

RELIGIOUS-POLITICAL EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: WHY AND HOW IT IS SPREADING

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

There can be no doubt that the most conspicuous event of the last century was the unprecedented revival and spread of extremism and terrorism. Today, the concepts “extrem-

ism” and “terrorism” have become the most commonly used terms in the political vocabulary of most people writing about present-day problems and security. People are writing about ethnic and

religious extremism and terrorism, about political and state terrorism, about domestic and international terrorism, and so on. It would seem that there is nothing more to be said about these phenomena, and we would do well to agree with the opinion that if we look a little more closely at all that has been written, it becomes clear that most publications contain a merely emotional description of events that once took place.¹

Extremism has many different faces, just as there are many different reasons and sources engendering and feeding it. Religious fundamentalism is often given as the reason for the spread of extremism in today's world. The true meaning of this concept is the striving to adhere to the initial principles of a particular teaching and overcome the deviations that appear during its development. We cannot help but note that today definitions such as "Islamic extremism" and "Islamic terrorism" have become rather widespread. There is an obvious substitution of concepts here, for we are all perfectly well aware that there is in fact no aggression in Islam itself. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the strong emotional load of all the events involving Islam and Muslims is making it difficult to analyze such a complex problem as religious-political extremism and prevents this issue from being dealt with in a calm and level-headed manner.

An analysis of the nature of extremism is leading to the rather simple conclusion that this phenomenon is based on a natural clash of interests and political, economic, social, ethnic, and confessional contradictions. In the event that one of the sides is unable to uphold its interests for one reason or another, it is fully capable of resorting to extreme methods to resolve its political, religious, ethnic, and other problems. In so doing, the problem of extremism forms not for some specific reason or factor, but due to a whole set of problems, each of which is making its negative contribution to the overall terrorist potential.

¹ See: K.L. Syroezhkin, "Obyknovennyi terrorizm," in: *Geopolitika—bezopasnost'—terrorizm*, Collection of articles, ed. by E.A. Vertlib and L.M. Bondarets, Bishkek, 2006, p. 203.

Globalization has added new features to extremism and terrorism: they have become even more widespread and turned into truly international phenomena. What is more, precisely due to economic globalization processes, not only does terrorism have greater technical and financial possibilities, but its social base has also significantly expanded. And it is absolutely no accident that the world has begun talking about "Islamic terrorism." In actual fact, it is paradoxical that terrorism is currently widespread primarily in countries where Islam predominates or coexists with other religions and traditions. But Islam is not the reason for and not the catalyst of terrorism; the root of the problem lies in the difficult sociopolitical situation in these states and their involvement in global and regional conflicts. This applies to most of today's conflicts: Iraq, the Philippines, Somalia, Nigeria, Palestine, Macedonia, Algeria, Tajikistan, Kashmir, the Muslim regions of China, and so on. But terrorism, which is spurred on by religious and national convictions, is in no way the exclusive "property" of the Muslims. It exists among Christians, Jews, and Hindus, as well as in Japan, other countries, and the groups of countries. Radical ideas, as well as terrorist violence, are even preached in some confessional and cultural centers in Western Europe and the U.S., and this is tolerated in the name of encouraging cultural diversity.²

Statements that the roots of terrorism lie in a particular religion are beyond criticism for the simple reason that terrorism is a tool that can be used by a particular ideology. Were it otherwise, we would have to accuse not only Islam of "terrorist inclinations," but also Catholicism, since in North Ireland, for example, religion, among other things, is the cause of the disaccord. We must acknowledge that today the Central Asian region is a territory of high terrorist potential. The manifestation of extremism and terrorism has affected all the republics of the region in one way or another during the entire period of their establishment as independent and sovereign states.³

² See: *Ibid.*, p. 204.

³ See: N.A. Nazarbaev, *Kriticheskoe desiatiletie*, Almaty, 2003, p. 73.

Religious-Political Extremism as a Threat to Central Asian Security

Conflicts between secular and extremist forces began in Central Asia (CA) early in the 1990s, and since then many harsh clashes have occurred. After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., some scientists predicted that religious extremism would turn the Central Asian region into one of the most instable in the world, and practice has shown that there is some grain of truth to this statement. There are certain internal prerequisites for the spread of radical ideology in the Central Asian countries. Some experts believe that the extremist movement in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan has been activated by such factors as weak government policy, deterioration of the economic conditions, corruption, the sharp drop in the standard of living, and inefficient state administration.⁴ The abrupt transfer to the market economy “reversed” the former moral values. When unemployment and marginalization became the plight of part of the youth, extremist views, appeals, and activity began to gain popularity in the region.⁵

Today, it should be said that there are rather serious long-term threats to security in the CA countries. And, judging by several parameters, it is entirely obvious that the threat of religious-political extremism currently occupies one of the leading places in the system of primary security threats in the region’s states. The viewpoint regarding the threat of religious-political extremism typical of the entire world community, which predominates among the other well-known types of extremism (political, ethnic, and so on), is also inherent in Central Asia. At present, religious-political extremism, including its extreme manifestations in the form of terrorist acts, has become an inalienable factor in the public and political life of several countries of the region.

The following phenomena could be signs that political Islam exists in Central Asia: opposition to secular regimes; relying on the protest potential of the population; registration as a religious party or religious organization; the wide range of legal and illegal action methods used. As a sociopolitical practice, the ideology of political Islam is being used as a tool by specific political forces, as a way of putting pressure on the existing secular policy, and, in this sense, it is a topic for political scientific analysis.⁶

The Islamic religious-political radical formations are the main threats to security in the region’s countries of all the current international, regional, and national extremist organizations. It is their activity, aimed at spreading radical ideology for the purpose of shaking the state foundations and ultimately changing the sociopolitical system of various countries (including by violent methods), that is believed to be one of the most serious threats to CA security. In so doing, it should be noted that, in the multiconfessional environment of Central Asia, a group of religious extremist organizations cannot objectively limit itself exclusively to structures acting in the name of Islam.

Today, the activity of numerous and very different non-traditional religious organizations, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Church of Satan, and so on, which are classified as extremist, can be seen in the region’s states with different degrees of dissemination. A clear tendency is noticed toward a quantitative increase in these groups, as well as a qualitative increase in their activity. This group of extremist organizations has not only become alienated from the rest of society, it is also socially dangerous, keeping in mind the initially well-known anti-government and anti-social tendencies in their activity. But these extremist organiza-

⁴ See: R. Dvivendi, “Netraditsionnye ugrozy bezopasnosti v Tsentral’noi Azii,” in: *Perspektivy ukrepleniia kazakhstansko-indiiskogo partnerstva*, KISI, Almaty, 2006.

⁵ See: M.S. Ashimbaev, *Bezopasnost’ Kazakhstana na sovremennom etape*, KISI, Almaty, 2002, p. 37.

⁶ See: I. Mirsayitov, “Osobennosti politicheskogo islama v Tsentral’noi Azii,” *Analytic*, No. 3, 2006.

tions have an extremely limited sphere of activity and, correspondingly, objectively occupy marginal positions without posing a real threat to the national security of the region's countries. In this way, for entirely legitimate reasons, the activity of Islamic groups is currently having an essentially monopolistic influence with respect to the threat of religious-political extremism to the security of the CA states.

As a result of the world community's qualitatively new active struggle against terrorism, which began after 9/11, several of the most dangerous extremist organizations in Central Asia were temporarily forced, proceeding from tactical considerations, to refrain from violent behavior in their activity and go underground. Nevertheless, despite some setbacks, the radical Islamic organizations have essentially not rejected the prospect of carrying out active (including armed) activity in the region.

The most discussed aspect in the factor analysis of the spread in Islamic religious-political extremism in the CA region is the priority ranking and interrelation of the reasons for this phenomenon. The most controversial questions in the expert community are those regarding what factor or group of factors in particular is the key one in the development of this phenomenon; whether they are universal in every case; or whether each specific case has its own particulars.

A stable approach has currently been elaborated among experts to evaluating the spread of Islamic religious-political extremism in the CA countries, as well as in the post-Soviet space as a whole. This approach, which "claims" a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of Islamic extremism, is based on a study of the internal and external factors that promote the development of this phenomenon. In so doing, the internal factors encouraging the emergence of terrorism and religious extremism are related to the difficult sociopolitical and economic situation that has developed in several CA states, with marginalization and sociocultural degradation of a certain part of the population, whose discontent often transforms into opposition movements. The external prerequisites, on the other hand, for the appearance of terrorism and religious extremism in the CA are related to the fact that the region is next door to the world's existing and potential hotspots, which form the "Islamic arc" of instability: the Caucasus, XUAR, the PRC, Kashmir, and, of course, Afghanistan. There are two opposing views of why extremist ideas and actions have emerged and developed. The first, which mostly represents the official viewpoint, hypertrophies the role of external factors, which mainly focus on the Tajik and Afghan threats. The second relates to the opponents of the ruling elites, whereby the accent is placed on domestic political reasons related to the shrinking of the political field and the banishment of certain political groups beyond its borders into the sphere of illegal activity.⁷

It is also clear that researchers and politicians are resolutely striving for a certain amount of absolutism in a particular reason for the emergence and spread in Central Asia of religious-political extremism. The significance of the socioeconomic factor as the underlying factor in the spread of religious-political extremism is overly exaggerated. Without diminishing the significance of socioeconomic conditions, it should nevertheless be noted that this thesis is not entirely correct. This is shown by the experience of many sufficiently economically prosperous countries of the world community which are still having to deal with the problem of radical groups (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the West European states, and so on). So, difficult socioeconomic conditions are not always and not everywhere, as is customarily believed, the dominating factor promoting the development of a protest ideology based on Islam.

On the whole, an explanation (usually by identifying a particular socioeconomic, domestic political, or foreign political factor) of the reasons for the appearance of religious-political extremism

⁷ See: E.V. Tukumov, *Religiozno-politicheskiy ekstremizm kak ugroza regional'noi i natsional'noi bezopasnosti stran Tsentral'noi Azii*. Dissertation for doctorate in political science, Almaty, 2004, p. 10.

acting in the name of Islam greatly simplifies the consideration of this very complicated problem. As world practice and the experience of development in the region's countries show, it is essentially impossible to unequivocally define any single factor or group of internal or external factors as the key component.

Despite the similar prerequisites for the development of religious-political extremism in the world community and the existence of a set of universal factors, the scenarios of how radical ideology based on Islam is spread are often very different for each country. Correspondingly, *first*, the phenomenon of Islamic extremism emerged and developed due to a certain symbiosis of internal and external factors, and it is sometimes extremely difficult to identify the most important component. *Second*, different stages in the development and spread of Islamic religious-political extremism are possible for particular reasons in each state.

On the whole, when analyzing the problem of the spread in Islamic religious-political extremism in the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century, it appears impossible to identify the most important factors that are having a decisive influence on the development of this phenomenon.

Geopolitical Factors of the Penetration of Religious-Political Extremism into Central Asia

As many researchers justifiably claim, it is so-called big geopolitics that has become the most powerful catalyst for spreading essentially all types of extremism and terrorism in today's world. It should be noted that using the religious factor to achieve geopolitical goals is not something new, it has existed and been actively resorted to by mankind for many centuries.

On the whole, the external conditions for the emergence of terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia are directly and closely related to its proximity to the world's existing and potential conflict zones, which form the above-mentioned Islamic arc of instability: the Afghan conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Caucasus, and Kashmir. The relation between the spread of radical Islamic organizations in the CA region and regional conflicts is obvious and acts as a type of vicious circle: regional conflicts in the Islamic world serve as a source for developing extremist formations. At the same time, the Islamic radical organizations themselves are the entities most interested in preserving these conflicts. The following conflicts can be identified, which, according to the principle of communicating vessels, are interdependent and interconnected with each other and have the most influence on the situation in Central Asia.

- *First*, the Arab-Israeli and Iraqi conflicts as a factor of global influence on the development of Islamic extremism in the world, including in the CA region (indirectly). Almost all the leading experts on the region, as well as experts on Islam, are of the opinion that the conflict in the Middle East is, for several objective and subjective reasons, one of the leading factors in the activation of Islam in the sociopolitical life of several countries of the region and of the world community as a whole.
- *Second*, the Indo-Pakistani conflict as a regional factor having a significant direct influence on the spread of Islamic extremism in South Asia and Afghanistan. On the whole, these conflicts, both the Arab-Israeli and the Indo-Pakistani, are the most long-term contradictions of present-day life, and there is no reason to believe that they will be settled any time soon. These conflicts, despite their local reasons, have currently acquired a global nature.

- *Third*, the Afghan conflict as a sub-regional factor having the greatest external influence on the spread of radical Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia. Since its appearance in the 1970s and as of today, the Afghan military-political conflict occupies a special place among the external sources of the spread of Islamic religious-political extremism in the region. The Afghan conflict fully demonstrates the fact that Central Asia was and still is a region where the geostrategic interests of different countries clash, and it is Islam, particularly in its radical form, that is the most efficient force capable of ensuring their interests. Bordering directly on Afghanistan, the region's states have experienced all the negative consequences of being a close neighbor throughout this entire conflict.

During the Taliban's rule, Afghanistan has essentially become the world center for training members of terrorist organizations, as well as for the global spread of radical ideology. On the whole, the Taliban's arrival on the political scene and its presence right up until September 2001 had a compound effect on the processes going on in Central Asia related to the spread of the radical ideology of the corresponding organizations. The support the Taliban movement rendered religious extremist organizations in several CA countries (such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—IMU) greatly assisted their qualitative and quantitative growth. At the same time, these transformations, which are increasing the threat of the appearance of religious-political extremism in the region's states, forced the ruling elites of the CA countries to take a more serious approach to this problem and raise the efficiency of regional security in general.

At present, despite the merely external successful outcome of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan and elimination of the problem of direct expansion of radical Islamists in Central Asia, the situation in this country is still extremely difficult, without clear and specifically positive prospects. The current crisis trends in Afghanistan show that the military operation to destroy the terrorist infrastructure on Afghan territory was not brought to its logical conclusion. And so today, all the prerequisites remain in this state for the emergence of new contradictions and conflicts capable of escalating into armed clashes. Radicalization of the military-political situation in Afghanistan and the inability of the ISAF coalition forces under NATO's supervision to control the situation indicate that the extremist threat has not been eliminated, but merely "stuffed," moved to a latent level, which currently complicates the struggle against it. It is obvious that potential aggravation of the situation in Afghanistan with the participation of radical Islamists will remain a stumbling block on the road to stability in the CA countries.

Socioeconomic Reasons for the Development of an Extremist Environment in the Region

It is customary to believe that the acute social, economic, environmental, and other problems existing currently in most CA countries are objectively creating a sufficiently favorable environment for the emergence and spread of radical religious movements in the region. They also graphically show the presence of systemic economic crises in several of the region's states as a legitimate consequence of incomplete Soviet modernization, on the one hand, and failed economic policy, on the other.

As the experience of the countries that have directly encountered the problem of the spread of Islamic religious-political extremism (in particular the Muslim states of the Near and Middle East) shows, there is a close interrelationship between the modernization processes in traditional Islamic

societies and the development of this phenomenon in these countries. This regularity, with the preservation of certain specific aspects, was also manifested in general terms in the Central Asian countries.

During the Soviet era, the CA countries had raw material economies with certain hypertrophied industries (cotton in Uzbekistan, aluminum in Tajikistan, and so on); the region was perceived primarily as a supplier of cheap raw agricultural and mineral material. All of this also largely predetermined peripherality, economic backwardness, and negative consequences in the future. The appearance of serious socioeconomic and environmental crisis phenomena undermining the very foundation of further advancing socioeconomic development of the region's countries is a legitimate consequence of the inefficient economic policy carried out in Central Asia. Socioeconomic problems, along with the spiritual crisis, led in the end to an increase in protest phenomena among the population of the CA states. As a result of the intensified stagnation phenomena in the economy, the drop in standard of living, the increase in unemployment, the high child mortality rate, as well as the serious deterioration in the environment, extremist trends have begun to grow in the regions of the traditional spread of Islam among unregistered churches, and searches have increased to find ways to Islamicize society as a solution to this situation. In this way, the reaction of part of the CA's Muslim population to the socioeconomic crises arising as a result of the modernization processes, as well as attempts to resolve them by means of Islam, was the same as that of the Near and Middle East countries.⁸

In the region's states, as well as in the other countries of the Islamic world, the main social base of radical organizations consists of that part of the population that has been unable to find its place in the dynamically and painfully changing socioeconomic conditions in which most of the CA states now find themselves. In turn, the extreme simplicity of the program precepts and methods for resolving socioeconomic problems offered by the radical Islamic organizations makes them popular among part of the population of the region's countries.

Keeping in mind that Islamic movements in the CA states are essentially protest, their ranks are constantly replenished with socially infringed upon citizens. As the experience of the Near and Middle Eastern countries shows, the Muslim population, which for a long time was in a difficult financial state and, most important, lived in unfair and unequal conditions, is increasingly inclined to think that a state based on religious principles (the Caliphate) will be more economically stable and socially fair for its citizens. The principles of isolationism and autarchy used by certain CA countries are leading to the failure of any development model and promoting socioeconomic stagnation. This is causing a drop in the level of national security in the face of any type of threat, including extremism.

On the whole, the phenomenon of religious-political extremism is a clear indication of the fact that long-preserved destabilizing components (critical state of the economy, intensified social polarization of society, total destitution of most of the population, and so on) in transitional states, to which the CA countries belong, usually lead in the end to political instability and social tension, which in turn give rise to conflict situations, including along the lines of secular power—the Islamic radical opposition.

Ideological Foundation for the Manifestation of Extremism in Central Asia

In our opinion, the destruction of the religious infrastructure in the region's countries, the struggle against traditional forms of Islam during the Soviet era and the attempts to eradicate it played one of the decisive roles in spreading the radical version of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia.

⁸ See: D. Kalieva, "Religioznyi ekstremizm kak netraditsionnaia ugroza natsional'noi bezopasnosti," *Kazakhstan-Spekr*, No. 4, 2002, p. 7.

It is quite obvious that under the conditions of tough widespread resistance from the broad masses of the Muslim population in the region's republics, the establishment of the dictatorship of Soviet power, as well as the reorientation of life in the traditional CA societies (with a few exceptions relating to Kazakhstan), which was strictly regulated for centuries by Islamic standards and traditions, were of a primarily forceful and coercive nature. In the mid-1930s, as a result of the mass repressions among the influential groups of the Islamic clergy and campaigns to eradicate religious traditions in everyday life, essentially the entire spiritual elite and system of traditional religious education were wiped out. Within a very short time, the Islamic clergy was almost totally destroyed and madrasahs and mosques torn down. There was serious deformation of the traditional Muslim school and a break in cultural ties with the Islamic world. In this way, by conducting a targeted policy, Islam's influence was effectively neutralized, and religion no longer posed any particular threat to Soviet power and the communist ideology. Traditional Islam was dealt a serious blow; and in so doing, the necessary ground was tilled for re-Islamization into a qualitatively different form with the arrival in the region of non-traditional Islamic trends at the beginning of the 1990s.⁹

At the same time, the policy of militant atheism that Soviet power engendered among the Muslim population of the region's countries had also the opposite effect, having a latent, negative nature. It is obvious that the widespread public discontent aroused by the coercive secularization was not completely neutralized—in reality, this protest remained, assuming a latent form for a long time. In the end, the main result of the policy of militant atheism was not the mass rejection by the people of their religious convictions, but the withdrawal of part of the influential clergy underground and the formation of religious structures which were called “parallel” or “alternative Islam” in the countries of the West. It was these religious formations that subsequently became the basis (in the organizational, resource, and intellectual respect) for the movement of supporters of so-called “pure” Islam, as well as for the appearance of several regional religious-political Islamic extremist organizations. The formation of the first Islamic groups in the region with extremist ideological precepts was noted in the 1970s.¹⁰

On the whole, the policy of militant atheism became the springboard for launching the present-day problem of religious-political extremism in the CA countries. It should be noted that Soviet power's policy aimed at assimilating the CA region was very similar in many ways (particularly with respect to the radical methods for introducing communist ideology) to the activity of today's religious-political organizations striving to implement the idea of building an Islamic Caliphate in the region. The difference lies in the dimensions of their activity, resource possibilities, and other conditions.¹¹

In this respect, the liberalization of religious relations that began during perestroika in the U.S.S.R. brought the entire complicated set of contradictions that developed during the Soviet era in the religious sphere out of its latent state. This legitimately led to the appearance of two trends. The Muslim community of regional states had the opportunity to return to normal conditions of religious life, legally carry out all religious rituals and observe traditions, on the one hand, and in a short period of time, the number of mosques multiplied, madrasahs and higher theological learning institutions were opened, religious literature was published in large quantities, and so on, on the other. By the time the U.S.S.R. collapsed, ideal internal and external conditions had developed in Central Asia for re-Islamization.

Under the conditions of the ideological vacuum that formed as a result of the collapse of the communist ideology, so-called non-traditional forms of Islam took the most active part in Islamic

⁹ See: S. Olimova, “Religioznye korni terrorizma,” *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, No. 3, 2002, pp. 21-29.

¹⁰ See: S. Akimbekov, “Islam i problemy bezopasnosti Tsentral'noi Azii,” *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, No. 3, 2002, p. 9.

¹¹ See: Iu. Egorov, “S mechttoi o vseimom khalifate,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 12 April, 2001.

revival—primarily, so-called Koranic or pure Islam. Taking into account that organizations of a chiefly extremist bent are their main entities widespread in the world community (in particular, in the Islamic world), the nature of the expansion of pure Islam assumed a radical form in Central Asia. The conflict that legitimately arose between the two versions of Islam—local, traditional, belonging to the Hanafi theological-legal school as the Islamic madhab, the most liberal and tolerant of religious dissidence, that developed over the centuries and is a synthesis of Islamic provisions and local pre-Islamic traditions and confessions, on the one hand, and the classical, Koranic, so-called pure Islam, on the other, led to the creation of so-called religious conflict groups.

Later it was precisely from the latter that regional extremist organizations formed due to external and internal circumstances. When reasoning the activation of their activity during re-Islamization of the CA region, the emphasis was placed on the need for intervention in order to revive the true Islamic nature of the local Muslim community (in this respect, it is worth keeping in mind that local Islam was defined from the viewpoint of pure Islam as “heretical” and “incorrect”). This applied, for example, to the tradition of honoring the spirits of ancestors (*aruakh*), the problem of the everyday clothing of Muslims (particularly women), education methods, questions of rituals, and so on. It is important to note that the local movement of pure Islam was not originally a monolithic formation, being divided into two main categories. Some of the supporters of this movement understood the slogans calling for preservation of pure Islam to mean ridding the Muslim religion of customs and rituals not inherent in initial Islam, refusing to levy large sums for carrying out various religious rituals, and driving thievish clergy from the mosques. Other fundamentalists went much further. For them the calls to purify Islam of superstition and remove self-seekers from the leadership of religious organizations were only ways to draw the believing masses onto their side. Their main purpose was something else: they wanted to turn the laws of the Shari’a into legal norms binding for the entire population, and ultimately create an Islamic state. The methods of their activity, which were openly extremist in nature, were also in keeping with the set goals.¹²

Several of the following key circumstances had a decisive effect on the further strengthening and spread of extremist religious-political organizations:

- *First*, as a result of the repressive policy carried out in relation to Islam during Soviet rule, there was an objective significant decrease in the role of the traditional local model of this confession in the CA region. One of the main reasons for the weakening of local Islam was the critical shortage among the clergy of qualified members preaching the traditional forms of Islam. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, people began to worry that the acute shortage of qualified clergy members, as well as the policy of openness, might lead to an increase in the number of non-traditional Islamic trends in the region, including radical ones. The low number of qualified clergy members and their illiteracy made it impossible to put up effective religious resistance to the penetration of non-traditional ideologies, including radical ones based on the conception of pure Islam. For example, certification of religious clergymen in Kyrgyzstan usually revealed that a quarter of the imams were not qualified to carry out their duties at all, and almost 60% had to be re-certified.¹³ It should be stressed that this is quite typical of most of the CA countries.

On the whole, the collapse of the religious infrastructure that had long developed in the form of the spiritual administrations of Muslims existing in the Soviet Union was an important factor leading to the weakening of traditional Islam in the region. The collapse of this structure, which to one extent or another controlled the religious processes in CA,

¹² See: E.V. Tukumov, op. cit., p. 19.

¹³ See: A. Krylov, “Religioznaia situatsiia v Kyrgyzstane,” Part II, available at [<http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=24&id=6799>].

led to the unity of the traditionalists being undermined and favorable conditions being created for the uncontrolled spread of various trends of Islam, including those previously unknown in the region.

- *Second*, during the first years of independence, when extreme shortages of professional Muslim clergy and teachers at learning institutions developed, the need arose for religious training abroad in order to acquire a professional Islamic education. At first, this process was largely chaotic and poorly organized. While some students were sent abroad to study in well-known education Islamic centers, such as Al-Azhar (Egypt), a large number of people in this category from the CA countries ended up in little-known “dubious” learning institutions in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and so on. All of this meant that, in addition to acquiring professional knowledge in Muslim theology, many students also became acquainted with the so-called radical trends of Islam.
- *Third*, by the time various radical Islamic organizations acting under slogans of returning true Islam to the Muslim people of Central Asia actively penetrated the region, a powerful protest base united part of the so-called unofficial clergy, which supported the idea of re-Islamicizing Muslim society in Central Asia within the framework of so-called pure Islam, had formed in the region, primarily in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.
- *Fourth*, political factors (mainly within the framework of secular power-Islam relations), in addition to purely religious reasons, promoted the successful spread of radical ideology in the region. The gist of the problem was that the return of Islamic values could not lead to automatic reinstatement of the rules of conduct in society that existed in the region before the modernization times of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ For example, for the secular political elite of the region’s countries (primarily, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), the model of a sociopolitical structure with the active and ponderous role of Islam on a legitimate basis came into sharp conflict with the CA states’ interests and own views of their strategic development. So the process of restoring Islam’s previous key political role, which developed naturally under the conditions of independence with support from a certain part of the population, parties, and clergy, was taken under the strict control of the local ruling political elites from the very beginning, which naturally aroused a protest reaction, including in radical form.

Entities of the Spread in Religious-Political Extremism in Central Asia

It is obvious that in order to form a complete idea of the problem being studied, the main entities of extremist religious-political organizations must be defined.

On the whole, an analysis of the situation shows that several extremist religious-political organizations are currently functioning in the CA region: the Islamic Revival Party of Uzbekistan (IRPU); the Adolat Party (Justice); Islam Lashkarlari (The Warriors of Islam); Tovba (Repentance); Iymonchilar (Believers), or Akramiylar, or Khalifatchilar (Adherers of the Caliphate); the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU); Hizb ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party); the Islamic Movement of Eastern Turke-

¹⁴ See: S. Akimbekov, “Islam v Kazakhstane,” *Kontinent*, No. 19, 2001, p. 23.

stan (Central Asia); Akramiya (the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)).¹⁵ Other well-known terrorist organizations, such as al-Qa'eda, Islamic Jihad, and so on, are also showing a certain interest in the region.

It seems that a clear distinction should be made among the regional Islamic extremist religious-political organizations with respect to their tactical, motivational, and qualitative parameters. The difficulty of this task lies in the dearth of reliable and objective information, particular about the size of the formations named, their real origin, resource base, interaction with other groups at the local and international level, and so on. There are several principally important common and distinguishing aspects in the nature of the activity of regional Islamic extremist religious-political organizations:

Common aspects:

- the presence of a single strategic goal—seizure of power in the CA countries and building an Islamic state (Caliphate) in the region or, at the initial stage, in a certain part of it (in particular, the Ferghana Valley);
- the presence of a single tactical goal—destabilization of the sociopolitical situation in the region's states. Most of the radical Islamic organizations function in accordance with the same strategic pattern: destabilization of the sociopolitical situation—provocation of mass anti-government demonstrations—overthrow of the country's leadership—formation of an Islamic government (initially, perhaps, together with other opposition forces).

Distinguishing aspects:

- it is important to note the absence of a unified radical movement in the region, and of a coordinated center, which is characteristic of the entire Islamic world. Central Asian extremist Islamic organizations are not only unable to join forces, which essentially would be an important and logical step from the viewpoint of achieving their common strategic goals, but they also treat each other as rivals, competitors for power over the local Muslims (Ummah);
- religious-political extremist groups should be clearly distinguished: some think an Islamic state can be created using non-coercive methods, while others believe this can only be achieved by means of armed action. For example, the main place in the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir is occupied by "propaganda work among the Muslim communities," i.e. achieving political goals by means of propaganda, money, opinion, or mobilization of the masses. On the contrary, the Islamic Movement of Turkestan bases its ideological struggle on the conception of the so-called small jihad (*armed struggle against the non-believers*).¹⁶

Along with this, today we are seeing the penetration into territories contiguous with the Central Asian republics of some religious-extremist and radical political elements calling for overthrowing the existing government, establishing archaic regimes, or autonomizing certain regions of the country. Some religious communities are falling under the influence of missionaries from foreign Islamic centers preaching ideas of religious intolerance.¹⁷

On the whole, it appears extremely difficult to talk about any specific path of development or unequivocal outcome: it would be expedient to carry out a differential analysis of the development of the situation in the context of the problem being studied. An attempt could be made to forecast the relations in the CA region along the lines of government-opposition-Islamic radical opposition, keep-

¹⁵ See: I. Mirsayitov, op. cit.

¹⁶ See: E.V. Tukumov, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁷ See: *Spetsifika proiavleniy terrorizma i ekstremizma v Tsentral'noi Azii*, Report of the Center of Antiterrorist Programs, available at [http://www.terrorunet.ru/analitic/64.html].

ing in mind the rich world experience in the development of this problem and relying on the practice of several countries of the Islamic world. The following main scenarios can be singled out from among the vast variety of development alternatives of the situation:

- *The Algerian-Egyptian scenario*—long-term armed government—radical Islamic opposition conflict entailing many victims among the civilian population. On the whole, the government controls the development of the situation in the country, but this state is characterized by increased instability of the sociopolitical situation;
- *The Turkish-Tunisian scenario*—relatively peaceful coexistence between secular power and the Islamic opposition. Relatively successful attempts by the government to find a peaceful solution to the problem of the radical Islamic opposition using different methods;
- *The Iranian scenario*—carrying out radical reforms by secular power—destabilization of the political situation—arrival in power by means of a state coup of Islamic fundamentalist forces and the building of an Islamic state.¹⁸

Taking into account the obvious significant similarities in the development of religious-political extremism in the Islamic world, on the one hand, and in the CA region, on the other, it can be presumed that development of the situation could potentially be carried out according to several known scenarios presented in ascending order of their likelihood.

Of course, in order to prevent the import of extremism into the region, there is an extreme and urgent need for legal regulation of the missionary activity of foreign religious preachers. This particularly applies to more precise and intelligent work in carrying out competent experts' examinations of religious literature, particularly that which contains non-classical interpretations of the Scriptures.

Although religious radical organizations have been subjected to immense resource damage that is difficult to compensate, on the whole their very presence is creating a tense situation in Central Asia, which could at any moment escalate into a conflict.

* * *

Summing up the aforesaid, we will note that the socioeconomic problems (increase in the unemployment level, low quality of public health, lack of access to a high-quality education, constant cutback in social government spending, and so on) as a result of the modernization processes, ineffective tough political regimes in several of the region's countries, as well as the weakness of the official Islamic clergy in combination with an appropriate external environment are capable of creating a dangerous aggregate of conditions conducive to the spread of religious-political extremism. These factors, which are raising Muslim society's perceptibility for radical ideology, are identical for all the countries of the Islamic world, and the CA states are no exception. What is more, religious-political extremism cannot be explained by socioeconomic, political, and geopolitical reasons alone.

We are sorry to say that Islam is stereotyped as a factor preventing political stability in the region, and all forms of public activity with an Islamic hue are at times automatically classified as manifestations of fundamentalism or considered doomed to conflict phenomena related to extremism and terrorism. This approach is very characteristic of Western experts, the mass media, and public opinion, which is encouraging an increase in Islamophobia in the world community. It is obvious that it is

¹⁸ See: E.V. Tukumov, op. cit., p. 14.

extremely wrong to make categorical generalizations and identify Islam, Islamism, and Islamists with extremism and terrorism.¹⁹

Extremism and terrorism are defined not by the proclaimed ideological doctrines, but on the basis of practical activity, when extremist sallies and terrorist acts become a means for putting pressure on the policy of the current political regimes. Religious-political extremism, which acts in the name of any religion, is an internal product of mankind manifested mainly as the result of the unharmonious socioeconomic, political, and cultural-civilizational development of the world.

In the CA countries, the face of Islam is defined not by religious extremists and terrorists, but first and foremost by moderate Muslims who have a tolerant attitude toward political and social freedoms, as well as to the development of civil and cultural identity. Ignoring this demand leads in theory and practice to placing an equals sign between extremists and moderates, between their ideologies and activity.

The question arises of how an increase in religious-political extremism can be opposed without intensifying a repressive state structure.

For example, the OSCE believes that the absence of democracy in the former Soviet CA republics is making this entire region more vulnerable to extremism. In the words of the organization's leader, Mircea Geoană, "In gagging their opponents, they risk driving them to terrorist organizations and there exists in Central Asia a real danger of extremism, notably Islamic fundamentalism."²⁰ This is an extremely dubious thesis, but, as usual, the OSCE is capable only of outward criticism, without getting to the gist of the issue and without offering specific effective measure to resolve it.

Nevertheless, many countries have immense practical experience in effective opposition to this threat—primarily, the Near and Middle East states. Their practice will be extremely beneficial to the CA countries, keeping in mind that a whole series of identical features and identical factors giving rise to the appearance of radical movements acting in the name of Islam is inherent in these regions.

All the same, the objective special features of the development and spread of religious-political extremism in some CA countries is making it necessary for them to find their own way to resolve this problem. By way of example, we can give Kazakhstan's current achievements in opposing religious extremism using natural, non-violent, and gentle methods—by means of conscious and rational liberalization of religious relations, which has greatly reduced the open and mass development of extremist trends.

On the whole, the current economic and political conditions in several countries of the region are such that the demand for Islam, including for an alternative radical Islam, will most likely increase in the next decade and in the more distant future. Nevertheless, it is obvious that it is not terrorism itself with its frequently entirely innocent and usually relatively small number of victims that is dangerous for the security of the CA countries (as of any country), but its consequences, which may be entirely different, but unequivocally negative.

¹⁹ See: E. Tukumov, "Problema religioznogo ekstremizma v stranakh Blizhnego i Srednego Vostoka," *Analytic*, No. 1, 2001, p. 23.

²⁰ "OSCE Warns of Islamic Militancy," available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/news/newsid_1381000/1381011.stm].