

## Relevant Questions in Counteraction Terrorism and Extremism in Central Asian Countries

Asia Tashtanbekovna Esenbekova<sup>1</sup>, Nadira Rakhymbekovna Baigubatova<sup>1</sup>, Bakhtigul Osmanbekovna Sarmanova<sup>1</sup>, Nurgul Zhenishevna Chynybaeva<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of criminal justice, Kyrgyz State Law University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

### Abstract

This article is analyzing a complex and topical problem countering extremism and terrorism activities. Particular attention is paid to description of modern legal and organizational frameworks countering terrorism and extremism in Central Asian countries. It was also noted that geographical proximity and the direct borders presence in Central Asian countries with Afghanistan in one way or another affect the region (illicit drug trafficking, activation of religious extremist organizations to popularize destructive ideology, etc.). Specific proposals were made to optimize the fight against extremism and terrorism.

**Keywords:** Terrorism; Extremism; Taliban; Counteraction; Statistical data; Central Asia

### 1. Introduction

United States designation of the end of Operations Enduring Freedom, Resolute Support by the fall of 2021 and the withdrawal of US troops and coalition forces from Afghanistan (Chevtaeva, 2021), and despite the historic peace agreement between United States and the Taliban of February 29, 2020 (BBC News, 2020) and the lengthy inter-Afghan conference between the Taliban and representatives of official Kabul (Vachedin, 2019; Petersman, 2021), and repeated Taliban talks in Moscow (BBC News, 2021a). Currently, there has been an escalation of the situation not only in Afghanistan itself (Currenttime, 2021; Hristova, 2021) but also large-scale Taliban attacks on Afghan border outposts and their approach to the borders of Central Asian countries closely (Pannier, 2021). In turn, fleeing the advancing enemy, hundreds of Afghan soldiers flee to neighboring Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Sardjveladze, 2021).

However, according to some experts Taliban offensive in northern Afghanistan does not pose a direct military threat to Central Asia. And here, more danger lurks in terms of ideology, as an inspirational phenomenon of "sleeping" cells of Islamic State (ISIS), Al-Qaeda (Sardjveladze, 2021), or Hizb ut-Tahrir. Although at the same time, some terrorist organizations through their Telegram channel began to openly threaten the countries of Central Asia, due to the perception of the signing of a peace treaty as a victory for

the Taliban over the Americans (Gupta & Chhapariya, 2020; Giese & Rizo, 2020). Moreover, there have been reports that citizens of some Central Asian countries Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have joined the Taliban (CABAR.asia, 2021).

And in Kyrgyzstan, they say about the detention of a foreign militant who planned to participate in the commission of a terrorist act as a suicide bomber ("shahid") in the territory of one of the CIS countries (AKIpress, 2021).

Thus, considering prevailing realities in Afghanistan, which almost always act as a kind of determining factor in terrorist phenomena in the Central Asian countries, the purpose of this study was to analyze the specifics of countering terrorism and extremism in these governments.

### 2. Research Materials and Methods

This article built on historical comparative, historical narrative and descriptive methods revealing the relevant questions in extremism and terrorism counteraction in Central Asian countries. Main features analyzed considering the geographical proximity of Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, including the presence of direct borders of three countries such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It should be noted that any positive or negative development of events in Afghanistan in one way or another directly affects this region, whether then illegal drug trafficking or the activation of religious extremist organizations to popularize destructive ideology.

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1. Central Asian Countries

Central Asia (CA) is including five sovereign secular republics like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which gained independence with the collapse of the USSR. The total area of which is approximately 4 million square meters. km (17.8% of the total territory of the CIS), and a total population of over 51 million people, consisting of representatives of more than 100 different ethnic groups from Germans and Austrians to Tibetans and Koreans (Institute for Central Asian Studies, 2021).

Therefore, for a complete presentation of the problems of countering terrorism and religious extremism in the Central Asian countries, we think it would be more correct to consider each country individually.

#### 3.2. Tajikistan

First, it must be said that the activation of the militants of the radical Taliban movement, in connection with the withdrawal of US and coalition troops from Afghanistan, was practically the first to be felt precisely on the Tajik-Afghan border, which is the longest and is 1344.15 km. Of these, according to official reports, today the Taliban control about 910 km of the border (Tajikistan News Sputnik, 2021). At the same time, Taliban claim control of 70% Afghan-Tajik border (Sardjveladze, 2021), 1.5 thousand military and Afghan militias to Tajikistan, fleeing (Berger, 2021).

Thus, the emerging situation of the terrorist threat is forcing the country's leadership to decide to conduct exercises to bring the army of Tajikistan to full combat readiness more than 130 thousand officers and reserve soldiers (Kalikov, 2021), as well as to seek help in protecting the border from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Currenttime, 2021), into a military alliance uniting several former Soviet republics led by Russia, such as Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Collective Security Treaty Organization, 2021).

Certainly, Tajikistan has something to fear, given the previous deplorable experience of a surge of extremist ideology, which one of the first in the post-Soviet space faced (Rizoyon, 2019), which led to a civil fratricidal war (1992

to 1997), where more than 150 thousand people died (Rahmonov, 2020).

Therefore, the government of Tajikistan constantly notes the need to strengthen the fight against the growing threat of extremism and terrorism. So, for example, today the republic is a party to all 12 anti-terrorist conventions, noted in the resolution of the United Nations Security Council (Nazarov, 2004). Great achievement is the approval of the special National Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan on countering extremism and terrorism for 2016 to 2020 and the Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy (Decree of the Tajikistan Republic President, 2016).

As well as the adoption of the current laws "On countering extremism" dated January 2, 2020 (Law of the Tajikistan Republic, 2020), "On the fight against terrorism" dated November 16, 1999 (Law of the Tajikistan Republic, 1999).

Although, at the same time, there is a lot of criticism of both the content of these national acts of Tajikistan and the methods of their preparation, as well as the very methods of combating extremism by local experts, Western diplomats, pointing out their excessive repressive nature. For example, in the reports of human rights organizations, one can find indications of cases of accusations of extremism, just for participating in disputes on a religious topic, reading namaz, or not appearing in the approved form (Radio Ozodlik, 2020; Rizoyon, 2019).

On the other hand, in view of terrorist attacks that occur from time to time, including using the so-called Afghan method (Magda, 2010; Gusev, 2018), or, for example, the desertion and departure of a colonel OMON G.Kh. into ISIS (Vesti.ru, 2015) necessitates such a tough campaign in the country to combat "religious extremism" and terrorism.

For example, over the past five years, 39 crimes of a terrorist nature, 233 crimes of an extremist nature have been identified, 183 criminal cases have been investigated against persons engaged in extremist activities (Rahmonov, 2020). about 1,400 citizens, although human rights activists claim that among them many people were convicted only for their beliefs (Radio Ozodlik, 2020).

At the same time, according to official data, since 2014, about 1,900 citizens of the country have left for Syria and Iraq, often with their families, where they joined the ranks of the Islamic State, more than 500 of whom are

allegedly killed (Nadjibulla & Ahmadi, 2019). Therefore, large-scale work is currently underway to return them to the country. For example, on the night of April 30, 2019, 84 Tajik children were returned from Iraqi prisons (CABAR.asia, 2019). four years, on the personal initiative of the country's president, 2,700 people from dubious foreign Islamic educational institutions were returned (Rahmonov, 2020).

At the same time, the Republic of Tajikistan in 2020 Global Terrorism Index presented by the Sydney Institute for Economics and Peace, took 45th place, rising five lines at once from 50th position compared to last year, from 164 countries of the world (Global Terrorism Index, 2020). The Supreme Court of the Tajikistan Republic recognized as terrorist and extremist and banned the activities of 20 organizations and groups: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan, the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the Movement Taliban" and others (The Commonwealth of Independent States Anti-Terrorism Center, 2021).

### 3.3. *Uzbekistan*

Uzbek and Afghan border is relatively short at 160 kilometers (Pannier, 2021). And it should be said that since the start of the new Afghan crisis, Uzbekistan has noted increased control on the border with Afghanistan, although Uzbek military control within these limits, therefore, has always been strong (Radio Ozodlik, 2021b). In addition, it is reported that battalion-tactical exercises are being conducted near the Afghan border (Radio Ozodlik, 2021a), including joint ones with Russian troops (Radio Azattyk, 2021b).

At the same time, official Uzbekistan notes the inadmissibility of crossing the border by fugitives, including the Afghan military, so as not to question the inviolability of the border of Uzbekistan, and that it remains neutral on this issue, thus taking a tougher position (Eurasianet, 2021).

It should be said that one of the reasons for this position of Uzbekistan, according to some experts, is the country's likely best ties with the Taliban (Pannier, 2021). recognize any government in Afghanistan, whether the Taliban likes it or not (Pannier, 2021; Gudava, 2000). This is probably why reports of their official or informal contacts sometimes appear (Pannier, 2021); Sputnik News Uzbekistan, 2021) despite the Taliban's close ties to the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Trivedi, 2011).

On the other hand, the existing extremist groups from Uzbekistan, especially the IMU, are considered the strongest and most aggressive in the Central Asian region. And given their repeated decisive actions in Uzbekistan itself, as the organization of murders, attacks (1997, 2001), terrorist attacks (1999, 2004), uprisings (2005), attempts to invade, including through neighboring countries (1999, 2000); as well as open statements about the desire to create an Islamic state in Central Asia, with a core in the Fergana Valley, which should become part of the so-called "World Islamic Caliphate" the governments of these governments fear their attacks to a greater extent than even from the Taliban (Amanbekova, 2018; Gusev, 2018; Trivedi, 2011), Pannier, 2021; etc.).

This is forcing Uzbekistan to pursue a policy of countering terrorism and religious extremism extremely tough (Trivedi, 2011; Gusev, 2018). The result of which is the absence of committed terrorist attacks over the past fifteen years, preventing them at the preparation stage. But still, the threat of youth radicalization due to the penetration into the country and the spread of ideas of violent extremism remains (Melibaev, 2020).

Although since 2016, with the designation of the course of the new president, there have been changes towards the liberalization of religious and civil self-expression (Pannier, 2021), which positively affected, among other things, the implementation of this policy of the country. Thus, more than 4 thousand persons serve sentences for crimes of an extremist nature, including 1.5 thousand sentenced to imprisonment.

More than 20,000 people who were considered adherents of radical religious movements were removed from the register of law enforcement agencies from the so-called "black lists". In addition, following the operation "Mehr", more than 400 citizens of Uzbekistan, mostly women and children, were returned from the territories of Syria and Iraq. Also, one can observe the adoption of more humane decisions by the courts in cases related to participation in the activities of extremist organizations, including the imposition of alternative punishments not related to imprisonment (Uzbekistan Republic National strategy on countering extremism and terrorism, 2021-2026; Ahmedov, 2021; Melibaev, 2020).

At the same time, the adoption of a number of new acts is considered an important

step, such as the National Strategy on Human Rights (for the first time adopted) (Uzbekistan Republic President Decree, 2020) and on countering extremism and terrorism for 2021-2026 (Uzbekistan Republic National strategy on countering extremism and terrorism, 2021-2026); the laws “On countering extremism” of July 30, 2018 (Uzbekistan Republic Law, 2018) and “On freedom of conscience and religious organizations” of July 5, 2021 (Uzbekistan Republic Law, 2021); as well as the introduction of amendments dated January 15, 2019 (Uzbekistan Republic Law, 2019) to the law “On counteracting the legalization of proceeds from crime and financing of terrorism” dated August 26, 2004, including in terms of renaming the name of the law to “On combating the legalization of proceeds from crime, the financing of terrorism and the financing of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction” (Uzbekistan Republic Law, 2004).

Moreover, the result of the measures taken by Uzbekistan, one can say, is its improved performance in the Global Terrorism Index, because in recent years it has been ranked 134 to 135, entering the category of countries with an insignificant level of a terrorist threat, compared to 2012, when Uzbekistan was in 86th place (Rating of countries by level of terrorism, 2012 to 2020).

### **3.4. Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan, according to the rating in the Global Terrorism Index, which has been consistently zero since 2012 (Rating of countries by level of terrorism, 2012 to 2020), is considered a country with no precedents and threats of terrorism.

However, the presence of common borders with Afghanistan, which is about 800 kilometers long, has forced Turkmenistan to increase its security measures on the Turkmen-Afghan border since 2014, due to repeated armed incidents with Taliban militants, accompanied by the death of the Turkmen military (for example, 25 people in July 2018; 27 people in May 2016; about 100 people several times in 2014, etc.) (Radio Ozodlik, 2018; Pannier, 2021; Annaev, 2014; Finbalance, 2015; etc.). At the same time, by July 2021, despite the official denial (Press-service of the Turkmenistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021; Tass, 2021), the actions of the Turkmen authorities to transfer heavy military equipment to the border with Afghanistan and export the

remaining part of weapons, so that “in case of emergency” they do not get to the militants, as well as on putting reservists on high alert and the evacuation of military families from the border (Turkmen news, 2021; Radio Svoboda, 2021; BBC News, 2021c; Venkina, 2021; etc.).

Apparently, despite their many years of active bilateral cooperation, which at one time even allowed the opening of a Taliban representative office in the capital Ashgabat, and assurances of non-aggression, official Turkmenistan is still not so sure of good neighborly relations with the current Taliban (Radio Azatlik, 2021; Pannier, 2021).

In addition, there is information that there are, including citizens of Turkmenistan among the 400 especially dangerous militants released last (out of 5 thousand) from prisons in Afghanistan, according to the decree of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani based on an agreement between the United States and the Taliban on the so-called “Qatari List” (Volkov, 2020; Afghanistan.ru, 2020). And based on the analysis of captured ISIS documents, at least 360 citizens of Turkmenistan were recorded as joining this terrorist organization (Mendkovich, 2018).

Moreover, despite the best official indicators, nevertheless, according to some data, the danger of a terrorist threat to Turkmenistan is determined not only by an external threat provoked by the activities of radical groups but also by the activity of the Islamist underground operating inside the country, the degree of threat of which, given the general closeness of the republic, very difficult to evaluate. For example in 2017, an organization of religious extremists was uncovered, in which 70 military men from 22 motorized rifle divisions participated, of which 12 were officers (Mendkovich, 2018).

It was calculated that in the period from 2013 to 2018 over 100 members of an informal Sunni Muslim study group in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabat were arrested (Corley, 2018; Mendkovich, 2018). Periodically, extremist and terrorist organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir were discovered in the country, Salafiya, ISIS, Nurcular (Mendkovich, 2018).

### **3.5. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan**

Unlike the three countries discussed above, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not have common borders with Afghanistan and despite the fact that these countries always act as a peacemaker and mediators (Message from the

Kazakhstan Republic President, 2012); Kyrgyz Republic Foreign Affairs Ministry, 2019), after all, Afghanistan is perceived by them as a source of terrorism, extremism and criminal drug trafficking (Concept, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that they support, as members of the CSTO, issues of strengthening the protective potential of the Tajik-Afghan border, to strengthen the southern borders of the CSTO (CSTO, 2021a); CSTO, 2021b), despite the existing controversial border issues in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border zone resulting even in armed clashes (BBC News, 2021b).

It should be noted that if Kazakhstan, until recently, was considered the most prosperous country in the Central Asian region in terms of the problem of combating terrorism and the spread of ideas of religious radicalism, then the Kyrgyz Republic pursues the most loyal and democratic policy compared to its neighbors. Which led to the revival of Islam and the strengthening of its socio-political prestige and authority among the population, in these two most secular countries until recently in this region (Amanbekova, 2018). Although, on the other hand, this situation still managed to take advantage of destructive forces.

Thus, the Financial Monitoring Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan lists the names of 1,631 people as of July 2021 as persons involved in the financing of terrorism and extremism (List of organizations and persons associated with financing of terrorism and extremism, 2021). At the same time, in places of detention 662 people are serving sentences for crimes related to terrorism and religious extremism, including 14 women (EA Daily, 2019; "Flowers in fetters", 2019). Officially, about 30 terrorist acts were prevented in the period from 2014 to 2017 (Kazakhstan Republic Government Resolution, 2018).

At the same time, the Prosecutor General's Office notes 9 terrorist attacks committed in the period 2012-2019. (Kazakhstan Sputnik, 2019), however, there were more of them and not all of them were recognized as such by the authorities of Kazakhstan (Kazakhstan Sputnik, 2016; Kazakhstan Sputnik, 2018). At the same time, it is believed that processes the return of militants to their countries of origin, for example, 125 citizens of Kazakhstan returned from areas of terrorist activity, of which 57 were convicted (Kazakhstan Republic Government Resolution, 2018).

Moreover, as a co-author of resolution 2396 (2017) the UN Security Council (S/RES/2396, 2017), in 2018-2019, the Kazakh Republic returned from the camps of international terrorist organizations in the zone of military conflicts (Syria) about 600 of its citizens, of which 400 are children during Operations Zhusan and Rusafa (Reshetnyak, 2021).

As for the Kyrgyz Republic, the State Financial Intelligence Service gives a consolidated sanctions list of 1,040 people as participants in terrorist, extremist activities (Consolidated Sanctions List of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021). At the same time, according to official data, more than 1,700 active members of extremist organizations, the vast majority of which are members of the religious extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (78.3%).

We also have to state that the number of those convicted for these crimes increased by 5.3 times from 2010 to 2016, i.e. from 79 to 422 people, and the number of persons serving sentences in closed correctional institutions increased by 3 times, i.e. from 62 to 191 people (Kyrgyzstan Sputnik, 2017). It should be said that at different times the country was threatened by terrorists from various groups, from the actions (terrorist attacks) of which over the past 20 years the country shuddered several times (2016, 2011, 2010, 2003, 2002), as well as periodically there are reports about the prevention of terrorist attacks (Kyrgyzstan Sputnik, 2016; Kazakhstan Today, 2021).

At the same time, it should be noted that the citizens of Kyrgyzstan did not stand aside and went to the zones of military conflicts, and, for example, left for Syria, according to the State Committee for National Security, more than 800 Kyrgyzstanis, including 140 women, of which over 200 died. In turn, according to the General Prosecutor's Office, in 2018, 110 criminal cases were initiated against citizens who left for Syria, of which 111 people were charged, 55 criminal cases were transferred to the courts and 41 people were convicted (Kojobaeva, 2019). At the same time, Kyrgyzstan returned 79 of its citizens-children from Iraq as part of the Meerim humanitarian mission (Radio Azattyk, 2021a).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be noted that in the Global Terrorism Index, the rating of these two countries under consideration has been almost at the same level in recent years, for

example, in 2020, Kazakhstan took 93rd and Kyrgyzstan 92nd place. Although Kazakhstan still managed to improve its performance compared to 2012, rising from 47th place (Rating of countries by level of terrorism, 2012-2020).

Thus, based on the foregoing, we can say that the measures taken to counter terrorism and religious extremism in the countries of Central Asia are somewhat similar to each other, and vary depending on the proximity to Afghanistan. In other words, close countries with common borders adhere to a tougher policy (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), in contrast to distant neighbors (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan).

Although experts still note the repressive nature of the laws and measures applied to counter these threats in all Central Asian states and, taking into account, proposals are constantly made for improvement through a gradual transition to soft preventive actions (CABAR.asia, 2021).

In turn, the socio-economic problems existing in these countries, corruption, lack of justice, the growth of internal and external migration, the crisis of traditional Islam cause the popularization of extremist ideas of terrorist organizations.

Therefore, the countries of Central Asia need to take a comprehensive and comprehensive approach to the issue of countering terrorism and extremism, starting with improving national mechanisms, taking into account international standards and defining the main areas of prevention and prevention. As well as the introduction of evaluation criteria for their effectiveness.

Not forgetting, at the same time, about establishing a dialogue with moderately radical religious forces to include them in the legal political process, in the course of which they are de-radicalized, as well as promoting the ideas of traditional Islam, especially among young people, including with the establishment of state support and protection of representatives of the direction of Islam traditional for government people.

At the same time, countering terrorism and extremism must necessarily include the vigorous activity of the state in the space of modern information technologies, primarily the Internet, with the possibility of blocking channels for propagating ideas and recruiting new followers of terrorists.

After all, the main thing in the state policy to counter terrorism and extremism is the optimal ratio of restrictive and permissive measures.

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