

# **Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia**

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*Hamburg, April 2018*

CORE Working Paper 30



## Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Basic Substantive Findings</b>	<b>5</b>
Essential: Broad Preventive Work beyond the Context of Terrorism	5
Essential: Consolidating Debates on Values	5
Domestic Political Dimension of Preventive Work	6
Governmental Responsibility towards Muslim Majority Populations	7
Women in Radicalization Prevention	7
Foreign Policy Dimension of Preventive Work	7
Threats by Extremist and Neo-Fundamentalist Movements	8
Civil Radicalization Prevention and Educational Work	8
Radicalization Discussions beyond Narrow Religious Contexts	9
Diminishing Influence of Europe, Growing Importance of China, Efforts of other States	9
Current Support of Governmental Responsibility by OSCE Field Operations	10
The OSCE in Future Debates between Secular and Islamic Elites	10
<b>2. Specific Findings on Kazakhstan: International Values Discussion,     Accent on Securitization, Regimentation and Tolerance</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3. Specific Findings on Kyrgyzstan: Accent on Securitization,     Cooperative Control and Collaboration</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4. Specific Findings on Tajikistan: Accent on Regimentation,     Elimination of the Opposition, Growing Influence of China</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Annex: Memorandum on the Prevention of Religious Radicalization in     Central Asia “Responsibility of State and Religion for Civil Peace”,     Almaty, 24 October 2017</b>	<b>14</b>

## Foreword

This paper is the outcome of a project that was commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by a working group of the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg, in cooperation with partners in Moscow, Almaty (Kazakhstan), Bishkek and Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan). During the course of the project, we conducted extensive literature research and a series of seven roundtables hosted by our partners in their cities as well as numerous individual meetings. All in all, about seventy governmental officials from offices overseeing religious affairs and the security apparatus, scholars, Islamic clerics and NGO representatives from Russia and Central Asia were involved in these activities. Furthermore, we solicited and funded eight short input papers for this report by Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian and Tajik scholars. For these reasons, this paper mainly summarizes findings made with respect to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The project's results were discussed in a final conference in Almaty in October 2017 and formulated in a "Memorandum on the Prevention of Religious Radicalization in Central Asia. Responsibility of State and Religion for Civil Peace" (see annex).

The aim of this report is threefold: *first*, we want to analyse the role of Islam in Central Asia – one of the very cradles of Islam – and its impact on state building and public security, its regional standing and foreign challengers. *Second*, we look into the matter of radicalization in Central Asia that takes place within a context that is significantly different from that of Western countries. Central Asia is a place of Islamic majority populations, on the one hand, and acts of radicalism are significantly rarer and define public life in a much less prominent way than in the West. We think that current narratives linking Islam's renaissance and transformation in Central Asia to the emergence of radical thought, extremism and, as a final consequence, to terrorist attacks, oversimplify underlying causal processes. Central Asian governments address these religious issues and cooperate with international partners in the overly narrow context of interior security. *Third*, we want to explain the necessity of addressing religious radicalization with civilian means and analyse the indispensable role that the Hanafi Madhhab, as Central Asia's indigenous Islamic school of law, should play in this respect, together with governments and societal players. The drivers of religious radicalization in Central Asia are heterogeneous and highly context-specific. Thus, an all-encompassing approach is needed to effectively prevent radicalization – one that supplements existing cooperation in matters of security with civilian measures.

The target group of this report comprises Western and Central Asian governmental officials and societal activists dealing with religious issues and preventing radicalization in religious environments, clerics, scholars and OSCE representatives.

The authors of and contributors to this report wish to thank the Department for International Cooperation against Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime of the German Federal Foreign Office for its generous sponsorship and encouragement, as well as all participants and interlocutors who were involved in its implementation for the time they took, for their thoroughness, open-mindedness and hospitality. The project was a very intensive and instructive exercise.

## **1. Basic Substantive Findings**

The findings of the project on civilian radicalization prevention in the religious milieu in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can be summarized as follows:

### **Essential: Broad Preventive Work beyond the Context of Terrorism**

The rapid reinvigoration of Islam in Central Asia since the 1990s represents a return of the region to its confessional traditions around the Hanafi Madhhab – that Sunni school of law, which is indigenous in the region and represents one of the central elements of the identities of the Central Asian peoples. The renaissance of Islam is not primarily an externally initiated phenomenon, even though Islamic movements, rooted in other regions, have attached themselves to it. This will be discussed further below.

What is important is the knowledge that, unlike in Europe, manifestations of radicalization in the Islamic milieu can undoubtedly include majorities in the population. For this reason alone, it is essential that preventive measures address broad segments of the population.

Thereby, radicalization prevention must go beyond the narrow context of combating terrorism and address its social and political roots. An approach based exclusively on security instruments may be effective in dealing with concrete radical groups or particular target groups that could be susceptible to extremism. It will hardly work for the religious segments of populations at large. Without civil-political work in the local and religious communities, these populations are left to the influence of radical Islamic movements.

Civil political work must undoubtedly be complemented by security measures. An example of combined efforts between the controlling and, at the same time, supportive police and security services and families and youth in communities and city districts can be found in Kyrgyzstan. A stronger conceptual and practical link between governmental radicalization prevention and civil society work must be discussed further. Interest in a dialogue on this has been explicitly voiced by officials of the Kyrgyz government.

### **Essential: Consolidating Debates on Values**

In this connection, we strongly recommend refraining from reducing the radicalization debates to connections with terrorism and, also, from pointed discussion terminology, such as the verbal conflation of terms like “Caliphate”, “Salafism” and “terrorism”. Rather, what is essential is a consolidated emphasis on positive societal goals, such as ethnic and national consolidation or, possibly, the compatibility and interaction between universal secular values, such as democracy, rule of law and human rights (including the right to freedom of religion or belief), and Islamic norms and values.

While supporters of the secular camp see, in a Caliphate, a threat to the national state, some segments of the Islamic youth see the prospect of a Caliphate as an alternative to their frequently unfavorable living conditions. Good experiences with consolidating debates on values can possibly be discussed with the relevant sides in

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. They are already available in the context of the dialogue initiated by President Nursultan Nazarbayev with the leaders of world religions. Noteworthy, in 2017, the-then Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambaev, invited representatives of the secular state and Islam to look for a democratic societal consensus.

### **Domestic Political Dimension of Preventive Work**

Civil political preventive work as *inward prevention* can and must contribute to solving societal dissatisfaction due to developmental and political deficits. Complex causes of radicalization, which are behind this dissatisfaction, range from socio-economic to the most varied subjective factors, which have to do, for instance, with state repression, poor governance, broadly perceived social injustice, individual hopelessness or ethnic, religious or social identities. The complexity and interaction of these factors call for a broad preventive approach.

Next to security policy measures, good governance (with elements, such as combating poverty and educational and equality efforts or possibly the settlement of ethnic and territorial conflict situations) and targeted cooperative governmental action, in collaboration with Islamic circles and the population, play an important role.

Conversely, efforts do not have to be limited ostensibly to combating poor governance and corruption. The harsh criticism by the Russian Delegation in Vienna of the report of the Special Representative of the 2017 Austrian Chairperson-in-Office on Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism (September 2017<sup>1</sup>), shows that such an approach will be rejected as politicized and aggressive.<sup>2</sup> Confidence-building between government officials, Islamic clerics and laypersons must be fostered. The guiding formula should be to cooperate wherever there is common ground, and coexist peacefully where contradictions run too deep.

What must be considered, thereby, is that the Central Asian governments are still searching for concepts to deal with the Islamization of their societies. For a start, this is not underlined negatively, quite the contrary. Nevertheless, to different degrees, the governments pose their questions about the Islamization of their societies in the

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1 Peter R. Neumann, Special Representative of the 2017 OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, *Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region*, 28 September 2017.

2 “All inter-State co-operation in counter-terrorism was ignored altogether – the report does not say a word about the decisions and documents of the United Nations and its Security Council that directly relate to the tasks of combating terrorism and extremism. The relevant decisions of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Belgrade (2015) and Hamburg (2016) were also adopted according to this philosophy. In the report, the main driver of extremism is the ‘repression’ of some regimes, and there is no mention whatsoever of an even more significant factor of radicalization – external interference in the affairs of sovereign States. All substantive and established counter-terrorism terminology is written off: there are allegedly disagreements between States over it. There is nothing of the sort – all tasks are optimally formulated in the documents of the United Nations and the OSCE. The real issue is the absence of political will on the part of a number of States. It is necessary to work on the formation of this terminology, including in the OSCE, and not to invent new terms – ‘extremism’, ‘violent extremism’, ‘violent radicalism’, which in a number of situations serve as a justification for terrorists.” (Delegation of the Russian Federation, Statement by Mr. Alexander Lukashovich, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, at the 1158th (Special) Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, PC.DEL/1228/17, 29 September 2017).

context of radicalization and terrorism. In non-governmental circles, it is commented that the governments fear the development of political competition to their regimes in the Islamic milieu. For example, they would interpret the Arab Spring of 2010-2012 as a clear indication of the relevant threat potential. According to them, their primary direction of activity follows a strategy of securitization and harassment of religious activists. Interference in religious life ranges from repression through the direct subordination of Islamic structures to official powers, decisions about personnel questions of the clergy and regulation of customs and traditions up to supervision of the public sphere.

### **Governmental Responsibility towards Muslim Majority Populations**

The profession of faith in Islam by the majority of the Central Asian populations places a particular religion-related responsibility on the governments of the region, which see themselves as secular. For one thing, this collective responsibility can only be fulfilled together with the Islamic clergy and the religious congregations. That is even more so the case as representatives of Islam increasingly demand political participation. Until now, there has been no or only an initial understanding for this on the sides of the governments. Quite the contrary, the autocratic (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) and clearly repressive religion policies (Tajikistan) of the governments threaten to become a separate radicalization factor.

### **Women in Radicalization Prevention**

Gender questions play a particular role in the prevention of radicalization. The majority of girls and women in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and, to a smaller degree, in Kazakhstan understand themselves as belonging to the Islamic world, without, in every case, reducing this conception of themselves to a strict religious way of life. Even in light of the existing deficits in the equality of a woman in these societies, her value in the family should not be marginalized. Her influence on the raising and education of the children and, thereby, the formation of spiritual-moral values, must be used as a resource in the prevention of radicalization. With respect to this, we recommend supporting the collaboration between the OSCE and Central Asian women's organizations, as well as bringing our project partners together with the OSCE in Vienna at an OSCE/CORE Women's Forum on radicalization prevention, in the second phase of the project.

### **Foreign Policy Dimension of Preventive Work**

Civil and political preventive work as *outwards prevention* must, in particular, grapple with the ideological and educational influence from abroad. Various Islamic movements act from the Arabic space and Pakistan. They make targeted use of the specific circumstances of the Central Asian societies, social dissatisfaction and religious searching for a way out and the not-yet consolidated processes of state formation. In addition, there is a need to deal with the risks that arise from the return of IS fighters to the Central Asian states. Security circles in Kyrgyzstan point out that they observe IS propaganda to be particularly positioned along ethnic strands.

Preventive work among migrant workers and their families is, in addition, a frequently emphasized topic, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This has to do, in particular, with Central Asian migrant workers in the Russian Federation, who, outside of their family environment and social networks, are comparatively easily reached by radical preachers. Among radicalized women there is also a high proportion of migrants.

### **Threats by Extremist and Neo-Fundamentalist Movements**

Central Asia has become a stage for the confrontation of various models of Islam. Most prominently discussed, because it is directly relevant to security, is the propaganda of extremist movements, which advocate radical political changes and a violence-oriented Islamization – that is, IS and Al-Qaida.

In addition, there are those movements which aim at long-term Islamization, based on grassroots work and gradual change of the societal framework from below. In the Western discussion, they are characterized as neo-fundamentalist movements, such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Islamic Liberation) or the movements of the Salafiyya and Tablighī Jamā‘at. They have been active in Central Asia for a long time, both in the underground as well as legally (such as Tablighī Jamā‘at that is seen as an extremist movement in Kazakhstan, but has permission to operate in Kyrgyzstan). Regional offshoots of the Gülen movement, which originated in Turkey, are also counted among these by various sides. Meanwhile, its activities in Central Asia have been largely forbidden at the urging of the Turkish government (without a great public furore).

While the governments may, more or less, be in a position to have a security-policy impact on extremist groups, neo-fundamentalist movements evade potential direct state influence. Here too, there is a need for discussion on civil measures of radicalization prevention.

### **Civil Radicalization Prevention and Educational Work**

Questions of religious and religion-related educational work have emerged in the discussion in Central Asia as a central theme of radicalization prevention. Far-reaching deficits in this area threaten to become an independent domestic factor of instability. This is exacerbated by restrictive measures, such as the drastic reduction of religious and religion-related educational possibilities in Tajikistan. Deficits in religious education among the youth, civil servants and, to different degrees, the urban and rural clergy, make Islam a gateway for external Islamic movements.

Thus, the reinvigorated Islam of the Hanafi Madhhab (Law School) is, in particular, an important consolidating element and one of the indigenous pillars of the current state and identity formation in the region. Then again, insufficient theological knowledge by Islamic clerics, as well as large segments of the populations, bring Central Asian actors in competition with those Islamic currents, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Salafiyya or perhaps the Tablighī Jamā‘at, operating from the Arabic area and Pakistan, whereby the problem in the individual countries presents itself differently.



What is needed, thereby, are educated, recognized Islamic academics and other discerning Islamic partners for the discussion of content with extremist movements of Islam.

Religion-related education among the population, the development of educational concepts for schools, universities, Koranic schools and the media are, therefore, central recommendations. Requirements and possibilities for educational policy support of institutions of the Hanafi Madhhab should be studied together.

### **Radicalization Discussions beyond Narrow Religious Contexts**

Manifestations of radicalization are increasingly placed in religious contexts by the Central Asian governments and are communicated in this way to the West. Thus, they are presented completely differently there, *in real life*, than in Europe. Neither acts of terror, extremist clashes nor movements and parties hostile to foreigners and refugees are dominant there. Instead, it is the governmental rhetoric and activities in the framework of ostensibly combating terrorism, which primarily affect public life. Critics do see a need for action there, but above all they see it as the endeavor of governments to protect the regime.

### **Diminishing Influence of Europe, Growing Importance of China, Efforts of other States**

In different discussions, it becomes clear that the European Union is less and less perceived in Central Asia as a key player. At best, it is still the larger individual states, such as Germany, which are considered to be attractive discussion partners. Inherent in the system, questions of deficits connected with power are scarcely allowed to be addressed by Europe. The usual civil society approaches are also difficult to implement. However, cooperative actions are still in demand where there are experiences, such as dealing with Salafism in Germany and Europe, on the relationship of state and religion, the structuring of religion-related education or the role of religious communities in European Islam.

Russia also is certainly still noticeably present in the region, but it is China, above all, which has already become the most important economic and also political power for the region. The Chinese influence on topics, such as the regulation of religious questions in Tajikistan, is among the unexpected findings of current research.

The Central Asian governments work together primarily with Russia and, increasingly, with China on security questions, such as radicalization prevention or combating terrorism. There are also international formats for interaction, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Furthermore Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia and Afghanistan are also trying to exert influence. Here, there are partially unexpected developments, such as those presented below in relation to Tajikistan.

## **Current Support of Governmental Responsibility by OSCE Field Operations**

The OSCE field operations in Central Asia are also participating in increasing awareness towards governmental responsibility for the needs of Islamic majority populations. At the same time, there is an ongoing discussion within the OSCE and with host governments about defining fields of activities that promise future success. These discussions need to be continued. Currently, OSCE efforts are concentrating on the three areas of strengthening the civil society, women, youth and religious leaders; promotion of collaboration between experts from the government, civil society, academia, the media and the private sector; and promotion of grassroots police work (community policing). In addition, there are gender as well as socio-economic questions and the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremists, including preventive work in prisons.<sup>3</sup> Here, the need for action and readiness to act meet the interest on the governmental and non-governmental sides.

## **The OSCE in Future Debates between Secular and Islamic Elites**

The OSCE should play a role in future debates about the governments' principle attitudes towards Islam, especially in states and regions with Muslim population majorities. *Viable foundations of non-violent cooperation, coexistence and confidence-building between secular and religious players should be found.* This is one of the central conclusions of our work on civilian radicalization prevention in the religious milieu in Central Asia.

In these debates, the democratic treatment of Islam in Central Asia and the entire Eurasian part of the OSCE area seems to be a key question. Another matter that should be addressed is the "dilemma of mistrust" that divides secular governments and their Islamic counterparts. They hesitate to guarantee each other an equal place and perspective in their common states. Deriving from this are practical matters, such as the possible recognition of Islamic parties that could come to power by democratic means. (This also includes western attitudes to this issue.) Conversely, the question of whether or not moderate Islamic parties, once in power, would guarantee the stability of the given constitutional order or finally give in to more radical Islamic forces, remains unanswered. Partly with reference to OSCE principles and commitments, secular leaders are anxious to ensure the stability of their political regimes. Islamic elites, in their turn, look for political and religious perspectives in their countries and in the wider Eurasian context.

In a number of ways, the conditions for discussion and action for the OSCE in Central Asia are worsening. Nevertheless, in our view, there are still relatively favorable prerequisites for the OSCE for further Islam-related discussions within and between Eurasian and European participating States, particularly in the context of radicalization prevention. Western Europe, by contrast to the Near and Middle East, has no colonial past in Central Asia and the anti-Western orientation of Arab jihadists movements does not yet apply to the Euro-Eurasian relationship.

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3 OSCE Secretary General, Report on OSCE Activities to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism (VERLT), Remarks by OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger, Special Permanent Council 29 September 2017, SEC.GAL/129/17, 3 October 2017.

Consequently, the OSCE could be considerably more supportive of the broad dialogue between secular and Islamic elites and representatives of the civil society. Obviously, there is a need for cooperation with Russia. Russia has, to varying degrees, an accepted status, although ethnically, economically and culturally, it is gradually losing positions in the region. The possible use of opportunities for access to the region, particularly to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, via the Eurasian Economic Union should also be assessed. It is worthwhile discussing the implications of China's increased presence in the region and possibly also considering including partners from China in events on radicalization prevention on the ground. Moreover, currently being observed is a somewhat increased interest in cooperating with the OSCE in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. There still seems to be a window of opportunity to prevent Europe's relations with the Islamic world in Central Asia from ending in a cul-de-sac, similar to that in the Middle East.

## **2. Specific Findings on Kazakhstan: International Values Discussion, Accent on Securitization, Regimentation and Tolerance**

Kazakhstan is known in the world-wide religious scene primarily as host of the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Here, President Nursultan Nazarbayev proactively combines discussions on values, identities and security topics with the promotion of the international reputation of his country.

Constitutionally, Kazakhstan is a secular state. The official discourse on religion-related topics stresses tolerance and peaceful coexistence. However, the government preferentially incorporates the so-called traditional religions, such as Russian Orthodoxy, into its conceptual framework. Cooperation with them is considered desirable, while adherents of the so-called non-traditional religions (among these are some Islamic movements, but also, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses) are confronted with sometimes substantial difficulties. This corresponds to a common practice in the post-Soviet space. The State Committee for Religious Matters directly intervenes in the concerns of the religious communities. Discussion partners indicate that the current position of the government is strongly dependent on its economic and social success, that is, it is, potentially, not invulnerable.

A central theme in the religious policy of Kazakhstan is religious and religion-related school education. The importance ascribed to preventive work here is owed to, among other things, the comparatively young age of many Kazakhs convicted of terrorism. Religious education in the schools is anchored in the "State Program against Religious Extremism and Terrorism 2013-2017". The scope and content of religious education (comparative religious knowledge vs religious instruction) is continuously debated. There are concerns that the secular character of the schools could be undermined through religious instruction. State religious instruction has begun to be introduced. There is a need for further conceptual work on education and radicalization prevention.

### **3. Specific Findings on Kyrgyzstan: Accent on Securitization, Cooperative Control and Collaboration**

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by the limited possibilities of the weak state for influence on the concerns of the Islamic majority population. There is a great religious range and an openness of the society towards the so-called new denominations and sects. This is frequently explained by the nomadic history of the Kyrgyz. Despite the appropriation of and paternalism towards Islamic structures (such as the Grand Muftiate) by the state, the relationship between the sides can be considered comparatively cooperative. For the government, the questions connected to Islam are, first and foremost, relevant to security. A too liberal religious policy is apparently considered to be a potential source of radicalization. But, at the same time, the important collaboration with the population, so-to-speak, “cooperative control”, is repeatedly pointed out by security circles.

In September 2017, at an international conference on the topic of “Islam and the secular State”, conducted in Bishkek under the auspices of the president of the country, the Kyrgyz government emphasized topics of cooperation, such as experiences in the interaction between state and religion, the preservation of the cultural identities of the national states as a means of radicalization prevention and methods to hinder the politicization of Islam.<sup>4</sup> Here, President Almazbek Atambaev was the first Central Asian head of state to advocate a democratic relationship to “rational Islamic powers”.

The government has begun to deal specifically with religious and religion-related education. For this purpose, a pilot project is running in a range of state schools. The officials in charge are seeking conceptual approaches for religious policy and radicalization prevention. There is a clear interest in an exchange with Western sides, especially in a continuation of respective efforts of the State Commission for Religious Matters of the Kyrgyz Republic.

### **4. Specific Findings on Tajikistan: Accent on Regimentation, Elimination of the Opposition, Growing Influence of China**

The government of Emomali Rakhmon follows a decidedly more repressive religious policy compared with the neighboring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The prohibition of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) – its peace partner, anchored in the agreements on the ending of the Tajik Civil War – and the persecution of IRPT members, worsen the political climate. The tolerance of these occurrences by the OSCE, the EU and important Western states is problematic.

The government regulates public and private religious life, often focusing on outwards signs of religiosity, such as the dress code in the public space, the length of beards, burial rituals and wedding celebrations. Religious institutions, beginning with the Council of the Ulema, the prior Muftiate, are placed under governmental supervision. Since 2010, religious questions have been managed by the Office for

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4 Permanent Delegation of the Kyrgyz Republic to the OSCE, Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Kyrgyz Republic B. Dzhusupov at the Special Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, 29 September 2017, PC.DEL/1243/17, 3 October 2017.

Religious Matters, directly from the presidential administration. The regulation of educational questions has special significance. Children, youth up to 18 years and women, in general, are not allowed to visit mosques or Islamic schools. A single state institute offers Islamic studies. However, it does not have a good reputation in Islamic circles. Diplomas and certificates earned abroad are frequently not recognized and external control of religious life is feared. A range of Islamic clergy with foreign diplomas which were earned without state approval, were removed in a recent campaign.

Taken together, all of this creates uncertainty among the Muslim population and in Islamic circles. This feeds mistrust about the background of the state's policy on religion, which is seen not only in terms of domestic political regime protection.

In fact, discussion partners point out that the religious policy of the government of Emomali Rakhmon is also increasingly dependent on outside considerations. The influence of China on Tajikistan is, for many, self-evident. The measures of progressive secularization of public life are reminiscent of the Chinese religious policy, the so-called "de-extremification" in the Uyghur Autonomous Region Xinjiang.

China is also expanding its influence in the economy, but, meanwhile, in the security area as well. The newest stipulated guarantee of technical help via China by the securing of the 1,300-kilometer-long border of Tajikistan with Afghanistan was a signal-setting event after Russia had had to remove its military forces from the border in 2005.

The religious policy of the Rakhmon government and, particularly its action against the IRPT was also seen by its own discussion partners in connection with the deterioration of the relationships with Iran and the simultaneous rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. Iran was accused by the (Tajik) government of supporting the IRPT. But bilateral political tensions could also have an economic background – outstanding debts of the government to Iran. Economic considerations could also be behind the relationships with Saudi-Arabia. Here, of course, it must be surprising that the latter itself could embrace opening up and collaboration in the area of religion. The degree, to which these developments will be sustainable, cannot be evaluated here.

It must be noted that the Tajik government is clearly and symbolically undertaking a turn away from European partners – particularly from Western partners – in a broad cultural and political sense. Leaving the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw in 2016 or organizing "spontaneous" protests in front of OSCE offices in past years were visible examples of symbolical action in the OSCE context.

However, by contrast, the Tajik government also offers friendly gestures and invitations to collaborate. This affects, for example, the collaboration with CORE in 2017 and the clear offer of further cooperation between CORE and the Center for Islamic Studies under the President of the Republic Tajikistan.

## **Annex**

### **Memorandum on the Prevention of Religious Radicalization in Central Asia “Responsibility of State and Religion for Civil Peace”, Almaty, 24 October 2017**

We, experts and scholars from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and Germany assembled on 24 October 2017 in Almaty (Kazakhstan) to discuss the problem of religious radicalization and extremism and the prospects of a comprehensive civilian strategy for prevention and de-radicalization. This was preceded by conducting workshops, focus groups and individual discussions in Moscow, Bishkek, Osh, Almaty and Dushanbe that included more than seventy scholars, government officials, representatives of Islamic communities and NGOs. The findings of these meetings are included in the present paper.

Our shared starting point is that religious radicalization, extremism and terrorism represent a significant long-term challenge for almost all parts of the OSCE area, including Germany, Russia and the Central Asian states. We also share the view that purely military and security policy approaches to these phenomena are not sufficient and are partially counterproductive. Therefore, our common objective is to conceive a comprehensive civilian strategy for prevention and de-radicalization, with specific elements for the Central Asian states, which complements military and security policy approaches.

#### **Religious Radicalization and Extremism in Central Asia**

While religious radicalization and extremism can be observed in almost all parts of the OSCE area, their specific root causes and features differ significantly. In Central Asia, the currently dominant debate is on how to counter foreign Islamic groups and their potential to convert a large share of the population to their interpretation of Islam. Deep concerns are caused by the fact that groups from the Near and Middle East and Southwest Asia could gain a sustained influence in the region and even forcibly change the distribution of power.

Connected to this is the fear that the retreat of the ISIL in the Middle East could lead to an influx of fighters to Afghanistan and its neighboring countries and to a strengthening of the positions of ISIL in neighboring regions as compensation for its military withdrawal from Iraq and Syria.

In the same context, Central Asian states face the challenge of ISIL fighters from the Syrian conflict zone returning to their native countries. Interlocutors estimate that the number of ISIL fighters from Central Asia amounted to about 3 - 4.5 thousand in late 2016. An additional 5,000 individuals in the ISIL ranks are assumed to come from other post-Soviet countries.

As the precise scope of extremism in Central Asia is unknown, much of what the Central Asian governments do to counter radicalization is based on a worst-case scenario. Critics hold the view that this mainly serves to justify restrictive measures for the protection of the existing political regimes. Noteworthy is that an advanced

level of counter-radicalization co-ordination exists between the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the heads of CIS border forces and the ministries of interior. However, there are certain shortcomings in the sphere of politico-civilian prevention of radicalization.

Our findings allow the conclusion that, in parallel to the socio-economic reasons, an overtly restrictive religious policy is the main structural factor, which causes dissatisfaction and radicalization. This situation nourishes distrust between governments and Muslim elites, while what is needed is building confidence between the sides.

### **Key Root Causes of Radicalization**

While the precise extent of radicalization is not known, there is more clarity on some of its root causes. Radicalization in the Islamic context affects the most varied social groups and is definitely not only found among the fringe groups of society, for which it is perceived as an increasing threat. While complex socio-economic conditions are, indeed, among the serious causes of radicalization, they should be seen in tandem with other factors. This is well known from other regions of the world. The fact that recruitment is also successfully carried out among the educated middle-class is indicative of this. The incorporation into radical organizations frequently takes place outside of mosques and social networks. The recruitment measures are tailor-made and concentrate on the most diverse groups, such as family members, migrant workers, youth, elderly people and also, to some degree, groups of persons with a comparatively high educational level. Radical groups capitalize on dissatisfaction with the general living conditions, not least with poor government leadership, education, the memory of stability and pro-social orientation of the Soviet period and the lack of vocational and social perspectives. The coupling of this dissatisfaction with calls for a life under strict Islamic rules is actively used by the recruiters.

### **The Role of Women in Radicalization Prevention**

Gender issues play a key role in radicalization as well as in its prevention. Also in Muslim views, trends of discrimination against women are perceived in current religious life, especially in the areas of religious education and the active participation of women and girls in religious life at all levels of society.

This can lead to susceptibility to radical flows of Islam, which are increasingly developing subtle gender-specific approaches in recruitment. Social networks and direct contacts, personal communication and financial contributions, based on accurate knowledge of living conditions and societal deficits, are used. In particular, young women who are isolated in their social environment because of their unmarried status are caught up in the prospect of marriage with ISIL fighters. The supposedly equal treatment as a full-fledged fighter for the Islamic cause appeals to younger women who are looking for a more active role in society.

## **The Hanafi Madhhab – the Traditional Islamic School of Law in Central Asia**

The Hanafi Madhhab is the dominant and traditional Islamic school of law in Central Asia, where it has deep historical roots. The Iraqi, Pakistani and Central Asian Sunnites are committed to the Hanafi Madhhab. While its theological and secular positioning and judgments are greatly appreciated in the Islamic world, it faces opposition from some other law schools. Radical missionaries from outside the region try to impose their reading of Islam on the Muslims in Central Asia.

The broad public is insufficiently acquainted with the Islamic scripts, theological discourses and traditions. Moreover, what must not be discounted is the fact that the Hanafi Madhhab represents the Islamic school of law in an overall weak economic region and, consequently, it is less well-off materially compared to many better-equipped Islamic movements from abroad.

The traditional centers of Hanafi theology are located in Bukhara and Tashkent, situated in today's Uzbekistan. Since the five Central Asian states are independent, the Hanafi Madhhab is internally divided along the new state borders between them. New Hanafi religious structures of their own have been established in these states. Youth and clerics seeking religious education or qualifications have stopped travelling to neighboring Uzbekistan and increasingly favor educational institutions in the Middle East.

The Central Asian governments perceive the Hanafi Madhhab as a religion, which is rather non-political and not unfriendly towards the state. The relationship between Hanafi Islam and state institutions is, nonetheless, ambivalent: while on the one hand, the secular governments appreciate it as a traditional religion, on the other hand, they attempt to directly govern religious affairs.

### **External Actors**

The religious situation in Central Asia is influenced by external actors. For one thing, the debates revolve around religious influences and the missionary activities of organizations from the Arab region, Pakistan and Turkey. To various degrees, they are seen as being supported by the United States and Western Europe. These strands are also seen as competing for discursive authority for Central Asia's Muslims and attempting to fill the vacuum of religious expertise and education left by the Soviet period, which had eliminated religious practice from public life. There are fears that radical groups will, in the long run, succeed in further promoting their scenario, spreading their influence in the region, imposing their religious norms on Central Asian societies and undermining the region's traditional religious identity.

For another thing, the economic and political influence of China is discussed in the same context. China already defines regional affairs in Central Asia much more than it may appear from a distance. With a view to recent developments in this respect, interlocutors point to China's increasing insistence that Central Asian governments strengthen the state's supreme role in religious affairs in order to ensure security, unity and public order. In particular, they point out that recent Chinese de-extremification regulations for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region can already be considered as a blueprint for Central Asia.



Experts explain that, taken together, these two factors – foreign missionary activities and the influence of the Persian Gulf countries, China, Pakistan and Turkey – are more and more dislodging the presence of the West and Russia in the region.

### **Towards a Comprehensive Strategy to Prevent Religious Radicalization**

We are far from having a comprehensive strategy for religious radicalization prevention and de-radicalization, but we have identified some elements that are worth being developed and pursued in the future.

First, prevention should start at the earliest possible stage and, ideally, prevent any kind of radicalization. Hence, we argue that it is necessary to focus our efforts on the developments preceding radicalization. The further the process of radicalization has progressed, the more difficult it is to achieve de-radicalization results.

Second, we argue for a modern religious policy in the states. An up to-date framework regulating the relations between states and Islamic communities must be characterized by mutual respect, cooperation and the recognition of each other's spheres of interest. In this respect, it is essential that both sides define what they expect from each other. While religious actors should discuss and explain their functions vis-à-vis the state, the state should provide the framework within which cooperation on matters of common interest takes place, instead of regulating everyday religious life. One should look for a common understanding of fundamental positions on matters, such as:

- disputed categories, such as secular statehood in a Muslim-majority society;
- viability and interdependence of values, such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights, with the values of the Central Asian states;
- principles and guarantees of non-interference of governments in confessional matters and of Muslim institutions in governmental affairs; and
- modernization of religious public education that also includes the strengthening of Hanafi traditions of Islamic education in Central Asia.

Establishing a new, mutually supportive relationship with Islamic elites would be a key move towards winning them over as equal partners in the development of their “common house”, one that would take into account Islam in its complexity as a religion, worldview and set of social rules and practices.

Third, both states and Islamic communities should undertake joint efforts to modernize religious education and improve its quality. In so doing, both sides should respect their spheres of competence. A higher level of religious education would also strengthen the authority of the Hanafi School of law and, thus, its potential for radicalization prevention and de-radicalization.

Fourth, gender issues play a central role in radicalization prevention. The majority of girls and women see themselves as belonging to the Islamic world without, in every case, reducing this self-understanding to a strict way of life. Muslim customs and traditions have survived in most of the families. Among other things, this also affects the understanding of the roles of men and women.

There are many women's organizations (NGOs), which deal not exclusively, but also, with radicalization prevention. To a great extent, they operate without relevant training in this area and have only limited support from their respective states. Projects

are primarily supported by international organizations and are mostly limited to one or two years. Interview partners expressed their wish to engage in international gender-related collaboration and to gain support for establishing more cross-regional links for their organizations.

### **Continuing our Cooperation in the Future**

It is obvious that religious radicalization and extremism represent a long-term challenge. Therefore, we express our desire to continue our cooperation and to extend it by including more participants, particularly from Islamic communities.

In this respect, it is necessary to create a mechanism that regulates relations between the state and religious communities. In following our cooperation, we have identified three specific items that can essentially contribute to developing a comprehensive prevention and de-radicalization approach:

**First, studying the experiences with negotiating and implementing regulatory frameworks between state authorities and Islamic communities.** Of course, conditions are different in Germany, Russia and the Central Asian states. However, the challenge of creating a framework regulating the relations between the state and Muslim communities, with the aim of substantiating common responsibility for the preservation of civil peace and harmony, is broadly relevant and has to be addressed.

**Second, analyzing the experience of religious education** in order to substantiate common responsibility for the preservation of civil peace and harmony and prevent religious radicalization. Thereby, we are aware of the fundamental difference that Islam is the religion of the overwhelming majority of the populations in the Central Asian countries, whereas in Germany and Europe, it is the religion of a rather small portion of the population. Nevertheless, we believe that studying the principles on which these efforts are based is well worthwhile.

**Third, assisting the establishment of a regional women's forum against religious radicalization in Central Asia** in order to support the regional networking of women's organizations that are involved in this sphere and also of other interested actors. Women have a special role in addressing radicalization – above all within their families, but also in the civil society. Such a forum could also make use of the experiences had by women in Europe and other parts of the world.

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In this year's dialogues on options for the prevention of religiously motivated radicalization and for de-radicalization, all sides included have gained substantial insights, shared the experts' views and broadened respective horizons of thinking and analysis of the phenomenon of radicalization. We express our gratitude to the German Federal Foreign Office for offering us this possibility. We would be grateful if we could continue along this course.

Adopted by the participants of an international working meeting on **24 October 2017 in Almaty, Kazakhstan.**



## **About CORE**

The Centre for OSCE Research (CORE), founded in 2000, is the only institute specifically dedicated to research on the OSCE. Located in Hamburg, Germany, within the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), CORE operates as a politically independent think tank, combining basic research on the evolution of the OSCE with demand-driven capacity-building projects and teaching. Addressing political actors, the academic community and the interested general public in Germany and abroad, CORE strives to contribute to the OSCE's development with analysis and critique that provide insight into the problems faced by and opportunities open to the Organization. For more information about CORE or this paper, please contact:

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