are on the move for some or even most of the year, it can be difficult to reach everyone. Some individuals may not take part in the census because they do not

have identification documents or are afraid of contact with government officials.

As more services and data collection move online, these groups may become more excluded. Without accurate data, governments cannot plan effectively. They may miss important information, such as how many children need school places, how many families need social support, or how many doctors are required in different communities.

Six, vulnerabilities linked to gender, age, and disability. Although nationality laws in Central Asia generally allow both women and men to pass on their nationality to their children equally, certain groups continue to face greater risks of statelessness in practice. Women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable due to a combination of legal, social, and economic barriers that limit their access to documentation and legal identity.

In many families, especially in rural areas or where household income is low, men are often the primary income earners and may travel abroad for work. When families decide whose documents to prioritize, the father frequently obtains a passport or other identity papers,

while the mother and children remain undocumented. If the father becomes absent or unreachable, the remaining family members may struggle to obtain documents on their own. Mothers may face administrative hurdles or hidden requirements—e.g., presenting the father’s documents or presence—that make it difficult to register their children, even when the law does not explicitly require it.

Children born at home or outside of medical facilities are especially at risk of missing out on birth registration. Without legal proof of birth, they may face barriers to enrolling in school, accessing health care, or being included in social protection systems. These early gaps can result in a lifetime of exclusion.

Older persons who never transitioned from Soviet-era documentation to citizenship of a successor state often remain undocumented. Many lack the financial resources, mobility, or support networks needed to resolve their legal status, which leaves them unable to access pensions, health care, or other public services.

Persons with disabilities also face unique challenges. Physical, communication, and environmental barriers can prevent them from traveling to registration offices or

understanding the procedures required. In some cases, they may be dependent on caregivers who themselves are undocumented, making the process even more complex. Without accessible services and inclusive outreach, persons with disabilities risk being further marginalized and excluded from their rights.

These groups are not inherently stateless, but they are more likely to become or remain stateless without targeted action. Human rights principles require that all individuals have equal access to legal identity and nationality, regardless of gender, age, disability, or social status. Addressing these vulnerabilities calls for inclusive and accessible procedures, outreach tailored to different groups’ needs, and removing legal and practical barriers that prevent people from claiming their rights.

Seven, overlooked and hard-to-reach populations at risk of statelessness. In addition to the groups already discussed, some people are still being left out of efforts to end statelessness. These include individuals with unclear or undetermined nationality, people in detention without documents, and members of ethnic or linguistic communities who face exclusion. Because these groups are often not

counted or included in national data, their numbers and needs remain largely unknown.

People held in detention facilities without identity documents are especially at risk. They may not receive legal help or fair treatment without proof of nationality. After release, they often struggle to reintegrate into society. In addition, no specific process exists to determine if detainees are stateless or at risk of statelessness. This leaves their legal status unresolved for years.

Statelessness also affects people’s mental health. Living for years without recognition or legal identity can lead to stress, hopelessness, and mistrust of institutions. This is especially painful for those who have lived their whole lives in one country but are still not accepted as citizens.

These challenges underscore that legal reforms alone are not enough. Many people will remain excluded from solutions without inclusive implementation, sustained outreach, and better data. To truly end statelessness in Central Asia, efforts must be intensified and guided by the

principles of equality, dignity, and the right of every person to belong.

The Way Ahead

Unanimously adopted by the five Central Asian states in November 2024, the Ashgabat Declaration represents both a historic milestone and a forward-looking roadmap for regional cooperation. It marks the transition from the ten-year #IBelong Campaign to the broader and more inclusive Global Alliance to End Statelessness, while affirming the extraordinary achievements of the past decade. With more than 220,000 people having acquired nationality in the region since 2014, Central Asia has become a global leader in efforts to resolve statelessness.

More than a reflection of past progress, the Ashgabat Declaration sets out a forward-looking roadmap. It presents a regional commitment to eliminating residual cases of statelessness, preventing new ones, and ensuring that no one is left behind. It reaffirms Central Asia’s dedication to human dignity,

To truly end statelessness in Central Asia, efforts must be intensified and guided by the principles of equality, dignity, and the right of every person to belong.

legal identity, and equality before the law.

Ending statelessness is essential to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the centerpiece of which is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG16 on inclusive societies and access to justice and SDG10 on reducing inequality. Far beyond being a legal anomaly, statelessness is a fundamental driver of exclusion and marginalization. It undermines nearly every development priority, from education and health to employment, gender equality, and social cohesion.

The Ashgabat Declaration recognizes this link. By ensuring that every person possesses a legal identity and enjoys access to rights and services, Central Asian countries advance human rights, strengthen governance, build more resilient societies, and promote inclusive development. As the region works toward the 2030 Agenda, the commitment to eliminate stateless

-ness will remain a central pillar of the pledge to “leave no one behind.”

The opportunity to align national and regional actions with the initiatives of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) brings additional momentum. The UNESCAP-coordinated platform “Get Every One in the Picture” emphasizes universal civil registration and vital statistics systems—a cornerstone for ending statelessness.

The Ashgabat Declaration reinforces this priority. Achieving universal birth registration across the region will require continued legislative reform, outreach to marginalized communities, and the removal of administrative and financial barriers. As countries prepare for the Third

Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific, scheduled for June 2025, Central Asia is poised to demonstrate how cross-sectoral action can close gaps and strengthen legal identity systems.

Far beyond being a legal anomaly, statelessness is a fundamental driver of exclusion and marginalization. It undermines nearly every development priority, from education and health to employment, gender equality, and social cohesion.

With the launch of the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, Central Asia has a new platform to share its experiences and shape global solutions. Turkmenistan has already joined the Alliance, reaffirming its commitment to international cooperation. Other countries in the region are well-positioned to contribute through leadership, innovation, and peer exchange. The diverse experiences across Central Asia—from Turkmenistan’s full accession to the UN Statelessness Conventions, to Kazakhstan’s early introduction of a statelessness determination procedure, and Kyrgyzstan’s historic resolution of all known cases—offer valuable and complementary models that can inform and inspire efforts beyond the region.

Uzbekistan’s citizenship reforms and Tajikistan’s amnesty law show that bold national policies, supported by international cooperation and public engagement, can produce transformative results. Central Asia’s collective experience offers practical tools, lessons, and inspiration for other countries tackling similar challenges.

The Global Alliance provides a peer exchange, innovation, and collaboration platform. Through

participation in the Alliance, Central Asian countries can continue to shape global solutions by sharing their expertise, hosting study visits, supporting legal and policy development, and continuing to reform their systems in line with international standards.

Central Asia has already demonstrated that statelessness is not an intractable problem, but a human rights challenge that can be solved through vision, inclusion, and sustained commitment. The decade of action under the #IBelong Campaign has laid a strong foundation. The next phase must build on that legacy—not just with technical reforms, but through systems that are accessible, inclusive, and centered on the dignity of every person.

The Ashgabat Declaration, the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, the 2030 Agenda, and the UNESCAP regional platform form a comprehensive framework. With continued regional cooperation and global engagement, Central Asia is well-positioned to become the first region in the world to fully eradicate statelessness—transforming a decade of progress into a lasting legacy of inclusion. **BD**

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Progress in Ending Statelessness in Europe

Sam Mosallai

Europe is home to almost 500,000 stateless people or people with undetermined nationality, mainly due to the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia over three decades ago. Other causes of statelessness in Europe include the lack of safeguards to prevent children from being born stateless, gaps in universal birth registration, and, to a lesser extent, the deprivation of nationality as a counterterrorism measure. Many Roma, particularly those residing in Southeastern Europe, are stateless or at risk of statelessness due to persistent discrimination against them. Additionally, due to the lack of dedicated statelessness determination procedures found in many countries in Europe, many stateless migrants cannot enjoy the rights to which they are entitled under international law.

Statelessness threatens a person's core identity by denying them the right to a nationality, which affects

their sense of belonging. Stateless people cannot access basic rights such as going to school, working legally, accessing healthcare, or getting married. Resolving statelessness benefits the wider society. Providing children with citizenship reduces vulnerability and ensures access to essential rights and services while helping reduce social tensions, leading to more inclusive and resilient societies. Stateless individuals also represent an untapped workforce, who, if allowed to incorporate into the formal labor force, could contribute to national economies.

Statelessness in Europe

Most countries in Europe are party to the two UN Statelessness Conventions: the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954) and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (1961). The 1954

Convention includes the international legal definition of a stateless person while also granting specific rights to stateless individuals, including access to education, employment, housing, identity documents, travel documents, and administrative assistance. The 1961 Convention requires states to implement legal safeguards to prevent statelessness at birth or later in life, particularly in cases of loss or renunciation of nationality or state succession.

Cyprus, Estonia, and Poland are the last three of the 27 EU member states that are not yet state parties to either Statelessness Convention, in addition to 5 non-EU countries (Andorra, Belarus, Monaco, the Russian Federation, and San Marino). France, Greece, Malta, Switzerland, and Türkiye are state parties to the 1954 Convention but not to the 1961 Convention.

Children born to parents of unknown nationality, stateless parents, or parents who are unable to transmit their nationality to their offspring face risks of prolonged statelessness in the majority of countries in Europe. This is due to a lack of or insufficient legal safe-

Europe is home to almost 500,000 stateless people or people with undetermined nationality, with many of them unable to enjoy the rights to which they are entitled under international law.

guards against child statelessness.

One of the most critical safeguards to prevent statelessness among children is ensuring that nationality laws allow children born within a state's territory

to acquire its nationality if they would otherwise be stateless. Its importance is further reinforced by international human rights instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976), both of which reaffirm every child's right to acquire a nationality.

Additionally, nationality laws must include provisions to grant nationality to children born to nationals abroad who would otherwise be stateless. Another essential safeguard is the presumption of nationality for foundlings (children of unknown parentage) to ensure they are considered nationals of the state in which they are found.

Currently, the nationality laws and administrative procedures in 26 countries in Europe lack safeguards against statelessness at birth that benefit all children born stateless in the country.

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Moreover, the difficulties in registering all children at birth, the lack of awareness of the importance of birth registration, and the incorrect or incomplete registration of births remain key challenges in some successor states to the former Soviet Union, in Central Europe, Southeastern Europe, and Türkiye. Documentary evidence requirements, fees, unawareness of the importance of birth registration, and discrimination are all obstacles to universal birth registration.

Birth registration is crucial for the prevention of risks of statelessness. Individuals may be at risk of statelessness if they have difficulties proving their links to a state. Lack of birth registration can create such a risk. This is because birth registration documents contain information about where a person was born and who their parents are—key pieces of information needed to establish which nationality a child can acquire. Certain groups may face unique challenges, particularly children born out of wedlock (including those conceived as a result of gender-based violence), nomadic populations, and children of non-citizens, such as refugees and migrants.

In some cases, proof of parental marriage can determine whether a child is registered at birth and granted nationality. Many civil laws either prohibit women from registering the births of their children in all circumstances or allow them to do so only in

exceptional cases. These legal and administrative barriers increase the risk of statelessness, preventing children from accessing fundamental rights and protections.

In parts of Europe, particularly in Western Europe, statelessness primarily occurs in a migratory context. In such circumstances, a Statelessness Determination Procedure (SDP) helps to identify stateless persons and ensures that they are granted the rights to which they are entitled until they acquire a nationality.

Without a formal SDP, stateless persons may remain invisible within migration and asylum systems, unable to access basic rights and services. An effective SDP helps establish legal status, granting individuals residency rights, access to work, healthcare, and education, while also facilitating pathways to naturalization.

Additionally, SDPs contribute to better data collection and policy development, enabling governments to implement targeted solutions for preventing and reducing statelessness. SDPs help protect fundamental human rights and promote long-term inclusion by identifying and addressing statelessness within migration systems.

A total of 18 countries and territories in Europe have dedicated statelessness determination procedures

and protection frameworks in place to ensure that stateless persons who migrated there are identified and can enjoy the rights they are entitled to under the 1954 Convention. These are Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Spain, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, as well as Kosovo (all references to Kosovo should be understood in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)). However, some of these existing mechanisms lack procedural safeguards, as set out in UNHCR's Handbook on Protection of Stateless Persons. In Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Switzerland, the law provides for rights and/or a legal status for stateless persons based on their statelessness, but lack dedicated determination mechanisms.

A Decade of Achievements

Although it may seem complex, statelessness is solvable with political will and coordinated action. UNHCR's #IBelong Campaign, launched in 2014 with the goal of ending statelessness by 2024, focused on promoting legal reforms, raising awareness, and supporting initiatives that help stateless individuals acquire nationality. While countries have made significant achievements, further steps are still needed to fully resolve statelessness and ensure

the rights and inclusion of stateless people in Europe.

During the High-Level Segment on Statelessness (HLS) and the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in 2019, the 2023 GRF and the 2024 HLS, more than 30 states in Europe, intergovernmental organizations, and civil society groups pledged to take action to address statelessness. To date, about one-third of the pledges made have been implemented, while another third is on track to be completed. This reflects the political will and determination of other key actors across Europe to resolve statelessness, as evidenced also by commitments made through other mechanisms like the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Apart from states, regional intergovernmental organizations such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe play a vital role in addressing statelessness in Europe by promoting compliance with relevant legal frameworks and advocating for policy reforms.

The Council of Europe has established key legal instruments to safeguard people's right to a nationality, including the European Convention on Nationality (1997) and the Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in Relation to State Succession (2006). The OSCE, particularly through its Office for Democratic Institutions and

Human Rights (ODIHR) and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), focuses on preventing and reducing statelessness as part of its broader work on human rights and the protection of minorities.

In December 2015, the EU Council adopted the first ever Conclusions on statelessness, which led to the launch of the European Migration Network Platform on Statelessness in 2016. The platform was established to promote the exchange of information and good practices among EU member states.

Under the umbrella of the #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness and with the support of UNHCR and relevant stakeholders, states in Europe have made significant progress towards the prevention and reduction of statelessness and the protection of stateless people. Key achievements include:

Over the last decade, several countries across Europe have acceded to the Statelessness Conventions to resolve cases within their territories. This includes Italy in 2015, Luxembourg in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. Further, in 2018 Spain acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, while Malta and Türkiye acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. Iceland acceded to

both Conventions in 2021. Slovenia is in the process of acceding to the 1961 Convention. This brings the total of current states parties from Europe to the 1954 Convention to 40 and the 1961 Convention to 34.

Thousands of stateless individuals have received nationality thanks to decisive action from national governments across Europe, in coordination with UNHCR and civil society groups. In Southeastern Europe, more than 6,000 formerly stateless people acquired a nationality or had it confirmed since 2014. For instance, legislative reforms in North Macedonia allowed 608 out of 786 known persons at risk of statelessness residing there to confirm their nationality. Several other countries—including Albania, Armenia, Estonia, Iceland, Georgia, Greece, Luxembourg, and Ukraine—have made efforts to facilitate the naturalization of stateless persons, including through the reduction of residency requirements or waiver of fees.

At least nine countries in Europe have introduced safeguards in their nationality laws to prevent child statelessness. For example, Albania adopted a new Citizenship Law in 2020 that grants Albanian citizenship to all children born in Albania who would otherwise be stateless. Spain has had robust safeguards against childhood statelessness in its nationality law for years, and in 2022 Spanish courts introduced broad

criteria in interpreting applicable safeguards to allow access to nationality or civil registration for migrant children born in transit.

Albania, Bulgaria, Iceland, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Türkiye, and Ukraine, as well as Kosovo (UNSCR 1244 (1999)), have established statelessness determination procedures (SDPs), while others have made improvements to their existing procedures, including Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, and Moldova. In particular, the latter country is widely considered to have one of the best SDPs in Europe, bringing together a number of best practices.

Several countries in Europe have tried to increase access to universal birth registration, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, and Ukraine, as well as Kosovo (UNSCR 1244 (1999)). In 2020, Montenegro had reformed its procedures to ensure that abandoned children or those born to mothers without identification documents are registered and have access to nationality.

Addressing Statelessness

As the UN agency entrusted by the UN General Assembly with a global mandate to identify and protect stateless people

worldwide and to engage in the prevention and reduction of statelessness, UNHCR engages in a broad range of activities to address statelessness. UNHCR's current mandate on statelessness was consolidated in 2006 when the General Assembly endorsed UNHCR's Executive Committee Conclusion No. 106 on the Identification, Prevention and Reduction of Statelessness and the Protection of Stateless Persons. The General Assembly has specifically requested UNHCR "to provide technical and advisory services pertaining to the preparation and implementation of nationality legislation to interested States."

In implementing its mandate, UNHCR collaborates with a wide range of stakeholders in Europe, recognizing that a coordinated multistakeholder approach is needed to find lasting solutions. Key areas of action include legal and technical assistance, capacity-building, advocacy, data collection, and direct engagement with stateless people. Each will be briefly discussed below.

First, *technical assistance and capacity-building*. Effective responses to statelessness in Europe require sustained support to governments in aligning national legal frameworks with international standards on the prevention and reduction of statelessness and the protection of stateless people. This includes

cooperation between national authorities, regional and international organizations, legal experts, and civil society groups to ensure that laws and policies not only address the root causes of statelessness and provide adequate safeguards but are also effectively implemented in practice without discrimination.

Capacity-building is essential to equip asylum officials, civil registers, border guards, and judges with the knowledge and skills needed to identify and address statelessness effectively. Regional and global training programs such as the statelessness courses provided by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in San Remo have benefited thousands of government officials and representatives of civil society groups, enhancing their ability to implement appropriate legal safeguards.

Cross-border exchange of information and good practices is equally important in strengthening responses to statelessness. This can be achieved through study visits, bilateral exchanges, and the publication of good practice documents. For example, in October 2022, consultations in Madrid brought together government officials from across Europe to

UNHCR engages in a broad range of activities to address statelessness, including legal and technical assistance, capacity-building, advocacy, data collection, and direct engagement with stateless people.

discuss challenges and good practices related to the implementation of statelessness determination procedures in the region.

Finally, legal assistance plays a crucial role in addressing statelessness, as it

helps individuals navigate complex legal and administrative procedures to obtain nationality, civil status registration, and identity documentation. Strengthening access to legal aid ensures that stateless individuals can exercise their rights and prevents risks of statelessness.

Second, *joint advocacy*. Statelessness cannot be resolved in isolation; it requires collaborative efforts among governments, UN agencies, international organizations, civil society groups, and affected local communities. High-level events and advocacy initiatives can be powerful tools in advancing efforts to address statelessness, as they provide a platform to build momentum and an opportunity to strengthen commitments.

For example, conferences such as the 2021 Strasbourg Conference on Statelessness, co-organized by UNHCR and the Council of Europe, and the 2023 regional High-Level Conference on Access

to Civil Documentation and the Prevention of Statelessness in South-Eastern Europe, organized by UNHCR and OSCE, have contributed to renewed commitments from participating stakeholders. The latter conference led to a joint pledge from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia to resolve all known cases of statelessness within their territories and take measures to prevent children from being born stateless. Similarly, a multistakeholder conference on Addressing Statelessness in Europe, organized by the European Network on Statelessness in Madrid in 2023, brought together key stakeholders and helped reinvigorate efforts across various sectors to tackle statelessness.

These initiatives demonstrate the impact that strategic advocacy events can have in mobilizing political will, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that statelessness remains a priority on national and regional agendas.

Third, *generation of data*. Reliable quantitative and qualitative data on statelessness are essential for understanding the scope of the issue, identifying affected populations, and developing effective policies and interventions. It allows for evidence-based decision-making, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively

and that solutions address the specific needs of stateless communities. National statistical offices play an important role in collecting data and producing statistics on stateless populations, including through analyzing civil registration data, conducting population censuses, and carrying out targeted surveys and studies.

In close collaboration with governments from Europe and civil society groups operating in the region, UNHCR has conducted mapping studies and surveys in 20 countries in Europe (Albania, Austria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom) to better understand the size and profile of the stateless population in their territory. The UNHCR-funded ENS Statelessness Index continues to be the most comprehensive comparative tool for assessing the laws, policies, and practices of countries in Europe on the protection of stateless people and the prevention and reduction of statelessness.

The International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS), developed by the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRIS) and endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission in 2023, marks a

significant step toward improving the availability and quality of data on stateless populations. The recommendations provide guidance to countries on how better to include stateless persons in their national statistical systems and thus improve official statistics on stateless populations.

Fourth, *engagement with affected communities*. Engaging with stateless communities is essential to developing effective and sustainable solutions to statelessness. Stateless individuals and communities have firsthand experience of the challenges and barriers that exist, making their perspectives invaluable in shaping policies. Recognizing this, UNHCR has stepped up its engagement with people with lived experience of statelessness, ensuring that stateless people have a platform to share their perspectives, challenges, and recommendations.

In recent years, the number of stateless-led organizations has grown, strengthening advocacy efforts at both national and regional levels. The Apatride Network, a pan-European stateless-led initiative, has emerged as a key platform amplifying the voices of stateless individuals. National-level organizations have also been established, such as *Unione Italiana Apolidi* in Italy, the *Stateless Rights Collective* in the Netherlands, and *Statefree* in Germany, all working to advance the rights of stateless people and push for systemic change. More

than ever, stateless people are actively engaged in decision-making spaces, influencing policies that directly affect their lives. However, despite these advancements, more efforts are needed to fully center communities affected by statelessness in efforts to address statelessness.

Renewed Efforts

On 14 October 2024, UNHCR launched the Global Alliance to End Statelessness during its Executive Committee Meeting in Geneva. This collaborative platform brings together governments, intergovernmental organizations, UN agencies, stateless-led organizations, and civil society groups. The Global Alliance aims to enhance collective advocacy, galvanize political commitments, and accelerate solutions to statelessness through a multistakeholder approach.

A key initiative of the Global Alliance will be the Solution Seekers Programme, designed to mobilize Champion States and intergovernmental organizations to set an example in addressing statelessness. Solution Seeker States are expected to take practical steps to prevent and reduce statelessness domestically, but may also be called upon to share their practical approaches with other countries. (For more on this, see the adjoining text box.)

The Solution Seekers Programme

All states and regional intergovernmental bodies can become Solution Seekers. States or regional intergovernmental organizations who wish to become Solution Seekers need to:

- **Be a member of the Global Alliance:**

States and regional intergovernmental organizations must be members of the Global Alliance and thereby have endorsed the vision and mission of the Global Alliance.

- **Have an active pledge:**

Solution Seekers must have one or more active pledges to address statelessness. These pledges should have been delivered in the context of events such as the Global Refugee Forums (both 2019, 2023 and future ones), the 2021 High-Level Officials Meeting, and/or the 2019 High-Level Segment on Statelessness.

- **Have a taskforce or focal point:**

A Solution Seeker State must have a Taskforce on Statelessness or a Statelessness Focal Point at the senior technical level, located within the ministry most relevant to the implementation of the pledge(s). Alternatively, a cross-sectoral taskforce can be established if the implementation of pledges falls across multiple ministries/departments. If a taskforce/focal point is not yet in place, this needs to be established within 12 months of joining the Programme.

- **Have a pledge implementation and/or a National Action Plan:**

Entities must have a time-bound pledge implementation plan with clear, measurable milestones, developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including stateless people or communities who stand to benefit from the pledge(s). It is strongly recommended that States formulate a comprehensive National Action Plan (NAP) to End Statelessness, incorporating the pledge implementation plan. The NAP or pledge implementation plan must be established either at the time of joining the Solution Seeker Programme or within 12 months of joining the programme.

Building on the momentum generated over the past decade to eradicate statelessness in Europe, efforts continue to focus on supporting states in adopting or strengthening mechanisms and policies to resolve and prevent statelessness. Collaboration among governments, international organizations, and civil society groups remains essential to ensuring that the

rights and inclusion of stateless individuals are effectively addressed and upheld.

To effectively address statelessness in accordance with international standards, efforts should continue to focus particularly on supporting states to:

- Amend legislation to grant nationality automatically at birth or

as soon as possible after birth to children who would otherwise be stateless.

- Ensure access to universal birth registration for all children born on the territory, regardless of the parents' ethnicity, nationality, documentation, or migration status, and ensure that gaps in birth registration are closed through legislation, policies, and practice.
- Establish dedicated procedures for identifying and determining statelessness in countries with migratory stateless populations to ensure that people can access their rights, including access to

facilitated naturalization, and children born to stateless parents are granted nationality.

- Raise awareness among marginalized communities through information campaigns and social and legal assistance, to identify children who are not registered and provide assistance to people to complete registration procedures.
- Engage with stateless people and people with lived experience of statelessness to increase understanding of the problem and identify suitable solutions.
- Renew commitment to address statelessness by joining the Global Alliance to End Statelessness. ^{BD}

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Leaving No One Behind in Northern and Central Asia

Climate Change, Vulnerable Groups, and Data-Driven Policymaking

Selahattin Selsah Pasali

More than four in five people in Asia and the Pacific reportedly face multi-hazard risks associated with slow or sudden onset climate events, according to the latest Asia-Pacific Disaster Report published by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Many existing hotspots of climate-related multi-hazards are forecast to intensify. Individuals residing in these hotspots, often already low-income and with limited access to basic services and infrastructure, will likely be exposed to more frequent and intense sudden- and slow-onset natural disasters.

Noteworthy is the assessment that migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and stateless persons residing in many parts of these vast geographic areas reportedly face even more daunting challenges in this category, due to their vulnerable legal status, limited coping capacity, and access to basic services and opportunities.

Several countries in Northern and Central Asia are already classified as intensifying or emerging multi-hazard risk hotspots under the 1.5- or 2.0-degree Celsius global warming scenarios. For instance, close to 10 percent of the population in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

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are forecasted to be exposed to intensifying climate change-related risks. The Aral Sea basin is a particular case in point. Over 50 million people residing around that basin in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan are said to be increasingly vulnerable.

At the same time, new disaster hotspots are emerging, as well. For instance, over 15 percent of the population in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan is expected to live in emerging hotspots. High water stress is one of the major channels through which climate change is projected to

impact people in the subregion. According to the latest Assessment Report issued by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021), Central Asia is warming faster than other regions, with the implication of melting glaciers and a loss of snow and ice sheets. Water scarcity and increased frequency of drought are expected. The exposure of energy infrastructure to climate hazards is another important impact channel.

This analysis aims to widen the knowledge base in the context of

climate change and the “leaving no one behind” premise of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It analyzes several household surveys collected recently in the Northern and Central Asia region, using an innovative empirical methodology. In the context of vulnerability and capacity to cope with climate change, the results shed light on the “who” and the “where” of what are called “fur-

Migrants, refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons residing in many parts of Asia and the Pacific face daunting multi-hazard risks associated with slow or sudden onset climate events.

thest behind” individuals and households in that part of the world. The results presented here may inspire further academic research and support inclusive and evidence-based sectoral policies as

countries accelerate climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Intricate Links

Various UN publications point to the fact that climate change and rising socioeconomic inequalities are inextricably linked, with severe adverse effects falling on the lives and livelihoods of people living in affected areas. Such effects are falling especially on marginalized people, like stateless persons, who live in vulnerable situations

and lack the capacity and resources to cope with complex shocks.

What is more, there is a broad spectrum of exposure and vulnerability to climate-related risks and how they affect people through multiple dimensions. These dimensions include, but are not limited to, health and food security, health systems and social services, economy, displacement, and human mobility and urbanization.

Where and in what conditions people live and why can influence the degree to which they are exposed to climate change. Lower-income households living in rural areas are particularly at risk in some countries, as shown in detail in ESCAP's flagship report Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific in 2024.

Take the example of Mongolia. On average, 3.3 percent of households experienced what is classified as a climate change-induced disaster in 2022. Across the country's five regions, the prevalence and variation of exposure is relatively low except in Western Mongolia, where 16 percent of households were exposed to disasters. Furthest

behind are lower-income households living in rural areas, where more than one in four were exposed to a disaster.

Lower-income households living in remote areas are also affected in what are called in UN terminology "small island developing states," including the Maldives and Vanuatu. Exposure to climate-in-

Climate change and rising socioeconomic inequalities are inextricably linked, with severe adverse effects falling on the lives and livelihoods of people living in affected areas.

duced disasters was found to be twice as high in remote and rural areas as in urban areas in Vanuatu. The gaps were more striking in the Maldives, where households living in the capital were four times less likely to be affected by disasters than those living in other atolls. Without requisite data, such an analysis is not yet empirically possible to conduct in Northern and Central Asia countries.

Furthermore, inequality in access to basic services and infrastructure amplifies the lack of resilience and thereby is found to perpetuate inequalities over time. Inequality of opportunity can be high in areas exposed to intensifying or emerging multi-hazard risks under a 2-degree global warming scenario.

Take the case of child malnutrition. There is a higher prevalence and wider variation in stunting among children under the age of five in selected disaster hotspots identified by ESCAP's Risk and Resilience Platform. In disaster hotspots, children living in larger and lower-income households are often furthest behind. There are also disruptions to education in disaster hotspots, leading to relatively weaker human capital accumulation. It is not only children who are affected, however. A similar picture emerges in access to basic sanitation and clean fuel. Inequality in access to such basic services is higher in disaster hotspots than in a country as a whole, in the cases of Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Vietnam.

At the same time, sudden- or slow-onset climate change events are inevitably triggering the movement of affected people, leading to an increase in internal displacement numbers and international migration. While some displacements are short-term and temporary, others may lead to permanent settlements. As noted above, migrants, refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons residing in such areas face even more daunting challenges due to their vulnerable legal status, limited coping capacity, and access to basic services and opportunities.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), a non-governmental organization established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in Geneva, Asia and the Pacific accounts for the majority of IDPs globally due to natural disasters. Specifically, the region accounts for over 50 percent of disaster-induced internal displacement in 2022 and 80 percent of the world's internal displacement from 2010 to 2021.

Latest IDMC data from 2023 shows that close to 22 million people in Asia and the Pacific were internally displaced due to disasters alone. More than half were located in the South and South-West Asia subregion, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Türkiye. However, the Northern and Central Asia region has so far been spared from large displacements due to natural disasters. In 2023, fewer than 65,000 people were internally displaced due to natural disasters, mainly in Georgia and the Russian Federation. In Azerbaijan, fewer than 1,692 were internally displaced in 2023.

A Deeper Dive

Understanding the nexus between climate change and inequalities inevitably calls for local empirical analysis, especially in and

around affected cities and human settlements. Given a lack of micro-data on exposure, my empirical analysis below focuses on resilience and coping capacity in the context of climate change.

SDG11, which pledges to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (it is popularly known under the shorthand moniker “sustainable cities and communities”), captures an important outcome to be monitored in the context of climate change. The status of housing conditions in which individuals live stands out as an important proxy for examining their vulnerability to climate change. Assessing the adequacy of housing conditions is not straightforward, however, as it has multiple dimensions with limited data availability. These dimensions include, but are not limited to, access to improved water and sanitation, sufficient living area, structural quality, durability and location, security of tenure, affordability, accessibility, and cultural adequacy.

In 2002, UN-Habitat, the UN Statistics Division, and the Cities Alliance (an international membership organization that includes

national governments, multilateral organizations, local authorities, philanthropies, and civil society groups) agreed on an empirical approach based on available data to take stock of and measure progress in SDG11. Their approach focused on fewer dimensions of housing adequacy, mostly due to the availability of publicly accessible data from nationally representative household surveys such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS).

These surveys collect household-level information on access to improved drinking water and sanitation, the type of materials used in the walls, floors, and roofs of dwellings, and the living area per household member. Households are considered “deprived of adequacy of housing” if they are said to be “deprived” in one or more of these conditions. In the case of housing materials, if natural or rudimentary materials are used in the walls, roofs, and floors, the dwelling is considered to be “inadequate.” In the case of sufficient living area, housing is deemed “inadequate” if more than three people share the same habitable room.

The status of housing conditions in which individuals live stands out as an important proxy for examining their vulnerability to climate change.

This empirical approach can be operationalized in the Northern and Central Asia region, as many countries undertake either DHS or MICS and make them publicly accessible. For instance, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan have publicly available data from 2023, while Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are expected to release their 2024 MICS data soon. This section focuses on Azerbaijan and assesses housing conditions primarily at the national level, with particular attention to inequality among socioeconomic and demographic groups.

According to this criterion, 61 percent of households in Azerbaijan live in “inadequate” housing, as they are deprived in one or more of the housing conditions elaborated above. In other words, only 39 percent of households live in “adequate” housing. This surprising result is largely driven by the widespread use of wood planks in dwellings across Azerbaijan, which are classified as rudimentary flooring materials. In the other five dimensions, 80 percent of households are not “deprived” at all. In other words, this surprising result comes down to the preference for wooden flooring.

Despite being relatively high, this national average can mask

differences across Azerbaijan’s demographic and socioeconomic groups. The ESCAP Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) algorithm can help disaggregate the national average. This approach leverages innovative methodologies in machine learning, such as Classification and Regression Tree (CART) analysis, and uses DHS and MICS in 33 countries across Asia and the Pacific.

The LNOB methodology follows objective criteria to identify the shared circumstances of mutually exclusive groups who live in significantly different housing conditions. The circumstances can be individual, such as age, gender, level of education, disability, and migration status, among others. They can also be household characteristics, such as the income level of the households based on assets they own, the location of residence, and the number of children under the age of 5, among others.

Since the analysis in this section focuses on household-level outcome, the circumstances used in the disaggregation model are also kept at the household level. The implication is that age, gender, and level of education of the head of household are included in the model.

Following this approach, a broad range of demographic and socioeconomic groups are identified, with two extreme cases. On one extreme, the group with the highest prevalence of “inadequate” housing is the furthest left behind. On average, the furthest behind group will have the highest prevalence for a negative outcome like “inadequate” housing. On the other extreme, the group with the lowest prevalence for “inadequate” housing is the furthest ahead. On average, the furthest ahead group will have the lowest prevalence for a negative outcome. There can be many other groups with different prevalence between the two, based on their circumstances.

The most important consideration in disaggregating the prevalence of “inadequate” housing is the selection of demographic and socioeconomic factors that can explain who does and does not live in “inadequate” housing. For this analysis, five circumstances are selected, namely household wealth, location, age, gender, and the educational background of heads of households. These factors may drive the differential prevalence of living in “adequate” housing conditions.

The LNOB analysis captures interesting intersections of

circumstances that leave people behind. At the national level, the furthest behind consists of lower-income households living in rural areas with relatively older heads of households (i.e., aged 46 and above). Among the furthest behind, 86 percent live in “inadequate” housing. In other words, only 14 percent of the population in the furthest behind group live in “adequate” housing (note that this group represents 22 percent of all households in the country). On the other hand, higher-income and urban households where household heads have tertiary education are furthest ahead. Still, 34 percent of the furthest ahead live in “inadequate” housing. Conversely, 66 percent are living in “adequate” housing.

The analysis can also be repeated at the sub-national level, but doing so in detail is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that this indicator also has wide variation across Azerbaijan, with Baku being one of a handful of exceptions. Notably, “inadequate” housing is much less prevalent there, where only one-third of the households live in “inadequate” housing.

While prevalence is low, the gap between the furthest behind and furthest ahead is notably wide.

In Baku, over half of the furthest behind group live in “inadequate” housing, while 18 percent of the furthest ahead group live in “inadequate” housing. Unlike in most other parts of the country, where the furthest behind groups are composed of lower-income households, this is not necessarily the case in Baku.

At the individual level, while the gender and educational levels of household heads rarely matter, the age of the household head is an important factor, with households headed by older persons standing out with a disadvantage.

Inequalities and Coping Capacity

Moving beyond exposure and vulnerability, there are also gaps in capacity to cope with climate change-related events. The survey data referenced above indicates that more than two-thirds of the population in Asia and the Pacific report that it is difficult or very difficult to raise emergency funds within 30 days. This is a grave concern due to various crises faced by the region, be it induced by climate change, pandemics, or economic shocks. The fact that close to half of the population in

Asia and the Pacific do not have access to at least one social protection scheme escalates this concern, as per the International Labour Organization’s flagship World Social Protection Report (2024-2026).

The LNOB methodology is again operationalized to measure gaps in coping capacity (Figure 1). An alternative data source is used this time, and results are shared at the national level only. This section focuses on eight Northern and Central Asian countries (i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Overall, 22 percent of the adult population in the region can raise emergency funds without difficulty on average.

Lower-income individuals living in rural areas are furthest left behind. Among them, 10 percent can raise emergency funds without difficulty. The furthest ahead group consists of higher-income men with tertiary education. In this group, 41 percent can raise emergency funds without difficulty. Such gender gaps are evident only among relatively higher-income individuals. Educational attainment is not helping to close the gap, as the gaps are similarly wide among tertiary-educated higher-income

individuals and lower- or secondary-educated higher-income individuals.

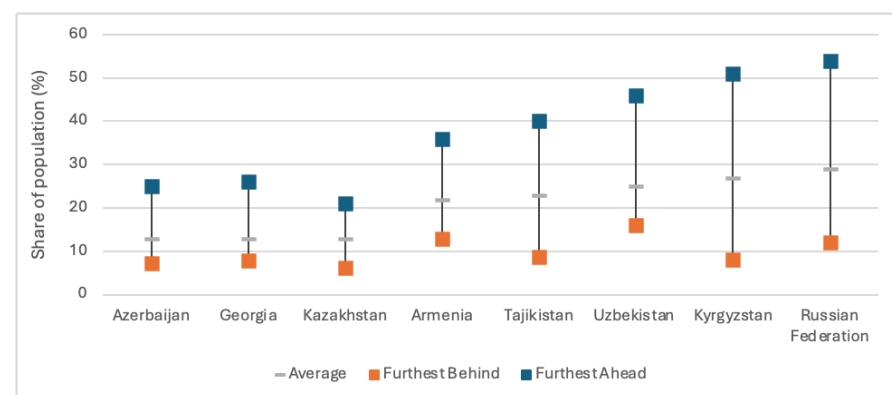
Moreover, the location of residence is an important driver of inequality only among lower-income individuals. Individuals with lower incomes living in urban areas are 50 percent more likely to raise emergency funds than lower-income individuals living in rural areas.

Across the eight countries, there are some notable differences. While 13 percent of the adult population can raise emergency funds without difficulty in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, over 25 percent of adult populations can do so in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Russian Federation. Notably, as the share of the population that

can raise emergency funds without difficulty increases, so does the gap between the furthest behind and the furthest ahead groups.

Among the furthest behind individuals, two circumstances intersect most frequently, namely income and education. Overall, having a lower income and less than secondary education are key factors that limit the capacity to raise emergency funds. Among individuals with a lower income and a lower education, women are particularly at risk and left behind, especially in Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation. The location of residence is a shared characteristic of the furthest behind groups only in Azerbaijan, where the rural population is at a disadvantage.

Figure 1: Gaps in the Ability to Raise Emergency Funds Across North and Central Asia (2021)



Note: The author's calculations are based on the ESCAP LNOB algorithm applied to the World Bank Global Financial Inclusion Database (2021).

Both digital and financial inclusion matter broadly for coping capacity. Information and communications technologies can effectively reach affected communities and ensure their access to critical information, including early warning messages. Access to financial services, including bank accounts and insurance, enhances disaster resilience and facilitates recovery from shocks.

When the preceding LNOB model is extended with digital and financial inclusion, the latter's importance stands out. At the regional level, access to the internet can improve the odds of raising

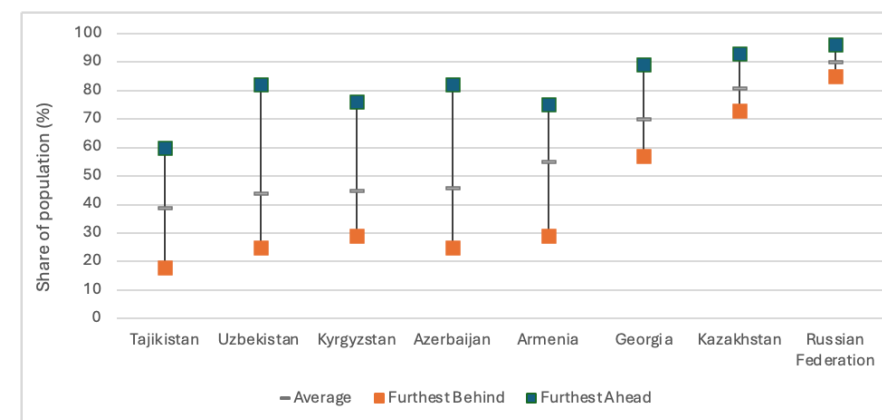
Education is a far more important indicator than income, age, gender, or location in driving inequalities.

emergency funds without difficulty, especially among women with lower or secondary education. Owning a bank account is equally important, especially among lower-income individuals living in urban areas.

Given their importance, Figures 2 and 3 focus on proxy indicators for financial and digital inclusion, focusing on countries with available data in the Northern and Central Asia region.

Bank account ownership is nearly universal in the Russian Federation, where, on average, 90 percent of the population owns

Figure 2: Overview of Gaps in Bank Account Ownership (2021)



Note: The author's elaborations are based on the ESCAP LNOB algorithm applied to the World Bank Global Financial Inclusion Database (2021).

a bank account. Among the furthest behind individuals, who are composed of lower-income individuals with primary or secondary

education, 85 percent own a bank account. Kazakhstan and Georgia follow suit, with over two-thirds of their populations owning bank accounts. Notably, inequalities start widening as average ownership decreases. In Azerbaijan, gaps are wider, with only 25 percent of the furthest behind owning a bank account. Comprising 20 percent of the country's adult population, lower-income women with less than a tertiary education are furthest behind.

Education is a far more important indicator than income, age, gender, or location in driving inequalities. People with no or primary education are often left behind. Youth are left behind in Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan, youth with less than a tertiary education are left behind. An important policy implication here is that financial literacy programs may be able to help increase bank account ownership rates across the region, since demand-side factors (i.e., not having enough money) may not be the leading driver of inequality.

A country's overall resilience against climate change depends critically on how resilient its furthest behind groups are.

Figure 3 offers a far more positive picture. At the national level, average internet access rates are relatively higher in many countries

and with narrower gaps. As noted earlier, access to the internet today is a main source of timely information, including early warnings for climate change-related events.

Therefore, leaving no one behind in this outcome is a strategic objective. Between 80 and 90 percent of the population had access to the internet in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Russian Federation. In Azerbaijan, two-thirds of the population had access to the internet in 2021 (the last year of available data, and this figure is likely to have gone up in the interim), notably with widest gaps between the furthest behind and the furthest ahead groups. Rural and lower-educated individuals are furthest behind. Note that this is a tiny group, representing 7 percent of the population.

Across the subregion, again, education matters most. Women, especially those who have a lower income and a lower education, are left behind in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Evidence-Based Public Policy

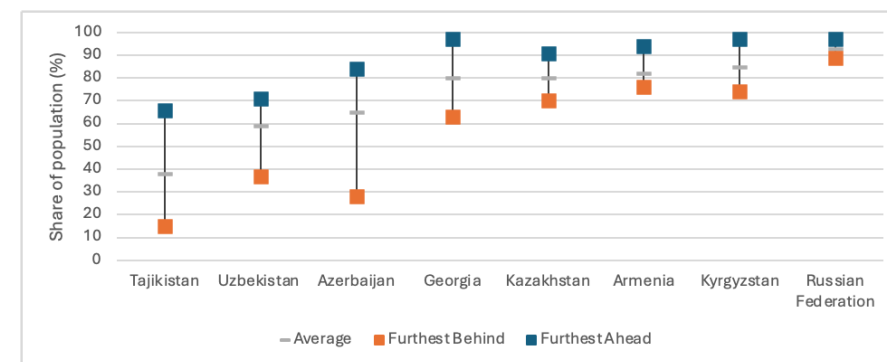
Leaving no one behind in sustainable development implies that inequalities in exposure, vulnerability, and capacity to cope with climate change events are tackled immediately. A country's overall resilience against climate change depends critically on how resilient its furthest behind groups are. There are several policy areas where urgent action is needed to support climate change adaptation and mitigation. These include, among others, climate change policies, disaster reduction policies, social protection policies, housing policies, and active labor market policies.

on evidence. From design phase to implementation, monitoring and evaluation, a broad range of data, including administrative, survey, and geospatial data must be leveraged and analyzed with innovative and rigorous methodologies. Since children, women, older persons and persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons are said by the UN to be disproportionately affected by climate change, policies must be inclusive and evidence-based to reinforce the need for adaptation and mitigation measures that address underlying inequalities faced by people in vulnerable situations.

Identifying the furthest behind households and tracking them over time should inform the design and implementation

Data holds the key to ensuring that sectoral policies are based

Figure 3: Overview of Gaps in Access to Internet (2021)



Note: The author's elaborations are based on the ESCAP LNOB algorithm applied to the World Bank Global Financial Inclusion Database (2021).

of policies. When expected results are not achieved, policies must correct their course. The results presented on furthest behind groups in terms of vulnerability to climate change (i.e. “inadequate” housing) and coping capacity (i.e. ability to raise emergency funds, ownership of bank accounts, and access to internet) in Northern and Central Asia can help governments as well as private sector and civil society to take requisite action in leaving no one behind.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the LNOB methodology employed in this paper does not lend itself to causal interpretation. As such, further research is needed in each country better to understand the relationship between climate change and inequality. Rigorous empirical methodologies that can establish causality should be used, especially when assessing the impact of sectoral policies.

The role of data collection and analysis is gaining more traction as digitalization unfolds as a global megatrend. For instance,

Identifying the furthest behind households and tracking them over time should inform the design and implementation of policies. When expected results are not achieved, policies must correct their course.

social protection policies can be strengthened with more data analysis and digital technologies, as they can facilitate the identification and registration of individuals and link social protection databases to national identification systems and civil registries.

Analyzing administrative and census data can help identify individuals eligible to receive social protection but are missed in the due process. In the area of forecasting, data and emerging technologies play a crucial role as well.

Identifying and forecasting climate risks are far better today than in the past. This is thanks to significant advances in climate science and achievements in geospatial data analysis with digital tools. In the context of early warning systems, there is an urgent need to report on and improve the status of its multi-hazard early warning system in the Northern and Central Asia region, given that some of the countries in the region (including Azerbaijan) are among the top 10 countries across Asia and the Pacific with populations most

exposed to emerging climate risk hotspots. Considering the specific challenges faced by people in vulnerable situations, it is important to mainstream their needs and voices throughout social protection systems.

Notwithstanding the crucial role of data for inclusive and evidence-based policies, there is an unmet need for solid investments in data collection and stronger national statistical systems. Without interoperability across data systems and platforms, analyzing policy-relevant questions becomes nearly impossible.

Equally important is the lack of data on certain groups of people living in vulnerable situations. Due to a lack of complete data on internally displaced persons and stateless persons, let alone migrants and refugees, the preliminary results elaborated earlier completely miss these important groups of people.

The recommendations put forward by the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRIS) are crucial in guiding the produc-

tion, and dissemination of statistics on vulnerable groups. Standardizing definitions for statistical measurement and inclusion in census or nationally representative household surveys are highly needed. In this way, indicators related to many other SDGs, in addition to SDG11 and, implicitly, SDG8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG17 (partnerships), can also be disaggregated to account for these vulnerable groups.

The Northern and Central Asia region stands out as having gained significantly from collecting and analyzing data to inform a wide array of policies in the context of climate change. In the area of household surveys, there is room for significant improvement. First, the frequency of household surveys needs to increase. Second, the modules of standard household surveys should be expanded to include more indicators relating to climate change. Finally, making such surveys accessible to all can help broaden the knowledge base for inclusive and evidence-based policies. **BD**

Notwithstanding the crucial role of data for inclusive and evidence-based policies, there is an unmet need for solid investments in data collection and stronger national statistical systems.



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Review Essay

Introducing Hafiz Pashayev's *An Ambassador's Manifesto*

Damjan Krnjević Mišković

There is a word in the Azerbaijani language—*ağsaqqal*—which means something like a wise and respected elder of the community from whom one traditionally seeks advice. Hafiz Pashayev is widely acknowledged as the *ağsaqqal* of the country's diplomatic service.

And the book we are here to celebrate is an important element in explaining this status he deservedly enjoys.

Now, before Hafiz m. came to be widely regarded as the *ağsaqqal* of Azerbaijani diplomacy, he became a founder (*fondatore*) of “new modes and orders,” as a Florentine political philosopher of the highest rank memorably put it centuries ago [NM, D I:pr.1]. In fact, Hafiz m. founded *two* such new modes and orders: Azerbaijan's diplomatic presence in Washington in November 1992, and, here in Baku, the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy in March 2006, which in January 2014 was granted a charter and thus officially transformed, following the founder's original intention, into ADA University.

Damjan Krnjević Mišković is Professor of Practice at ADA University; Director for Policy Research, Analysis, and Publications at its Institute for Development and Diplomacy; and Co-Editor of Baku Dialogues. This text is a slightly revised and expanded version of the author's remarks delivered to an audience of ambassadors and heads of delegation accredited to Azerbaijan at the launch event of the English translation of Hafiz Pashayev's book, An Ambassador's Manifesto: The Birth of U.S.-Azerbaijan Diplomatic Relations – The First Ambassador's Story (Baku: Sharg-Garb, 2025), on 5 May 2025 at the Baku Book Center. The views expressed in this essay are his own.

We are here this evening to discuss his memoir of this first founding, titled *An Ambassador's Manifesto*. A memoir of the second—or at least on the pedagogical and state-building logic informing this second founding—is yet to come.

As a founder—but even more broadly—“in every phase of his life, at every position he has held, Hafiz Pashayev took Azerbaijan's interests over everything. In his political, public, and scientific endeavors have served just one purpose: strengthening Azerbaijan and its development.” That is the judgment pronounced by the First Vice-President of this country during her ADA University commencement address, which took place around this time back in 2016. And she was correct in this, and in the implication that his two foundings—i.e., Azerbaijan's diplomatic presence in America and ADA—are intimately connected.

As Hafiz m. said in a July 2007 interview to the *New York Times*, “To spread our image in the world, we need a real presence. But we have a shortage of diplomats.” My point here is that his experience in Washington—the experience he accumulated during the 14 years he served as Ambassador to the United States—led him to understand the strategic necessity of establishing a diplomatic academy to train Azerbaijani present and future diplomats.

Now, training diplomats was our university's first mission, and we still do that through our flagship Advanced Foreign Service Program and other executive education courses. But as I said a moment ago, it was understood from the onset that ADA would evolve into a fully-fledged university. The founding logic, which was executed over time, was that ADA would train not only Azerbaijani diplomats, but also many Azerbaijanis striving for excellence. Each student would specialize in one (or more) of the fields necessary for this country to develop, maintain, and strengthen its sovereign independence, mindful of the legacy the university was both shaping and by which it was being shaped: a comprehensive national quest to consolidate peace, stability, prosperity, and self-reliance, which is located in a particularly complicated geopolitical neighborhood.

One of the things I have learned in the more than five years that I have lived and worked in this country is that positions in the public and private sectors—certainly in those areas that matter most—are filled, by and large, with the most qualified and competent person that can be

found. And ADA University has had a lot to do with ensuring that what some call “technocracy” but is better termed “meritocracy” is becoming this country’s overarching governance lodestar.

This national accomplishment is oftentimes underappreciated, or its significance downplayed, when, in fact, it should be recognized as one of President Ilham Aliyev’s most noteworthy achievements. Indeed, it is an indispensable part of the explanation for how, in just 30 years, Azerbaijan has gone from being a failing state to what a Harvard University historian has called a “project state”—that is, a country that has the ambition, power, and human capital to mobilize the entirety of the nation’s potential to get behind larger, aspirational goals.

In more than a few ways, this national raising up, we can call it, began in that embassy in Washington that Hafiz m. founded. And that is why, to me, this is at bottom what Hafiz m.’s memoir is about. The book shows how, under his leadership and with the help of colleagues he chose personally on the basis of his estimation of their competence and potential, both the project state took on embryonic form and the meritocratic drive was launched. I note, here, that the word *ada* in Azerbaijani and other Turkic languages means “island,” as in island of excellence.

The memoir is also a written testament or bequest to the generations who don’t remember how difficult that founding period truly was for this country—and when I speak of such generations, I speak of both Azerbaijanis and foreigners. In this sense, it is a “manifesto”—a clear statement of the path that was cleared in the wilderness and a teaching on how taking care that it remains as free of obstacles as possible is a national strategic imperative. And it is also a “manifesto” in the sense that, as he tells us on the first page, the choice of the title has its origins in the title of his father’s famous novel, *A Young Man’s Manifesto* (1938).

My bottom line is that one cannot hope to understand Azerbaijan as it understands itself without reading and reflecting on Hafiz m.’s book.

Let me now come back to the matter of founding. To simplify for the sake of clarity, a founding is made up of two basic elements. First, the acquisition of knowledge. In perfect circumstances, this takes place prior to a founding, although it is not strictly necessary. Second, the act of founding

itself, which is the founder’s task properly understood. In other words, it is the doing of something from scratch—from the beginning, “without any respect,” as the Florentine said.

Some founders have the leisure of preparing themselves through the acquisition of a body of knowledge; others act without it, proceeding by their wits or what the Florentine calls “virtue” (*virtù*). Either way, a founding can only partly be mapped out in advance by theoretical knowledge.

As Hafiz m. put it in the *New York Times* interview I mentioned earlier, “Our advantage is that we don’t have old baggage. We’re a new academy.” The same, of course, could be said about the founding that his memoir recollects.

Because, at best, prior knowledge serves as a partial guide for execution—for the doing of deeds—given the importance of particular circumstances in actual situations. Facts on the ground demand different strategies. “We had been sent to an unfamiliar country to master the profession to which we’d been assigned,” he writes. Hafiz m.’s memoir is thus also an account of the travails of *fortuna* (translated as fortune, but which can also mean influence or legacy)—the particular circumstances and strategies he employed as he began from scratch. “The question of where to start appeared both complex and strange in the situation we were in,” he tells us.

The combination of *virtù* and *fortuna* suggests to me that—obviously, at a much smaller scale and scope—Hafiz m. followed a logic that the American Founders would have understood.

I teach American politics this semester, and so the opening paragraph of the first *Federalist Paper* is fresh in my mind. The text announces what is at stake in the American founding by presenting two alternatives: on the one hand, there can be a founding based on “reflection and choice.” On the other hand, there can be a sort of anti-founding based on “accident and force.” The Americans chose the former, making the argument, first in speech and then in deed, that an intentional founding is clearly possible. And like the Florentine thinker before them, they were right—to their enduring credit.

In Azerbaijan, there have been both types of founding at the national level. The collapse of the Soviet Union produced an accidental founding—or re-founding—of this country. It was short-lived, ending in territorial

loss, economic locomotion, and an almost descent into civil war. A few years later, the return to power of Heydar Aliyev produced one based on “reflection and choice,” pulling the country back from the edge of total collapse and, in so doing, becoming what Hafiz m. called “the architect of Azerbaijan’s modern statehood.”

And in both foundings that he planned and executed, Hafiz m. chose “reflection and choice”—also to his enduring credit.

Although I have no personal connection to the founding of Azerbaijan’s diplomatic undertakings in the United States, I do know something of the adverse political circumstances in which Azerbaijan found itself upon Hafiz m.’s arrival in Washington.

One of these remains an exposed nerve—or, as Hafiz m. calls it in his book, a “wretched act” and a “nasty sore [...] impossible to cut out”—to this very day. I refer here to Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act. This section, titled “Restriction on Assistance to Azerbaijan,” prohibits any kind of direct U.S. government-to-government aid to Azerbaijan. This law put the United States government in the official business of sanctioning Azerbaijan—and only Azerbaijan, of all post-Soviet states. Washington’s baseline posture toward Baku was punitive. And no one in this town has forgotten that this baseline remains on the books.

Section 907 of what Hafiz m. reminds us was ironically termed the “Freedom Denial Act” was championed by then-Senator (and later U.S. Secretary of State) John Kerry and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush. And all this happened a month or so before Azerbaijan had the opportunity to establish an embassy in the United States. It was the diplomatic equivalent of a sneak attack—a preemptive strike.

I will not go into the details of all this, because you can read about them in Hafiz m.’s memoir, and you can also read a complementary account in various places, including in an article that S. Frederick Starr wrote four years ago in *Baku Dialogues* about Hafiz m., titled “Azerbaijan’s Educator-Statesman at Eighty.”

But I will reproduce what Hafiz m. said in an Azerbaijani publication in 2006 about Section 907: “Throughout those long years of the Soviet

occupation of our country, we had looked to America as a beacon of hope, democracy, and justice. [...] So [...] as we were trying to shake off Soviet oppression—an effort which the United States itself had actively endorsed and encouraged—we discovered that they, too, had shunned us, ignored our needs, and abandoned us when we needed help the most. Psychologically, it was a demoralizing blow.” In his book, Hafiz m. characterizes it as a “humiliation.”

This was especially so not only for the reasons he mentioned, but also because those who championed Section 907 did so in support of a country that not only committed territorial aggression against its neighbor, but because just as Section 907 was adopted, that same country, which benefited the most from its provisions, was well on its way to orchestrating the most successful, and the most complete, act of ethnic cleansing of the post-Cold War era in the OSCE space. By the time the First Karabakh War was over in May 1994, not a single Azerbaijani remained in that neighboring country and in the Azerbaijani lands it had occupied.

These are indisputable facts, because the relevant census data is very clear on this point. But also because the first president of that country, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, said so explicitly. There’s a video of him from 23 July 1993 giving a speech in which he said, “Armenia and Artsakh have been completely cleansed of other ethnicities. [...] Imagine if today there were those 180,000 non-Armenians in Armenia who lived here until 1988, then today we would not have a state.”

That country and its supporters—in Washington and other Western capitals—have never suffered any political, diplomatic, economic, or even moral consequences because of any of this. This is, to my mind, unconscionable.

That is why Section 907, which not only remains on America’s legislative books but had been unjustly invoked by the previous U.S. administration recently, is a textbook example of an American diplomatic double standard (at the very least)—a “stain on American democracy,” as Hafiz m. puts in his book. Its continued existence has done sometimes significant harm to a bilateral relationship that could have become an incontestable anchor for advancing the strategic interests of the United States and its allies in the Silk Road region. I make this judgment on the

country's strategic importance on the authority of Hafiz m.'s good friend, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who wrote in 1997 that "Azerbaijan is the cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia."

Of course, Section 907 did not prevent the development of U.S.-Azerbaijan ties, which really flourished in some periods—including during much of Ambassador Pashayev's years of service. As Starr put it in his aforementioned article, "There is nothing more bizarre than the fact that the struggle over Section 907 took place simultaneously with the development of an important strategic relationship between Azerbaijan and the United States, and that this relationship was to prove as enduring as the shell of Section 907."

I'm referring here, *inter alia*, to the 1994 Contact of the Century and to Heydar Aliyev's historic 1997 state visit to the United States ("the greatest honor in my life," Hafiz m. writes)—and you can find the details of both in Hafiz m.'s memoirs. But I'm also speaking of everything that has derived from it, including Azerbaijan's important contribution to the War on Terror (facilitated by the introduction of an annual waiver provision to Section 907), an account of which you can also find in the book (including the role Hafiz m. played in establishing what he calls the "foundation for truly strategic cooperation" between the two countries during this period).

Beyond then and into the present, I can refer to the quest to build a series of undersea cables that will carry to European shores electricity produced from renewable sources like wind and solar in Azerbaijan, as well as neighboring Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

The United States is far less involved in this enterprise—although this could still change. And if it were to change—if, for instance, American investment, financing, or technological solutions were to become present—then the strategic argument for deepening engagement with Azerbaijan would be all the greater. Of course, Section 907 would need to be repealed, as part of a broader bilateral package reflective of the new geopolitical reality in this part of the world, including the fact that with the liberation of Karabakh, the territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has effectually come to an end.

The cable project is but part of an even greater enterprise: east-west economic connectivity, anchored by the Middle Corridor, which is

becoming the backbone of the new Silk Road region in general, and the new South Caucasus in particular. There is room for American involvement in the execution of this even greater enterprise, too.

In the Introduction to a forthcoming book that I have co-edited with Svante E. Cornell, titled *After Karabakh: War, Peace, and the Forging of a New Caucasus*, we write that the success of external players, like the United States, in becoming a strategic part of the Silk Road region's new geopolitical reality will largely be determined by whether they learn to

accept, in both theory and practice, that the rules of the game in this part of the world are not theirs to either set or revise anymore. For quite a few of them, this would constitute a heretofore largely untried approach. To succeed, each will need to show a degree of restraint, humility, and respect that has been traditionally exhibited in a limited manner towards the countries that make up the core Silk Road region. [...] As things now stand, local suspicions regarding the preferences and aspirations of the various outsiders remain very much alive. These can be mitigated, and perhaps even removed, in the time ahead largely in proportion to the extent that these same outsiders choose to temper their speeches and deeds in such a way as to harmonize them with those now prevalent in the Silk Road region itself. For most external, that is, foreign players, this will be easier said than done. Those for whom more interest-based, transactional approaches represent their [present] diplomatic norm could be said to have an advantage over those [that remain] habituated to pursue different ones.

Inter alia, this will require the U.S. (and all other external players) to embrace the principle of inclusivity as the price of admission, which translates into accepting that there is now conceptual room for the Silk Road region to gain substantive agency—to become a fully-fledged, distinct, and emancipated *subject* of international order. The foregoing is in the U.S. national interest, since Washington has neither the ambition nor the capability to act hegemonically or unilaterally in this part of the world. The welcome corollary is that America appears now to be out of the sordid interventionist and nation-building business, which should mean that henceforth it will stay out of the domestic affairs of sovereign states. As U.S. President Donald Trump stated in his May 2025 Riyadh address, "In recent years, far too many American presidents have been afflicted with the notion that it's our job to look into the souls of foreign leaders and use U.S. policy to dispense justice for their sins."

This Trumpian doctrine applies as much to the Middle East (his immediate focus in that speech) as it does to the Silk Road region—particularly its three

keystone states (i.e., Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan). Here, in this part of the world, that should translate into a policy that comes to terms with the fact that Brussels will—more likely than not—ultimately accept Beijing’s offer, made by the latter’s seniormost foreign policymaker, Wang Yi, during his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, to “synergize high-quality Belt and Road cooperation with the European Union’s Global Gateway strategy, so as to empower each other and empower the entire world.”

In the Silk Road region, as in most other regions, “the preferred mathematical operations are [now] addition and multiplication, not subtraction and division,” as a former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State put it around this time last year. Thankfully, that seems to be understood by the external players, as is the fact that Azerbaijan has stood up straight—no longer a bent, passive, or powerless object to be coveted, manipulated, or disputed over by anyone.

In short, Hafiz m. and his two foundings have been an integral part of the statecraft that lifted this country from its knees, playing an oftentimes unsung role in ensuring that all requisite precautions are taken to ensure that no one can demand that Azerbaijan sits back down again.

I now turn to my conclusion, which consists of two parts. First, as bitter as some of his experiences in Washington could have made him, the overall impression from reading his memoir is that Hafiz m. is a gentleman diplomat: prudent, warmhearted, low-key, persistent, effective, and, to borrow a phrase from Kurt Riezler, “passionately reasonable.” Without rancor or hubris, he shows his readers, in page after page, that history never ends, geography matters, the future is uncertain, one’s friends are always imperfect, and power politics never truly goes away. This is a critical lesson—whose origins go back to Thucydides—for those who believe that the “rules-based international liberal order” and the “end of history” paradigm that served as its intellectual dibber ever had a chance at *enracination*.

Second, I wish to end by coming back to my beginning. In the same context in which that Florentine thinker writes of founders, he also writes of the interplay between necessity and choice. Each of the two new modes and orders that Hafiz m. founded was a product of this interplay. Their foundings were necessities; their long-term design and execution

were choices. In both foundings, the quality and direction of the choice was largely a product of the founder’s character, which, as I’ve said, our Florentine thinker calls *virtù* and says is “seen to be greater where choice has less authority” [NM, *D* I.1.4]. When, in other words, the choice is restrained by a different sort of necessity—namely, the inborn necessity of the founder, which ultimately means the founder has little real choice in the matter because he is driven by a “natural desire” to “work, without any respect, for those things [the founder] believe[s] will bring common benefit to everyone” [NM, *D* I:pr.1]—it is all the more virtuous.

From my vantage point, both of Hafiz m.’s foundings—driven by the sort of virtue that accompanies necessity—have indeed brought common benefit to everyone. That is why it is fitting and proper for him to be considered a contemporary Azerbaijani embodiment of *ağsaqqallıq*. ^{BD}

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