

ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS RADICALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Introduction

The considerable research shows that the Central Asia is potentially the axis of the radical ideas and global terrorism. Over the quarter century period of independence the former Soviet countries have experienced religious-based civil war (Tajikistan), violent ethnic conflicts (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan), two revolutions (Kyrgyzstan), a series of assassinations of the high-ranking officials (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), hundreds of terrorist acts (all five republics), involving local and foreign insurgents. The terrorists are members of homegrown or foreign radical extremist groups, and they use a wide variety of tactics, such as kidnapping people, suicide bombing, attacking security or government offices, etc. The magnitude, intensity and content of radicalism have been expanding across the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some people argue that Central Asia, historically part of the Islamic civilization, never in its history knew this type of violence and hatred, and the radical ideas are being imported into the region. While the other scholars argue, that radicalism is a local phenomenon, and based on the social, political and economic circumstances of these countries. This essay will weight two different positions on the root causes of radicalization in Central Asia and will look for exceptional reasons unique to this region that made it prone to radicalization.

Mail part

The shootings and bombings of Islamist groups and subsequent arrests of their activists are widespread across the region and a number of locals joining the terrorist groups in Syria had been rapidly rising. The shock of the first terrorist attacks in western, southern and central parts of Kazakhstan occurred in 2011 are still fresh in people's mind [1]. Different estimates show that 1,000 to 4,000 people from five Central Asian countries have been fighting alongside ISIS terrorist group in the territory of Syria and Iraq. The governments of former Soviet republics with the Muslim majority populations have been expressing concerns over the radicalization of its citizens and «importing» of the ideology of violence upon their return from the battlefields.

The Soviet Union's initial oppression of religion until the 1940s and the subsequent attempt to create «communist» Islam, which lasted till the *perestroika* didn't give any results [2]. Even during the Brezhnev time the residents of Central Asia covertly travelled to Pakistan and Arab countries to learn the «other» or «purer» Islam from outsiders, and they often brought radical ideas of Mawdidi and Qutb to the region [3, 626], [4, 42]. By the time of disintegration of the Soviet Union, the young people of the region were keen to seek better ideals and meaning of life. The secular and conformist older generation had lost its credibility and clout, while the «communist clergy» was no longer capable of meeting the expectations and increasing interest of people in the religion [5, 23], [6, 20]. The independence was the chance for them to reestablish a blurred identity of the nation, and Islam was a crucial part of the ethnic and national self-consciousness of the indigenous people of Central Asia [7, 177]. Gunn having cited Laitin, characterized this period as «the phase of «identity formation» in the region [8, 392]. Therefore, the ideological encroachment of Saudi Arabians in the region after its emancipation from the USSR was embraced by the people. The religious literature of different content poured the Central Asia from Arab countries and Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support to the region presenting scholarships and constructing mosques throughout the region [9, 263], [10, 171], [8, 401]. Consequently, the Central Asian Spiritual Muslim Governance displayed the books of al-Wahhab and Qutb in the shelves of its library, and they were disseminated among the students in Tashkent and elsewhere in Ferghana Valley [4, 42].

Apart from a small group of Shiah residing in Tajikistan, the majority of Central Asian Muslims are followers of moderate Hanafi *madhhab* of Sunni Islam; therefore the radical ideas of Wahhabists were uncommon for them [6, 20]. Hanafi is an apolitical movement which advocates the division of religion and state. This contradicts the ideas of radical Islamists [10, 175]. The clergy in the region even accepted the Soviet rule and withstood the repressions and marginalization [11, 330]. Notwithstanding this the fundamentalism made a great success in a short period of time. The radicals had filled the ideological and political void, suggesting answers to the questions of bewildered people. «Islamist groups offer straightforward, appealing answers to today's moral choices, attractive for young people,» Matveeva concludes [5, 23]. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the most vocal homegrown radical group in Central Asia had been established in 1990,

while Hizb ut-Tahrir, the fundamentalist group created in 1953 in Jerusalem was encroaching into the community in middle 1990s [9, 264], [3, 626]. The local governments were unable to assess the threat from rapidly expanding influence of the radical groups and did nothing to prevent it neither from ideological, no from security perspectives [3, 626]. The political establishments of Central Asian states have neglected the ethnically and culturally mingled Ferghana Valley [12, 2]. Although the state borders of all Central Asian countries were porous, they were late with military reforms and border security measures. Only the invasion of terrorists into the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan in 1999 forced them to act [3, 628]. Similarly, the government of Kazakhstan has acknowledged its slowness in the ideological sphere and just in recent years launched websites aimed at disseminating the ideas of «official» Islam [13, 640].

Furthermore, the ethnic boundaries in Central Asia don't coincide with the national borders, and all the five countries have historical territorial claims to each other. According to Pipes the Soviet rulers have intentionally created distinct nationalities in order to weaken the unity of Turkic tribes and «because of their fear of pan-Islamism and *pan-Turanianism*» [14, 307]¹. Also, there is a tense relationship among Central Asian nations over the scarce water and energy resources. Kyrgyzstan has experienced two bloody conflicts between Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents since 1990s, while the minor clashes between Kazakhs and Uzbeks occasionally happen at the Uzbek-Kazakh border. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have disputes over water recourses and their relationship was deteriorated by the Tajik civil war of 1992-1997.

The overall success of the foreign radical groups is explained by the tactics that they employed in Central Asia. Karagiannis points out that by 1980s mosques in Central Asia played a role of socializing hub, where people found answers to all their routine questions [9, 262]. Adapting their rhetoric to the mentality of local people, Wahhabists and other fundamentalists promoted the idea of «internal» or «mild» jihad, which was closer to the worldview of Central Asian residents [15, 82]. Collins asserts, «HT [Hizb ut-Tahrir] in Central Asia has adeptly exploited the internal, spiritual, and defensive interpretation of jihad that historically prevails in

¹ Turanianism is an idea of uniting all Turkic nations in Central Asia and to politically tie them with Turkish people, which was suggested by the nationalist groups of Ottoman Empire at the beginning of 20th century.

the region, whereas in the Middle East its message is more violent» [15, 82]. With no social or political slogans in their immediate agenda the Islamist movements tried to fill the gap in the psychological necessities of people in their quest for God [9, 266], [7, 177].

Heathershaw and Montgomery contend that the autocratic regimes of all five republics of the region were using «radicalism» as the witch-hunting tool to silence the democratic opposition [16, 12]. The governments applied twofold policy with regard to radicals. Firstly, they outlawed all the «parallel» Islamic movements, forcing them to go underground and further radicalize [5]. Gunn aptly makes parallels between the methods of Soviet authorities and the establishments of the new independent countries in tackling the (non-)religious freethinkers [8, 403]. Unsurprisingly, almost all of the Central Asian leaders were at least members of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (two of them are former heads of the branches) in their respective republics, and promoted atheism, but now they use «Wahhabi» «...to threaten and undermine all Muslim believers» [8, 403]. McGlinchey points out the example of autocratic regimes in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Southeast Asia where «political Islam as first conceived in the 1950s was a response to the «nationalist and chauvinistic ideologies...» [17, 555]. The fact that the religious movements are active in more repressive Uzbekistan than in more democratic Kyrgyzstan says that if the oppositional religious groups have voice in parliament, they could have tried to persuade the government to make appropriate reforms [17, 555]. The politically isolated and frustrated people had no choice other than joining the Islamist groups [12, 1]. It halted the democratic emulation between secularism and religion [7, 174]. Lipovsky holds a similar view, saying that ascendancy from Afghan and Iranian fundamentalists was not the cause, but the long-lasting persecution of Islam paved the way to radicalization [6, 12].

Secondly, the governments used the «terrorist» label against the political opposition, who had nothing to do with religion, but tried to challenge the uncontrolled rule of the autocratic leaders. For instance, Uzbekistani court had sentenced Muhammad Salih, the head of the nationalist and non-religious Erk party in exile to 15 years imprisonment in absentia for terrorism.

Consequently, series of terrorist acts shocked Uzbekistan in 2004 and it was followed by the tragic riot in the eastern city of Andijan in May 2005. In both cases president Karimov blamed Huzb ut-

Tahrir and other Islamist groups for masterminding and ideologically encouraging the people. Yet no substantial prove of these statements was provided [9, 265]. There are speculations that the local governments have been orchestrating terrorist acts in order to frighten the whole society, especially those who endanger the existence of autocratic regimes, by the ghost of «radicals». Falkenberg has provided the statement of Craig Murray, who served as British Ambassador to Uzbekistan in 2002-2004, who said that the terrorist acts in Tashkent in 2004 were staged by the Uzbek security forces [18, 376].

Most of the scholars indicate the instability and turmoil that agitated the Central Asian region after 2001 as the direct consequence of the double-faced foreign policy of the United States, and the shameful side-effect of the «war on terror» campaign, which was globally launched after the 9/11 [4], [10]. The US President George Bush's televised address on 20 September 2001 was the turning point, where he declared the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan the companion of Osama bin Laden [4, 42]. The Central Asian countries have become partners with the U.S. in its Operation Enduring Freedom campaign, opening up their airspaces to the military planes. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had granted their military bases to the US air forces. At the same time, the geographical proximity of the region to the epicenter of terrorism had created an atmosphere of paranoia, allowing the governments to threaten the people with terrorism in order to strengthen their own power [3].

Ilkhamov posits that indiscriminate exploitation of «the war on terror» by the United States led to the untying of the autocratic rulers' hands in their oppressive policies, subsequently deteriorating the situation in the human rights and minority rights issues [4]. This facilitated the people's alienation from the government and led to support given to the extremist's views. Foust appropriately pointed out, «[t]he relative lack of attention given by U.S. officials to the oppressiveness of local regimes has rankled many human rights groups. Human Rights Watch, for example, repeatedly admonishes Central Asian governments for rampant human rights abuses, arbitrary justice, and restrictive social environments-conditions, they argue, the United States has accepted or ignored because of its focus on conducting operations in Afghanistan» [19, 48]. Consequently, the predilection for radicalism over liberalism is explained by the poor performance of democracy in the region and the discredit of its values by the local regimes [9, 276]. The mass uprising in Andijan in 2005 and the following

crackdown of the Uzbek government forces against the demonstrators and the members of the Akramiya religious group had a sobering effect on Washington. Different sources say that between 178 to 700 people were killed during these riots, which was primarily described by the Uzbek government as the destabilizing unrest of the Islamic militants, whereas some ascribe it simply with civilian demonstration. Moreover, hundreds of people were persecuted and arrested, they deprived of their businesses, while the demands of the international community to conduct and open investigation were not satisfied [12, 1].

The oppressing method of Central Asian governments has not only political, but also ethnic dimensions. Moreover, most scholars conclude that the exclusionary policies towards minority ethnic groups exploited by the governments of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in some cases in Kazakhstan have even stimulated the alienation and violence [7, 170]. For example, almost half of the population of the southern Osh region of Kyrgyzstan is ethnic Uzbeks, while they consist only 8% of the public sector [12, 3]. Omelicheva provides a data from the International Crisis Group, which shows that almost all of those who were arrested in Kyrgyzstan in connection to terrorism were ethnic Uzbeks, and the 90% of the Hizb ut-Tahrir members are Uzbeks [7, 171]. Similarly, most of the Islamist movements in Tajikistan are led by ethnic Uzbeks, and those who were compelled to leave Uzbekistan joined these extremist groups in the neighboring country. «In the Uzbek communities, Hizb ut-Tahrir has promoted a vision of a borderless and nationless Islamic state. For many Uzbeks who feel dissatisfied with their post-communist status and isolated from their families in Uzbekistan, these views have been very attractive», Omelicheva asserts [7, 178]. Furthermore, the Kyrgyz government has implemented a special plan to monitor the Uzbek and Uyghur residents of the southern regions.

All the scientists demonstrate that the social and economic inequality was the main trigger for the flourishing of radicalization. In addition to above mentioned factors, the authors point out political and financial corruption and nepotism; harsh economic conditions, especially in rural areas; constrained labor migration [8, 408], [10, 175]. But at the same time the level of radicalization didn't necessarily match with the socioeconomic conditions of the countries. For instance, despite its relatively good records in the economic sphere Uzbekistan became a fulcrum of radicals, whereas much poorer Kyrgyzstan was

less affected by extremists. Similarly, Kazakhstan, the leader in economic reforms, is experiencing Islamist violence, quiet frequently [7, 172]. This phenomenon could be characterized from the social movement theory perspective, which includes such key variables, as a political opportunity, resources, and framing and have a much broader explanation [15, 70].

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be argued that the radicalism in Central Asia, which historically has been part of the Islamic civilization, has both local and external characteristics. This can be explained by a number of factors. First, the worsening social and economic situation twined by corruption and inequality has discredited the government and the religious clergy, leaving people alone with their problems. The parallel with the «lost generation of Muslims in Europe» could be used in case of Central Asia, where the young children of «communist parents» wanted more satisfaction of their spiritual needs. Furthermore, the independence has opened an opportunity for the formerly isolated and oppressed people look for a pure Islam and a meaning of life in Arab countries in order to «rehabilitate» their blurred ethnic identities. Third, the governments led by former Communists didn't notice any threat from the influx of different ideologies to the region, and were late to react adequately, whereas the radicals adopting their missionary rhetoric to the local mentality easily gained popularity thanks to the ideological vacuum in the society. Bearing in mind the civic war in Tajikistan, the autocratic governments started a witch-hunting campaign silencing all unofficial Islamic ideas, forcing the activists to go underground and further radicalize. They also used «terrorism» tool against the secular political opposition, increasing the number of people who sympathize extremists. The global war on terror even deteriorated the overall situation in the sphere of political freedom and human rights, giving the autocratic leaders the uncontrolled power and justification of their acts. This overshadowed the people's believe in liberalism and made them sympathetic with «oppressed» radicals. Therefore, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of radicalization in Central Asia is a combination of classical social movement theory elements and other political, geopolitical, historical, societal factors that are unique only in this region and in this period of history.

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