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CENTRAL ASIA: SECULAR STATEHOOD CHALLENGED BY RADICAL ISLAM

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Today post-Soviet Central Asian countries are facing problems caused by old security challenges and the emergence of completely new threats. These threats may influence the prospects of secular statehood in the region. This is a serious obstacle to modernization.

One of the old security challenges is the situation in neighboring Afghanistan *where crisis phenomena continue to become aggravated*. The most dangerous threat is posed by *the concentration of militants in northern Afghanistan (on the border with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) during 2014 and 2015*.¹

As the UN Security Council papers stated “Afghan security forces estimated in March 2015 that some 6,500 foreign terrorist fighters were active in this country.”² There are 200 fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan alone (later renamed as the Islamic Movement of Turkistan – IMT).³ According to the Russian General Staff estimations if the Afghans are also counted, the total number of terrorist fighters in this country would amount to 50,000.⁴ The threat from Afghanistan is not only an ideological alternative to secular statehood in the form of radical Islam. It also has a purely military dimension. For example a recurrence of events similar to the “Batken war” (the invasion of Kyrgyzstan by IMT militants in 1999) is likely. There were only 200-259 militants there but the Kyrgyz government agencies were too weak to cope with them and the mechanism of the CIS Collective Security Treaty had to be used.

In 2014 and particularly in 2015, a “second front” emerged in the Middle East which has rapidly gained a Central Asian dimension. This front is a new threat posed by the Islamic State (ISIS) (*banned in Russia – Ed. Note*). First, ISIS is fraught with a threat of faith-motivated terrorism in view of militants’ migration potential. According to a number of authoritative estimates 500 militants arrived in Syria and Iraq from Uzbekistan; 360 from Turkmenistan, 350 from Kyrgyzstan, 250 from Kazakhstan, and 190 from Tajikistan.⁵ Obviously their recruitment would have been impossible without the existence of ISIS “sleeping cells” in Central Asian countries and Russia. Militants often travel to Syria and Iraq through Russia. Guest workers in Russia are also recruited. Second, ISIS is a serious ideological challenge to all Islamic states, Central Asian states included, because as a caliphate it claims supremacy in the entire Muslim world.

Specifically, ISIS has listed Central Asia and Afghanistan as Wilayat Khorasan. *It is actively penetrating Afghanistan exploiting the split in the Taliban after the death of its leader Mullah Omar and actively using the flow of funds from the Middle East. According to Al Jazeera Taliban militants are paid ten times as much as ISIS mercenaries – \$700 vs. \$70 per month.*⁶

According to Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, about 2,000-3,000 militants directly linked to ISIS were in Afghanistan in the fall of 2015.⁷ A special threat to Central Asia is posed by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), historically the most dangerous terrorist movement in the region and formerly part of Al-Qaeda which has joined ISIS. At the same time ISIS banners were raised by Turkmen tribes that inhabit areas bordering on Turkmenistan (many are descendants of the *basmachi* who fought the early Soviet government). ISIS is engaged in subversion in Central Asian hinterland as well. Kyrgyz and Tajik experts report that ISIS has allocated \$70 million for subversion in the region.⁸

Security threats to Central Asia from radical Islamism in Afghanistan and Mid-Eastern countries *are being aggravated by numerous negative domestic factors that put the majority of countries in the region on the list of “fragile states.”* These “fragile states” may easily turn into “failed states” that do not control their own territory. These states are the ideal ground for the entrenchment of radical terrorist groups like ISIS. The following is how experts rate the Central Asian countries in The Fragile States Index, 2015.

Table1. Central Asian countries in The Fragile States Index, 2015 ⁹

Country	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan	Kazakhstan
Place in the world out of 178 countries (the lower the place, the bigger the threat)	51/178	57 /178	62/178	78/178	110/178
Points (the higher the point, the larger the threat)	85.4	83.4	82.2	77.5	68.3
Category	High Warning	High Warning	High Warning	Warning	Low Warning

These expert estimates show that there is a serious threat to statehood in most Central Asian countries (High Warning) although it has not yet materialized as it has in many African and Asian countries. Second, they testify to a considerable differentiation between the region’s countries and Kazakhstan’s special position.

Factors contributing to these states’ “fragility” are as follows. *First, that is a large-scale drug traffic along the northern transportation route from Afghanistan to Russia.* The latter is the main consumer of Afghan heroin in the world. Security experts know well that the proceeds from the drug traffic are often used to fund terrorism and religious extremism.¹⁰ The existence of this link is obvious from the Batken war: one of IMU’s goals in invading Kyrgyzstan was to lay routes for heroin trafficking.

The second important factor contributing to their “fragility” and the growth of the radical Islamist threat is *the extremely high rate of corruption in the region.* Transparency International puts all these states at the bottom of its Corruption Perception Index, often below countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. International experts are particularly negative on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, perceived as some of the most corrupt states in the world (they share 170th place out of 174).

Table2. Central Asian states in The Corruption Perception Index¹¹

Country	The Corruption Perceptions Index		
	2012	2013	2014
Kazakhstan	133/174	140/177	126/175
Kyrgyzstan	154/174	150/177	136/175
Tajikistan	157/174	154/177	152/175
Turkmenistan	170/174	168/177	169/175
Uzbekistan	170/174	168/177	166/175

First, corruption is closely linked with organized crime especially drug trafficking, the proceeds of which may be used to finance terrorist groups, as we have already mentioned. Second, it sharply decreases the efficiency of government agencies in fight against the threat of radical Islam. Third, the high level of corruption and ensuing social inequality are one of the main propaganda points used by radical Islamists including ISIS against existing secular regimes in the region.

Poverty is the next factor contributing to these states' "fragility." Regional countries (especially parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the Fergana Valley) are characterized by a very high degree of rural overpopulation aggravated by the shortage of water and fertile soil. This leads to unemployment and the accumulation of large numbers of marginalized young people who are highly susceptible to brainwashing by radical Islamists. This problem is made worse by the degradation of the Soviet-era social support, education and healthcare systems. Labor migration to Russia (which provided until recently 50% of the GDP in Tajikistan, 33% of the GDP in Kyrgyzstan and 15% of the GDP in Uzbekistan) was an important check on social explosions. However devaluation of the ruble in 2014-2015 and a decline in the demand for labor in Russia has sharply reduced this source of income. In turn this has led to a serious deterioration of the situation especially in Tajikistan.

The growth of poverty is taking place against the backdrop of a trend towards socio-economic "de-modernization." For example due to civil war and economic hardships the share of urban residents in Tajikistan dropped to 26% of the entire population in 2010,¹² which is comparable with the world's most backward countries. Other manifestations of "de-modernization" include an exodus of highly-skilled specialists and intellectuals (both Russian-speaking and ethnic) and the disintegration of Soviet-built technological and social infrastructure even in such resource-rich countries as Turkmenistan.

The fourth critical factor threatening the statehood of regional countries is the

existence of personalized sultanistic regimes¹³ ingrained in the clan systems that determine the intra-elite network configurations.¹⁴ The two key countries in the region – Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – did not pass through a single power change cycle in the post-Soviet period. The existing political institutions in both countries are closely linked with the outstanding personality of their presidents. At the same time *by virtue of the age factor a change of supreme power will be on the agenda in the near future which may lead to the exacerbation of inter-clan conflicts within the elites and further destabilization.*

Fifth, there are serious interstate conflicts over water resources between countries in the upper reaches of rivers (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and those in the lower reaches (Uzbekistan and less so Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan). These conflicts are the serious obstacles to cooperation including the joint struggle against security threats.

Sixth, the influential great powers (Russia, the United States, China, EU and Islamic countries) are involved in the New Big Game¹⁵ for influence in the region.

Clashes of interests between them may enhance security threats and at best neutralize their efforts to help regional countries cope with various challenges.

The afore-mentioned external threats from radical Islam emanating from Afghanistan and Middle East countries, threats that are dramatically enhanced by domestic problems existing in a number of regional countries clearly point to *a certain amount of crisis in the secular statehood model that was established in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period.* Prospects for overcoming this crisis are different in different countries and are largely determined by existing peculiarities of the relationship between government agencies and Islam.

Islam began to spread in Central Asia in the 7th century AD as a result of the Arab conquest. The process of Islamization lasted for centuries and was not even completed before the establishment of the Soviet regime. Indicatively, there was a clear-cut distinction between the settled populations (Uzbeks and Tajiks) that were under a strong influence of Islam and the nomadic groups (Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz and the Turkmen) who were under a weaker impact of Islam. This distinction is still valid as the problem of religious extremism is particularly urgent in settled countries and areas of compact settlement in nomadic states (southern Kazakhstan and southern Kyrgyzstan).

After the Central Asian countries received independence their elites started actively supporting what they considered politically fit versions of Islam, thereby trying to create national forms of this religion that would legitimize existing political systems of secular states.

The situation in Tajikistan is the worst in terms of instability and the influence of radical Islam. Among the specific negative factors it is important to note its proximity to Afghanistan, a very complicated domestic socio-economic situation and the persisting destructive consequences of the civil war that took place in the first half of the 1990s.

At the same time the radicalization of society including law enforcement is accelerating. The most blatant incident occurred in 2015 when a riot police colonel, Gulmurod Khalimov, deserted his unit and joined ISIS. A military mutiny headed by Deputy Defense Minister Major General Abdukhalim Nazarzoda occurred in the fall of 2015. The official authorities also attributed this to the influence of radical Islam. The central government of Tajikistan does not seem to exercise strong control over some of its territories such as Gorny Badakhshan. The protection of the Tajik-Afghan border has also become fairly weak after the departure of Russian border guards which is dangerous in view of accelerated destabilization in Afghanistan's border areas.

Excesses in the struggle against Islamism may also be conducive to the diffusion of radical Islam. Such actions as the mass-scale shutdown of mosques, the introduction of a tough dress code contradicting the Islamic traditions and the banning of the moderate Islamic Revival of Tajikistan party may consolidate the radical Islamic underground.

Kyrgyzstan is also subjected to serious threats. One of the specific risks is the country's geopolitical split into north and south. As the Batken war bore out Kyrgyz government agencies are traditionally weak and were further weakened by two revolutions (2005 and 2010). Radical Islamism presents the biggest threat in the south of Kyrgyzstan especially within the large Uzbek diaspora. The situation in this area is complicated by an acute ethnic conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks which led to pogroms in 2010.

The situation in Turkmenistan has been traditionally considered as one of the most stable in the region (as the above statehood ratings bear out). Nevertheless it has seriously deteriorated in 2014-2015, after ISIS penetrated areas adjoining the Afghan-Turkmen border. Turkmenistan's neutral status has started to demonstrate its negative effects. The country does not have a strong army to protect its borders nor can it request military aid for instance from Russia as this would contradict the concept of neutrality. The domestic situation leaves much to be desired, too. If we go by the above numbers of militants in Syria and Iraq should they be counted in terms of militants per one million of the population Turkmenistan ranks first in the post-Soviet space.

Uzbekistan's standoff with extremist trends in Islam is characterized by substantial contradictions. On the one hand the region's strongest extremist groups have originated in Uzbekistan. In 1999, IMU staged massive terrorist attacks in Tashkent. In May 2005, Akromiya (Akromiylar), a radical Islamist group, organized an uprising in Andizhan (Fergana Valley). On the other hand the state's powerful law enforcement agencies and its generally repressive policy have put the activities of religious extremists in the country under a measure of control.

Islamist propaganda and terrorist activities today are growing in Uzbekistan against the backdrop of an aggravating socio-economic crisis. Uzbekistan is second after Russia in the post-Soviet space in terms of the number of militants who went to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Among other things the growth of religious extremism in Uzbekistan is a complicated issue as it is linked with clan policy. Uzbekistan has a traditional "division of labor" between

regional clans that is expressed well in the proverb: “A resident of Samarkand rules; a resident of Tashkent counts money, and a resident of the Fergana Valley prays.” This proverb emphasizes Islam’s special role in the Fergana Valley and the fact that all key clergymen in Uzbekistan traditionally come from the Fergana Valley.

During the post-Soviet evolution the Samarkand clan (the president himself belongs to it) and the Tashkent clan (in charge of the economy) have come to power in Uzbekistan. Many experts believe that the Fergana clan has traditionally used the threat of Islamic extremism to enhance its influence. The aforementioned inter-clan alignment of political forces is highly important as the still outstanding power inheritance problem may sharply aggravate the inter-clan struggle.

Kazakhstan is least affected by religious radicalism owing to the following specific factors: a stable economy (about two-thirds of Central Asia’s GDP is produced in Kazakhstan); a fairly high level of social modernization in the Soviet period; the existence of a large strata of Russian speakers; and, the historical traditions of Islam’s dissemination among the Kazakhs.

The situation in two regions is critically important in terms of the spread of radical Islam. The influence of Islamic institutions was traditionally strong in southern Kazakhstan which is an area with a settled population. Islam’s revival there has been accompanied by the emergence of its radical forms. A no less complicated situation has been taking shape in western Kazakhstan in the past few years. The intensive industrial development of the region’s oil and gas deposits has attracted to it socially marginalized groups, especially guest workers (many of whom are Oralmans, or ethnic Kazakhs who often return home from fairly backward countries). Disturbances in Zhanaozen in 2011 testify to tensions in that area (importantly they were not triggered by the Islamic factor). There is a potential for the growth of radical Islamist influence in this complex environment.

The analysis made in this article shows that the threats to secular statehood in Central Asia are fairly high. However, the region’s countries have a potential for countering them.

Historically, Central Asia, as part of the Muslim world was characterized by a developed Islamic science (Al-Khwarizmi, Al-Farabi and Al-Biruni, to name a few) and the high Sufi tradition of Islam including mystic poetry (Attar, Jami, Mashrab, and others). It is these local cultural traditions of Islam that are one of the main targets for Islamic radicals who deny national forms of Muslim religion and culture. Central Asian Sufis (primarily the great Uzbek teacher of the Soviet era Muhammad-jan Hindustani) actively countered the spread of radical Islamism (Salafism and Wahhabism). Indicatively, religious extremism is much less widespread in the ancient Central Asian civilizational centers such as Samarkand and Bukhara by virtue of the high traditional culture of the population.

The potential of the traditional legal Hanafi School should not be underrated either. It is one of the four Orthodox Sunni religious schools of jurisprudence, whereas radical Islamism (Salafism) is linked with the Saudi-adopted Hanbali School in the radical Wahhabi interpretation. The development of traditional Islam and the consolidation of the Hanafi School as officially recognized (which is the case, for instance, in Tajikistan) is a resource

for fighting radicalism along the Islamic path of development.

It should also be emphasized that Central Asian states have positive historical experience in terms of successfully upgrading Islamic ideology, which may well be used in current conditions. The latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century saw the emergence of the Jadid ideology (Young Bukhara and Young Khiva movements, etc) both in Central Asia and Russia's European region. It was introduced by Muslim liberal reformers in the regions that were leaders in disseminating such ideas. This is a cultural tradition of development along the strictly secular road, which is typical of the region's more advanced countries such as Kazakhstan.

Soviet modernization heritage also facilitates the preservation of secular statehood. It led to many changes in Central Asia. Many Soviet-established non-Muslim stereotypes of everyday life (for instance, high literacy and the secular education of the population owing to the system of universal school education, the consumption of alcohol and infrequent visits to mosques) still make many residents of this region substantially different from their brethren-in-faith in the rest of the Muslim world.

In the post-Soviet period the efficiency of reforms aimed at building modern institutions was different in different countries of the region. Kazakhstan has been in the lead in terms of developing a market economy and attracting investment. An efficient market economy is one of the largest obstacles to the return to archaic Islamic institutions as urged by radicals. It is only natural that Kazakhstan's leaders sharply intensified institutional economic reforms in response to the general growth of instability in 2014-2015. It is Kazakhstan that is a kind of a "bastion of stability" primarily owing to its relative (regional) socio-economic well-being. It ensures the security of Russia's southern borders, China's western borders and eventually the security of the European Union's eastern borders.

The assistance of great powers is a major resource in the struggle against radical Islamism in Central Asia. In this context special credit goes to Russia which has key positions in terms of ensuring regional security. The Moscow-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization is the main protection for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan against possible invasions from Afghan territory and potential ISIS expansion.

Russia is vitally concerned with fighting Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. Its further spread and even possible victory are linked to the growth potential of many cross-border threats (terrorism, drug trafficking, the intensification of uncontrolled migration, etc.). In the migration context, the security of Russia's several metropolitan areas (Moscow above all) largely depends on the ability of Moscow and the entire international community to render effective aid to Central Asian countries in countering the growing threat of radical Islamism.

¹ *ISIS militants are aiming at Central Asia and Russia. This warning was made by Russia's military and secret services.* <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2827486>

² *Letter dated 19 May 2015 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council. S/2015/358. p.8* http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358&referer=/english/&Lang=R

³ *Letter dated 19 May 2015 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council. S/2015/358. P. 9.* http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/358&referer=/english/&Lang=R

⁴ *ISIS militants are aiming at Central Asia and Russia. This warning was made by Russia's military and secret services* <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2827486>

⁵ <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/> (date of publication: January 26, 2015); Lister Ch., *Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Integration?* Brookings Institution, 13.08.2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/08/13-foreign-fighters-lister/en-fighters-web.pdf>.

⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2015/11/islamic-state-isil-taliban-afghanistan-151101074041755.html>

⁷ *Militants of the Islamic State are aiming at Central Asia and Russia. This warning was made by Russia's military and secret services.* <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2827486>

⁸ *Tajikistan announced that ISIS allocated \$70 million to establish its cells in Afghanistan.* <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2015/10/06/1448092.html>; Alexander Knyazev: "ISIS allocates \$70 million for Central Asia. What is Kazakhstan's share?" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxZSifWe8Do>.

⁹ <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2015>

¹⁰ *US Drug Enforcement Administration DEA Congressional Testimony – "Narco-Terrorism: International Drug Trafficking and Terrorism – a Dangerous Mix,"* <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/cngrtest/ct052003.html> , Accessed August 9, 2012.

¹¹ <https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview>

¹² https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/wfbExt/region_cas.html

¹³ *Sultanistic Regimes / Ed. by H.E. Chehabi, J.J. Linz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998.*

¹⁴ *Collins K. Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia. N.Y.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006.*

¹⁵ *Казанцев А.А. «Большая игра» с неизвестными правилами: Мировая политика и Центральная Азия. М.: Наследие Евразии, 2008.*

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