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2021.03.001. KSENIA ATAMALI. TERRORISM AS A THREAT TO REGIONAL SECURITY IN CENTRAL ASIA // *Condensed abstract.*

*Keywords: Central Asia, CIS, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, radical Islam, international terrorism, geopolitics, regional security, CSTO, SCO.*

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1. Nurdinova K.Kh. Radicalization of Islam as a Threat to Security of Central Asia // *Vestnik Oshskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 2020, № 1–3. P. 334–339.

2. Trusova A.A., Cherniaev M.S. Terrorism Threats to Central Asia: Background, Areas, Regional Security Problems // *Postsovetskie issledovaniya*, 2020, Vol. 3, № 6. P. 470–478.

K.Kh. Nurdinova [1] examines threats and security challenges that the states of Central Asia are facing. One of the main challenges is religious and political extremism, since radical international and regional extremist organizations are spreading radical Islam ideologies and undermining social and political structures of states. Some experts believe that the socio-economic crisis and corruption contribute to the development of radical Islamic organizations. The problem of regional security and stability is further aggravated by the following factors:

- lack of full-fledged democratic institutions, which may result in a coup d'état;
- power rivalry in the region and mutual personal hostility of certain officials;
- political changes in a single country can threaten stability in neighbouring states.

In both Middle East and Africa, radical Islam in Central Asia is regarded as a major threat. Radical ideas have been spreading over the Soviet period, and in the years of “perestroika” they began to replace the socialist ideals. Moreover, it is the international border with Afghanistan that makes the influence of radical Islam in Central Asia especially strong, destabilizing the situation in all five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Since the traditions of Islam and opposition to secularism have a long history here, the influence of radical Islamism in the region has proved to be quite strong. For instance, radical Islam was greatly affecting policy of Tajikistan after the civil war in the 1990s, which in fact was a reflection of the struggle between the secular and theocratic forces. In addition, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)

was officially allowed in Tajikistan for a long time and its members were represented in the government structure.

The underground religious organizations made use of multiple internal problems of the Central Asian countries to discredit and undermine the secular regimes. Interethnic tensions, low standards of living, high unemployment and corruption rates, weak governance and the spread of drug addiction and radical religious and nationalist ideas are also hazards. The most significant events associated with radical Islam are the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992–1997, the Batken Conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 1999–2000 and the Andijan unrest in Uzbekistan in May 2005.

The author notes that the Islamists in Afghanistan are going through a kind of consolidation period, having managed to overcome internal discord following the death of the Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and to occupy the territories bordering Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Radical Islamism in Central Asia is spread to a greater extent in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Such an uneven spread may be due to the ethnic factor that brings Uzbekistan and Tajikistan closer to Afghanistan. Tajiks and Uzbeks are the second and third largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan, respectively. After appearing in early 1990s, Islamist parties and organizations have become part – an illegal one, with few exceptions – of the political landscape in the states of Central Asia. The main organizations are: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation; HT), the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and the Islamic State (IS). The Muslim Brotherhood also operates in the region; it is a network of autonomous cells that use various names, such as “Social Reforms Society”, “Islamic Call Committee”, etc. The already complex social and economic situation in the region is aggravated by social and political problems, with radical Islam at the top of the regional agenda.

The Islamic State, which has considerably strengthened after the seizure of vast territories in Syria and Iraq, is the major threat. The members of the movement work to create a world caliphate governed by Sharia law and headed by the caliph, the agent of God on earth. Many researchers both in the Western countries and Russia link negative trends in Central Asia to the activities of IS. Nevertheless, some Russian scientists are of different opinion. For example, A. Grozin, the head of the Central Asia Department of the Institute of CIS Countries, believes that the media has made IS a “brand name” that is now used by people who are in no way related to the movement.

It should be noted that the activities of Islamist groups (mostly of the Wahhabi wing) is virtually the only means for social protest against the impoverishment of the population, social and economic inequality, authoritarianism of the authorities and corruption. The author identifies the following reasons for expanding influence of radical Islam:

- since justice is one of the most important values in Islam, its widespread violation gave the Islamists the opportunity to justify their actions by the demand to observe religious norms;

- after the collapse of the USSR, the newly established national governments fell short of expectations of the population, and Islam filled an ideological vacuum, created by the crisis in the public consciousness;

- having received regular support from abroad, Islamists found themselves under influence of the actions of Islamic radicals in the Middle East and North Africa; moreover, the Taliban victory in Afghanistan created a favourable environment for increasing Islamist radicalization in Central Asia;

- the ideology of proletarian internationalism and relevant Soviet national policies was replaced by Islamic ideology, becoming a consolidating force in the Muslim republics of Central Asia;

- there is a certain influence of historical and geographical factor: during the demarcation of national boundaries, the areas

inhabited by the settled population and nomads became part of different republics, for instance, the Fergana Valley spreads across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; the territories along these administrative and territorial borders were marked by the most rapid Islamic revival;

- there is also a generation gap due to the fact that young people from extremist groups protest against the old clergy and senior officials of the Sufi tariqas, who will not allow a new generation into the elite;

- national governments proved to be unable to have a constructive dialogue with Islamic political organizations and movements.

The author notes that the official clergy is the only structured Islamic authority in all five states of the region, and recently the line between the official and “unofficial clergy” has started to blur. The reason for this is that many new mosques obtain official registration and that both structures are being unified into one; this is also partly because of the existing diversity of views and beliefs and the complex nature of the relations with the authorities. There are also structured Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) that are particularly influential in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. They are very little involved in public and political activities, although their representatives are part of some political Islamic groups and organizations. Underground Islamist groups have a flexible pyramid-shaped hierarchy; an organization can consist of a single pyramid or many separate pyramids (groups). The groups are noted for high discipline because members are recruited from the military, including participants in the war in Afghanistan. The leader (emir) takes advice from the council (shura), but has the right to make independent decisions. The council members (and even Emir himself) have groups of personally loyal followers, and an ordinary member of such a group, in turn, can be emir for the next tier of the pyramid. Although there are some differences between the groups, they all seek to take power by force; do not

recognize the official authorities; demand the introduction of Sharia law; and use terrorist attacks as a means of pressure on independent states.

According to Russian experts, there is a new generation of radical Islamic organizations in Central Asia that use Internet for Islamic agitation; recruit officials of the republics of the region; focus their activities on traditional structures (mahalla) by creating local cells (khalq); and promote the idea social equality ("Islamic socialism").

The author concludes that Islamist organizations are acknowledged as a threat to national and regional security throughout Central Asia. In addition, there is a risk of another "Arab Spring", since there are many similarities between the states of Central Asia and the countries where the Arab Spring protests had spread. With the support of the official clergy, the leadership of the Central Asian republics are stepping up their fight against radical Islamists who can cause the systemic crisis in the region. At the same time, most countries in the region come to an understanding that there is a need for social and economic reforms, not only the crackdown against radical Islamists. There is a complex of objective and subjective reasons that contributed to radicalization of political Islam in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period: poverty, corruption, overpopulation, ideological vacuum, generation gap, as well as the hard-line stance of the authorities and leaders of Islamic movements. The above-mentioned complex of problems must be systematically and comprehensively addressed and requires exhaustive strategic efforts.

Researchers A.A. Trusova and M.S. Cherniaev [2] examine the threat of international terrorism and mechanisms for countering it; identify preconditions and further development of terrorist activities; and also analyze the impact of these factors on regional security in Central Asia. International terrorism is a global phenomenon and its study requires comprehensive analysis of economics, politics, history, psychology, culture, etc. Terrorist acts are considered as one of the most dangerous crimes

against humanity, society and the state, and with the expansion of globalization and development of modern technologies, the problem of countering terrorism becomes cross-cutting and global. At the same time, there is still no single definition for “international terrorism”. Thus, Russian Federal Law “On Countering Terrorism” defines terrorism as an ideology of violence and a tool for influencing governments, but does not specify the term “international terrorism”. Nevertheless, the Federal Act on international terrorism was adopted in 2016, and a number of Russian researchers also introduced this concept in their works. The authors cite some of them. A.P. Kuznetsov and N.N. Marshakova define international terrorism as a socially dangerous act committed for international legal purposes that encroach on public relations, intergovernmental affairs and international rule of law by causing (or threatening to cause) harm to the essential interests of the global community. According to A.A. Popovich, international terrorism is an infringement on the global order through the use (or the threat of use) of organized violence for internationally illicit objectives by intimidating those who are not direct targets of the attack. I.M. Ilyinsky argues that international terrorism is a motivated illegal retaliatory act of violence committed by citizens of one or several countries against another or other countries that is intended to provoke state of terror in particular individuals, groups of people or the entire population in order to gain ideological, religious, national, economic, political or social advantages.

The issue of international terrorism is also being widely discussed outside of Russia. For example, the FBI defines international terrorism as criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are associated with foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored). According to the Oxford Dictionary, international terrorism is the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims. The authors conclude that although

there is no single definition of this phenomenon, the issue of international terrorism is becoming more and more pressing and acquiring new dimensions and features.

Geopolitically, Central Asia is important due to large deposits of energy resources that the republics export around the world. Therefore, the interests of Russia, China and the United States clash in the region. Thus, China views the countries of Central Asia as an important transport hub for the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project, which Xi Jinping announced in Kazakhstan in 2013. In addition, the Central Asian region directly borders unstable Afghanistan and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China, a hotbed of separatist sentiments and an area of activities of the East Turkestan terrorist group.

The authors note that due to the fact that the countries of Central Asia gained independence only after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, this is a relatively new region, where the formation of an institutional structure and the search for cultural and historical identity are still ongoing. Moreover, the region is located between two great political forces – Russia and China – and cooperation with these forces requires a constant search for a balance of interests. Thus, in addition to regional challenges and threats, the situation is complicated by the competition of external actors and the lack of cooperation between the countries of the region.

The authors subdivide terrorist threats to the countries of Central Asia into those internal and external. Internal threats are posed by the difficult social and economic situation in the countries of the region, because poverty, unemployment and the marginalization of certain groups of population often give rise to extremist opposition movements. External threats are posed by hot spots around Central Asia, forming the “Islamic arc” of instability: the Xinjiang of China, the Caucasus, Kashmir and Afghanistan. As a result, the Islamic groups Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) now operate in the territories of

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The IMU sought to create the Fergana Valley a separate state, thereby separating it from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The Fergana Valley is a densely populated region with high unemployment, which contributes to the rise of radical organizations and facilitates recruitment. The IMU troops fought for the opposition in the Tajik civil war, joined with the Taliban in the war against coalition forces in Afghanistan and collaborated with al-Qaeda. The IMU joined ISIS in August 2015. The activity of the IRPT peaked during the armed confrontation in the country, making it a legitimate opposition party. Initially, the party opted for constructive dialogue; however, the authorities accused the leader of the IRPT M. Kabiri of financing the coup d'état in September 2015, attempted by Abduhalim Nazarzoda, the Deputy Minister of Defense of Tajikistan. As a result, the IRPT was banned and designated as a terrorist and extremist organization in Tajikistan. After the pan-Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) was founded in East Jerusalem in 1953, it quickly expanded its influence to Central Asia. The brutal persecution of its members can lead to further radicalization of the organization, now consisting of 15–20 thousand people. According to the representatives of the party, they do not recognize violence as a tool for political struggle, and carry out their activities peacefully. However, party literature ideologically justifies violence, and the party acknowledges its involvement in a number of attempted coups in the Middle East and has connections with other extremist groups.

The authors point to the fact that the instability in Afghanistan and the emergence of ISIS have made Central Asia an area of increased terrorist threat. Being driven out of the territories of Iraq and Syria, the organization's fighters relocated to Afghanistan, posing a threat to the countries of Central Asia and the CIS. A few years before the withdrawal of the anti-terrorist coalition troops from Afghanistan began, the terrorist threat in the countries of Central Asia considerably increased,

although it was more closely related to drug trafficking, not ISIS. The Central Asian region is one of the main suppliers of fighters (almost 20 per cent of all foreign fighters) for Salafist jihadist terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria. There have been a number of terrorist attacks in Central Asia, including the following:

- *Tajikistan*: explosions in Kamarob and Khujand in 2010, armed attacks in Khorugh in 2014 and Dushanbe in 2015;
- *Kazakhstan*: explosions in Aktobe, Astana (Nur-Sultan) and Atyrau in 2011, armed attacks in Aktobe and Almaty in 2011 and 2016, massacres in Almaty in 2012;
- *Kyrgyzstan*: explosions in Bishkek in 2015 and 2016;
- *Uzbekistan*: explosion in Andijan in 2009.

Thus, a thorough analysis of the terrorist threat in the region indicates a high level of instability in Central Asia. The combat against terrorism and extremism is a primary objective of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The CSTO consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the SCO includes Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, among others. Coordination and consolidation of efforts of the member states in countering international terrorism, extremism and separatism, drug and arms trafficking, illegal migration and other transnational criminal activities are enshrined in the charters of both organizations. The Collective Rapid Reaction forces (CRRF) formed in 2009 are designated to respond quickly to threats to regional security. Nevertheless, both the CSTO and the SCO (which is in the process of establishing legal and regulatory framework) carry out military training, but have not been involved in military operations to date. Counter-terrorist operations are still the responsibility of the national armed forces of each Central Asian republic.

The authors conclude that terrorist and extremist organizations in the region have similar objectives and tactics, but the increasing autonomy of terrorist cells and solid networks pose new challenges in combating terrorism. The geopolitical importance of Central Asia, combined with its social and

economic problems and the religious factor, attract more and more terrorist groups to the countries of the region. Existing organizations that train fighters in the region are noted for closely connected terrorist networks. Moreover, there is no unified practical cooperation between the countries in countering terrorism in the region, and despite the existence of the CSTO CRRF, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan combat terrorism at the domestic level. The authors predict an increase in the activity of terrorist, extremist and separatist groups in the region; further politicization of Islam and the expansion of the influence of radical groups; consolidation of activities of terrorist groups while retaining their autonomy; and an increase in the number of terrorist attacks. The Central Asian republics, Russia and China should pool their efforts in combating the threat of the spread of terrorism in the region.