

CENTRAL ASIA: How to thwart religious extremism ?

HRWF (02.03.2020) - In February 2016, the EIAS published a briefing paper entitled ["Rising Extremism in Central Asia? Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia"](#), by Sebastiano Mori and Leonardo Taccetti. This paper addressed several major issues:

- Why Central Asia?
- The role of religion in Central Asia
- An overview of Central Asian Islamic groups
- Growing radicalization?
- European Pivot to Central Asia
- Conclusions and steps forward

Its section "Conclusions and steps forward" proposes a wide range of policies to thwart rising religious extremism in Central Asia.

As of 31 January 2019, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* highlighted the repressive but inefficient policies of some countries in the region by documenting in its [Database of FORB Prisoners](#) a number of cases of detention of non-violent believers exercising their right to religious freedom but accused of extremism:

Kazakhstan: 28 prisoners

1 Jehovah's Witness – 18 Sunni Muslims – 9 Tablighi Jamaat Muslims

Tajikistan: 31 prisoners

1 Protestant - 2 Jehovah's Witnesses – 2 Tablighi Jamaat Muslims – 26 Sunni Muslims

Turkmenistan: 26 prisoners

9 Said Nursi Muslims – 17 Jehovah's Witnesses

Uzbekistan: 38 prisoners

38 Sunni Muslims

Repressive policies and sentencing non-violent believers to prison terms is a non-solution to the problem of public and state security. Such measures only fuel popular resentment and provide fertile ground for further radicalization.

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"Steps forward

This study underlines the different nature and traits of the several Islamic movements present in the Central Asian region in order to raise awareness concerning the ineffective and often backfiring "one-size-fits-all" policy adopted by the governments without regards to the diverse array of forms of Islam. A major opening concerning freedom of beliefs and freedom of thought should be incentivized, especially in Central Asia's most autocratic governments. Increasing youth opportunities and religious freedom will prevent the rise of dissatisfaction and discontent among the population and therefore drastically reduce the chances that new generations will join the extremists' ranks. A number of the groups examined, namely Gulen, *Tablighi Jama'at* and Sufists are actually moderate, fostering more tolerant behaviour than other more radical movements. Given that they do not dispense an Islamic education and instead boost the dialogue among different religious groups, FG's schools should be legal in each republic, not discriminated but encouraged in their efforts to disseminate their model of secular

education without proselytism. Investing in this positive education methodology will contribute to raising youth knowledge, driving the younger generation away from potential attempts of recruitment and radicalisation and creating a peaceful and prosperous environment. "The grassroots levels are the key environments to achieve an inclusive society and to fight radicalisation" as Ms Malika Hamidi Director General of European Muslim Network of Brussels stated. (88)

Raising awareness of the importance of rediscovering the "enlightened and ethical" Islam doctrine based upon the Hanafi School and social initiatives would play a crucial role in shaping a more inclusive religious sphere (89).

We should not underestimate the importance of the imams and mufti as religious leaders in Central Asia. Enhancing their role and better training them in negotiation and mediation in conflict resolution could contribute significantly towards preventing radicalisation and terrorist attacks (90). The lack of understanding of their religion, in particular among young Muslims, should also be addressed from within their community. Increasing religious leaders' role in these matters is another step forward – already being implemented in Kyrgyzstan – in fostering more tolerance and in fighting the lack of education amongst the younger generations. In addition, "we should not forget about prisons, which are becoming a breeding ground for radicalisation. Working with convicts and establishing community-dialogues involving the imams are practices already in use in some Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and are bringing positive results", said Mr Keneshbek Sainazarov, Kyrgyzstan Country Director of Search for Common Ground. (91)

The difficulty of combating terrorism and violent extremism lies on the complexity of the different reasons that push people to use a more radical approach and to fight for jihadist and fundamentalist groups. The lack of understanding of the above mentioned motivations should be resolved through the direct involvement of European and Central Asian Muslims in the process of radicalism prevention.

Furthermore, a country's stability is best ensured where there is economic stability and where its citizens can take care of themselves economically and efficiently. For these reasons, and given the multifactorial and transnational nature of the radicalism challenge, Central Asian countries should use a more comprehensive approach, involving not only law enforcement and border security but also civil society, religious groups, information sharing and addressing local community-level issues, while keeping in mind the importance of economic development, youth employment and religious freedom.

In this framework where the U.S., Russia, the Council of Europe, OSCE and to some extent NATO are involved, the EU-Central Asia Strategy should do more and include in its objectives the challenges of foreign fighters and radicalisation, drug trafficking and organized crime, and conflicts that require cooperation between Central Asia and the EU. Approaching the five republics with a balanced mix of soft policies and investments in human capital and inclusive economic development, together with more realistic tools can be the right strategy to secure the Heartland. "

⁸⁸ Information obtained through interview with Ms Malika Hamidi, Director General of the European Muslim Network.

⁸⁹ Zhussipbek, *Religious Radicalism in Central Asia*.

⁹⁰ Mirsaiitov, I., Sakeeva, V. Baseline Assessment Report, In the framework of the "Strengthening capacity to prevent violent extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic" project.

⁹¹ Information obtained through interview with Mr. Keneshbek Sainazarov, Kyrgyzstan Country Director, Search for Common Ground.