Rising Extremism in Central Asia?

*Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia*
This paper expresses the views of the author and not the views of the European Institute for Asian Studies.
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Stability in the Heartland for a Secure Eurasia

Authors: Sebastiano Mori and Leonardo Taccetti

Abstract

“Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-island;
Who rules the World-island commands the World”.¹

When the ‘Heartland’ theory was first published in 1904, it soon became a milestone for geopolitics. Due to the current events, Mackinder’s paradigm seems to have concrete relevance within the international scenario today.

The geographical position of Central Asia as the crossroads of the Eurasian continent together with the abundance of important energy resources has increased the strategic value of the region within the international arena. Once again, this complex “chessboard” between the Caspian Sea and Western China is the theatre of a “New Great Game” between important international players such as China, the United States, Russia and Europe. In this intricate context it becomes even more vital to have stability among the five republics, avoiding the rise of menaces for internal security.

This briefing paper seeks to identify and analyse the internal and external factors that could lead Central Asia to become an unstable environment in a region that is essential for global order. With the rise of extremist religious movements all over the world, describing the particular role that Islamic communities are playing in the region becomes fundamental.

The ultimate aim of this research is to create an accurate picture - utilising a combination of primary and secondary sources - of the rising extremism within the five republics. By providing a deeper knowledge of the Islamic communities and their current issues, this analysis seeks to highlight the importance of preventing the formation of terrorist organisations within the five republics.

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1 List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFLC</td>
<td>American Freedom Law Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARA</td>
<td>Agency for Religious Affairs in Kazakhstan</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOMCA</td>
<td>Border Management in Central Asia</td>
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<td>CADAP</td>
<td>Central Asia Drug Action Programme</td>
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<td>CRA</td>
<td>Committee on Religious Affairs in Tajikistan</td>
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<td>ETIM</td>
<td>East Turkestan Islamic Movement</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FG</td>
<td>Fetullah Gülen</td>
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<tr>
<td>HT</td>
<td>Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDU</td>
<td>Islamskoe Dvijeniie Uzbekistana</td>
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<tr>
<td>IJU</td>
<td>Islamic Jihad Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMT</td>
<td>Islamic Movement of Turkestan</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMU</td>
<td>Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRP</td>
<td>Islamic Renaissance Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISAF</td>
<td>International Security Assistance Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe</td>
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<td>SADUM</td>
<td>Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia</td>
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<td>SCRA</td>
<td>State Commission for Religious Affairs in Kyrgyzstan</td>
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<td>SFCG</td>
<td>Search for Common Ground</td>
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<td>TIP</td>
<td>Turkistan Islamic Party</td>
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<td>TJ</td>
<td>Tablighi Jama’at</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</td>
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<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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</table>
Why Central Asia?

Figure 1 - Central Asia Map

The EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted in 2005, covers four policy strands: prevent, protect, pursue and respond. The first policy aims to dissuade people from complying with extremist behaviour and radicalisation, halting future generations from joining terrorist groups. Keeping this objective in mind, the EU works increasingly closely with local communities to counter the rise of extremism among vulnerable and discriminated individuals. Furthermore, the EU provides standards to promote important values such as justice, democracy, cultural dialogue and respect of fundamental rights in order to fight radicalisation and recruitment. The complexity of this challenge affects not only European Union Members States but also the international scenario. Therefore combating radicalisation and terrorist recruitment should be a task to accomplish jointly with other partners beyond the EU, engaging with local communities and increasing their resilience towards this phenomenon. Sharing information and promoting dialogue with civil society and faith groups that reject the idea of using violence to achieve their objectives are effective measures to prevent

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the wide-spreading of radicalisation, and a priority among EU policies. Increasing the effectiveness of prevention will drastically improve Europe’s ability to fight the root causes of this “ailment” and not just dealing with the symptoms. For this reason, as indicated by Sophia in’t Veld, Vice-President of the group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the EU needs to invest more into prevention to better understand which are the root causes of the process of violent fanaticism in order to be more effective in our policies implementation in countering violent extremism.

Central Asia is a growing hub for extremism and radicalisation, and being in the vicinity of vulnerable countries such as Afghanistan escalates the relevance of this issue. The recent terrorist attack in Kunduz, the conclusion of the ISAF mission with the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and the Pakistani Zarb-e-Azb operation close to the Afghan border are just some exemplificative actions that disseminate the militants into the Central Asian region. In light of these facts, during this year the escalation of the extremist and terrorist threat is driving even Turkmenistan, which has traditionally adhered to a non-interventionist foreign policy approach, to “revalue its neutrality policy”. The five republics represent a crucial crossroad between several economic spaces and connect the West with the East. The porous borders and the socio-economic insecurity make this a vulnerable spot for terrorist recruitment. Despite the fact that large and long-established terrorist and jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda are not active in the region, several local religious extremist movements are spread around this territory. This large variety sometimes causes great confusion when trying to identify each group and comprehending what each of them stands for. A better understanding of the realities in Central Asia is needed to increase the effectiveness in prevention of radicalisation and extremism.

As Sun Tzu pointed out in his masterpiece *The Art of War*: “Knowing your enemy and knowing yourself, you can win a hundred of battles without experiencing defeat”.

There is a lack of an international shared definition of violent extremism and terrorism, and due to the fact that the first often leads to the second, it is important to establish a common and uniform understanding of this issue. For the purpose of this project, the definition proposed by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is used:

"[...] Violent extremism is an act aimed at violent encroachment of public security and forcible change of the constitutional system by using various extremist ideologies, including religious ones. *Therefore, the problem is not the religion per se, but rather using a religion as a political tool in achieving political agendas.*"

The lack of a universally shared definition of terrorism and terrorist organisation is mainly due to the complicated nature of the phenomenon, which always recalls the famous statement “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. The theoretical debate led to a huge variety of

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7 Sun Tzu. *The Art of War*. Ch III.
definitions of terrorism and terrorist activities, which share several points in common but fail to have a unique view that is crucial for coordinating international cooperation efficiently.  

For the purpose of this paper we identify terrorism as a tactic, strategy, asymmetric form of conflict that consists in the use of or the threat to use force or violence that targets civilians in order to influence an audience and pursue political goals. In order to describe the current challenges in Central Asia, has been adopted the term radicalisation in the meaning of an “instrument that leads to violent extremism”.

3 The role of religion in Central Asia

Since ancient times, Central Asia has always been considered as the crossroad of European and Asian cultures. For many centuries, trade along the Silk Road allowed different civilizations to enter into contact with each other. Crossing the entire Eurasian continent, this important commercial route allowed the exchange of cultures and the encounter of different religions.

Since the 7th century, merchants coming from Saudi Arabia on caravans were not just increasing trade flow, but also spreading Islam in the region. In fact, as underlined by Professor Adee Khalid, “many nomads entered the orbit of Muslim civilization from the 10th century on, but conversion to Islam was a gradual process that lasted into the 18th century”.  From isolated oases, the Quran was easily diffused into big bazaars such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Kokand, transforming them into Islamic strongholds.

Local rulers adopted Islam with a particular approach, spreading the religious belief among elite classes without forcing the conversion of the lower strata of the population. This set of beliefs - defined as the High-Islam - allowed the strong majority of Sunni Muslims to create a peculiar formal religious hierarchy appointed or sponsored by a secular ruler, for more than five centuries. Accordingly, within the five republics, rejecting the leadership of the religious establishment has always been considered an outright expression of opposition against the government.

Historically, the Central Asian Islamic communities have always had distinctive features in their approaches to religion compared to their Middle Eastern and African counterparts. Although the strong majority of Sunnis contributed to avoiding

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14 ibid.
the harsh debate on the “Shia-Sunna split”, on the other hand this overwhelming presence led to an internal conflict within the same branch of Islam. Another characteristic that influenced Central Asian population’s perception of religions is the diffusion of the Hanafi Mazhab School, which strongly encouraged moderate and tolerant Islamic practices. Therefore, these peculiarities drove to a unique coexistence of the power of the state and religion across the whole region.

Table 1: Muslim Population in Central Asia: Sunnis and Shiites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kazakhstan</th>
<th>Kyrgyzstan</th>
<th>Tajikistan</th>
<th>Uzbekistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunnis</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiites</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


During the period of the Soviet rule, Stalin launched a strong antireligious propaganda campaign against Islamic beliefs, institutions and traditions. In particular Russia tried to substitute religious schools with a new form of scientific atheism, attacking the core of the intellectual platform of religious communities, which almost destroyed the above mentioned “High-Islam”.

In 1943, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was established to train clergy and publish religious resources. This official governing body of Islamic activities was also in charge of supervising the regional Islamic communities, which were organized within the newly established system of the Muftiate. These local bodies, headed by a Mufti, were entrusted with the supervision and the coordination of Muslim groups. Additionally these particular institutions were tasked with administering mosques, training ulema and overseeing other Islamic activities within the Central Asian Republics.

Despite the strong anti-religious campaign conducted by the Soviets, Muslims maintained a strong majority in Central Asia. In fact, despite the hostility of the USSR against religious groups, Islam became a driving force of identity for the younger generations. In 1991, the five republics established a new administrative structure to deal with religious issues. Even if different ad-hoc institutions were created - such as the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) in Kyrgyzstan, the Agency for Religious Affairs (ARA) in Kazakhstan, the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) in Tajikistan, the Council on Religious affairs in Uzbekistan and the Ganesh for Religious Affairs in Turkmenistan - the five republics maintained the old Muftiate as the core bodies.

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16 Olcott, Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia, p. 8.
17 Olcott, Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia, p.9.
19 Olcott, Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia, p.4.
To some extent, Central Asian governments wanted to distinguish themselves from the former Russian system. Indeed, with the collapse of the USSR, Islamic symbols and structures were restored in all the five republics. Political leaders tried to gain more support establishing a soft approach to Islam, including the issuing of official statements, for example Uzbekistan’s President Islom Karimov was sworn into office holding the Quran and subsequently went on a pilgrimage to Mecca.\textsuperscript{24}

Nowadays, despite several reforms and changes, the five republics still maintain some similarities with the former Soviet administrative system and the control of Islam communities. Central governments wanted to maintain a watchful control of the religious groups, with the scope of avoiding the formation of a strong political opposition. The Muftiates are still playing an important role as independent coordinators of Muslim groups in the society, even if they are strongly linked with each republic government policies. Although according to the official statements Muftiates should be independent and not under the state administration, religious agencies are still very influent.\textsuperscript{25} In particular Muftis still represent the highest religious leaders for national communities and are still heading bodies such as the \textit{Islamic Administration of Uzbekistan}.\textsuperscript{26}

There are several factors that undermine the autonomy of these important religious institutions. First of all, the elections of imams - usually managed by local communities - are instead organised by Muftiates allowing governments of the five republics to appoint imams, obtaining a strict control over these bodies.\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, the prohibition of foreign Islamic funds created a strong dependency on the central government for Muslim communities, which necessary need public financial support.\textsuperscript{28}

The control exercised by the five governments together with other internal factors created a fertile context for the spread of radicalism. In addition, after their independence, open borders allowed Islamic missionaries from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia to influence the revival and also the radicalisation of Islam.\textsuperscript{29} In particular, these external factors influenced the development of the mosques and Islamic schools, which also provided the training abroad for burgeoning radical movements. Nevertheless, as Dr Tiffany Petros, co-author of the book \textit{In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia’s Path to the 21st Century}, affirms, “history demonstrates that Islam has served and continues to serve as an important part of Central Asian identity”.\textsuperscript{30}

Despite the historical presence of Muslim communities in the region, Islam still had a limited role within the political sphere. In the last years, the five central governments responded with different approaches to ensure that religious belief would not be the basis for political opposition. Nonetheless, the internal factors, united with external influences, created the right context for radical movements to spread throughout the region.

\textsuperscript{24} Hunter S. (2003 June 11) The Islamization of Central Asia: Politics, Economics and Society, Delivered at the Woodrow Wilson Conference retrieved from Olcott, Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia,p.141. ,
\textsuperscript{25} Lenz-Raymann, Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia, p.198.
\textsuperscript{26} Olcott, Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia,p.10
\textsuperscript{27} Pannier B. (2010, April 5), , State Islam, Outsiders Compete For Influence In Central Asia, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, http://www.rferl.org/content/State_Islam_Outsiders_Compete_For_Influence_In_Central_Asia/2003138.html
\textsuperscript{28} Lenz-Raymann, Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia, p.198..
\textsuperscript{30} Petros, Islam in Central Asia: The Emergence and Growth of Radicalism in the Post-Communist Era, p. 140.
Currently several Islamic movements and political parties are present in Central Asia. While the governments often label them as radical, extremist or terrorist, they are deeply different from each other and belong to different strands of Islamic thought.

Among them the most aggressive is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or Islamskoje Dvijenie Uzbekistana (IDU) in Russian, which originates from the union of the leaders of the Adolat, Islam Lashkarlori and Tawba movements in 1998. Several terrorist attacks aimed at overthrowing the current Uzbek government and at establishing an Islamic state were perpetrated by this organisation in the last two decades. From 2004 onwards, it split in two different branches, widening its scope: the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT), which aspires to establish a caliphate including Xinjiang and the whole Turkish community in Central Asia, and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), which represents the IMT’s armed splinter. More recently the IJU, which was already affiliated with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, joined Daesh (Islamic State), just before this summer’s attack in Kunduz. In particular, following the Pakistani operation Zarb-e-Azb, which aimed at eradicating violent extremist militancy along the border with Afghanistan, new jihadist fighters moved from one border to another increasing the ranks of the well-known Central Asian violent groups, further worsening the destabilisation in the region.

The more moderate and political Islamic organisations include the Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (HT) and Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which share the common trait of non-violence but pursue different goals. On the one hand, HT aims to establish a transnational caliphate, disseminating propagandist leaflets, on the other hand the IRP does not strive for an Islamic State but it is against Western imperialism and aspires to the foundation of an Islamic society. Both are dangerous for the political stability of Central Asian countries and are outlawed in every state – the IRP was legal in Tajikistan until August 2015. Currently, HT is successfully luring new members thanks to its political similarity to Soviet communism’s main economic policies such as guaranteed employment, nationalisation of enterprises and free health care. Even if Hizb-ut-Tahrir opposes the aggressive jihad pursued by some other Muslim organisations, it uses the same “pre-violent Jihad” strategies and tactics as the Muslim Brotherhood to achieve the creation of an Islamic State in Central Asia and beyond. David Yerushalmi, Director of the American Freedom Law Center (AFLC) and General Counsel for the Center for Security Policy, and AFLC co-founder Robert J. Muise, described “pre-violent jihad” as a civilisational jihad, which uses lawfare as the main tool to compel sharia into the state’s jurisprudence. The HT daunting intent of indoctrination of civil society to change the world’s paradigm establishing a worldwide Islamic caliphate was pronounced already in 1998. Operating as a political party, it has a strong influence over the implementation of policies, aiming not only at Central Asia but using its anti-American, anti-western and anti-capitalistic propaganda to eradicate “Western disbeliefing imperialism” from all Muslim countries and colonist states. The group is mainly present both in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, in particular due to the latters’ strong and repressive

actions towards it\textsuperscript{38}. In the United Kingdom first Tony Blair, and then two years later in 2007 and again in 2015, David Cameron attempted to ban HT as a political party.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Tablighi Jama’at} (TJ) is another transnational movement that can be regarded as neo-fundamentalist but with a particular focus on the Islamic development of individuals and less ambitious regarding systemic social changes. Founded in India in the 1920s, TJ rejects the use of violence as a means to establish an Islamic state in Central Asia, because its followers strongly believe that proselytise will be the key to obtain the same result.\textsuperscript{40} Therefore, this group does not pursue any final goal to establish a Caliphate or enforcing a jihad, but its apolitical and conservative characteristics emphasise its will to bring back Muslims to “true Islam”. Even if perceived as backward looking, if well cultivated, it could represent one of the antidotes to militant Islam.\textsuperscript{41} So far Kyrgyzstan is the only country that has not banned it, after being outlawed by Kazakhstan in 2013.\textsuperscript{42} Despite the general tendency to put each Islamic group in the same pot, TJ is mostly tolerated by Central Asian governments. Due to its pious and non-radical nature, some experts regard it as a tool to supervise young people, vulnerable to radicalisation. Also its methodology of door-to-door proselytism, inviting people to religious gatherings and praying together in local mosques, is considered a form of peaceful \textit{jihad}. This missionary role became a milestone of TJ’s Islam and thus an important activity for the members in order to be regarded as good Muslims. Indeed, it is worth noting the peculiar nature of this movement especially in contrast with more radical and extremist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. TJ’s leaders forbid their followers from mentioning any links with politics, which is considered as a “source of discord and division within the Islamic community” (fitna). However, this apolitical approach could be subject to change in the future, following the rapid diffusion of TJ in Central Asia and its proselytisation of young unsatisfied people.\textsuperscript{43}

According to Mr Michael Privot, Director of European Network Against Racism, from a European perspective, dealing with this group could be counterproductive, in particular in the long term. TJ is sworn to Salafism and even if Salafism is not the only reason for conversion do not take this decision for every strata of society to radicalise. It is self-evident that those converted do not take this decision only due to their religious viewpoints, but the reasons are numerous, and need to be analysed in-depth with a more comprehensive approach.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Colonel Gulmurod Halimov}
\end{center}

The Colonel Gulmurod Halimov, the commander of the Tajik Interior Ministry’s Special Forces, which received military training both in Louisiana (U.S.), and in Moscow, recently disappeared, and reappeared in fighting for Daesh in Syria. In a video propaganda, he blamed the U.S. and Russia as infidels and encouraged Tajik migrants to rise up against democratic governments and to combat in favour of the implementation of sharia. The shocking news demonstrated how even after the vetting by FBI and local government, a high-rank official, who was suitable under any means to pursue his training in expert institutions, could be attracted to fight for Daesh. This case highlights that there is a need to a better understanding of the root causes that provoke this drastic change in people from every strata of society to radicalise. It is self-evident that those converted do not take this decision only due to their religious viewpoints, but the reasons are numerous, and need to be analysed in-depth with a more comprehensive approach.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\end{footnotesize}
solution to let them do their work, but at the same time we attempt to inject the vaccination we just inject the disease in the body. We let them do their policy here in Europe and now we are paying the price.”

An evident exception to the large array of different factions inside the Sunni branch of Islam in Central Asia is the Gülen Movement (FG). Named after its U.S.-Turkish founder Fetullah Gülen, this group is the most progressive Islamic movement in the region, as it complies with Western technological advancements and knowledge and tries to adapt them to the Muslim religious context in Central Asia. By developing a new form of education, FG tries to combine religious and positive sciences, while establishing schools in different provinces. Until December 17, 2013, thanks to a cordial entente, FG collaborated closely with the Turkish government in spreading the cultural, economic and political influence of Turkey in Central Asia. The common heritage of history, language and religion fostered positive relations between Central Asian states and Turkey, and the variable geometry of FG’s network was essential in order to obtain positive results. As aforementioned, FG’s main focus has always been in education, establishing a dialogue between religions and cultures. In fact, Gülen schools were spread around the five Republics, training the new elites, while respecting the local secular norms.

The deterioration of relations between Turkey’s government, FG and Uzbekistan in the 2000s resulted in a drastic reduction of the Gülen movement’s influence and presence in the region. It is important to notice that these schools did not dispense Islamic education, but drawing inspiration from the Christian mission model of the Ottoman era, they fostered a model of secular education without proselytism. Despite its apolitical behaviour, since its detachment from the AKP ruling party, FG’s image in Central Asia started to deteriorate, and seeds of mistrust and fear of Islamic infiltration were disseminated in the secular administrative ruling structure of regional governments. FG’s raison d’être of building cultural bridges between the Heartland and Turkey was losing grip in the region and already in May 2014, Uzbekistan’s government was the first to close all Gülen schools in its country. Soon after, it was Turkmenistan that nationalized private education, while neighbouring countries are increasing their controls over these institutions. More recently, also Tajikistan closed Gülen schools, fearing that they aimed to create a parallel government and claiming that they were teaching Islam to the students. The growing anxiety towards jihadist and extremist movements in Tajikistan, led the government, fearing more instability, to exacerbate repressive measures and controls over the Islamic community. The crackdown could instead lead to an opposite result than the one expected by the Tajik government. Indeed, draconian policies tend to lead to a greater polarisation of conflicts and stimulate the opposition, allowing the space for more violent extremist manifestations to grow.

Religion has assumed a primary role in the political and governmental structure of the countries and kingdoms that reigned in the Heartland. In particular Sufism covered a vital part of

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Central Asia’s history. Since Timur\textsuperscript{50}, through Soviet rule, Sufi mysticism and its variable degree of politicization strongly contributed to the definition of rulers and ruled, and in the revival of Islam after the independence from the USSR. The ascetic and spiritual nature of Sufism that distinguishes it from conventional Islam does not imply that Sufi movements do not have a political agenda. From time to time and region to region, Sufi movements differ one from the another and are often related to politics; in particular they antagonize the Islamic practices of their rulers, their corrupt traits, and their strict and legal-formal interpretation of faith. In recent years Sufism has become more common across Central Asian states’ non-educated population and also to some degree in the intelligentsia’s circles. Thus, if more intellectuals would join Sufism, the potential for a higher level of politicisation could become a reality. This trend is also incentivised by the governments’ uniformed policies towards all forms of Islam, which do not analyse the deep differences between each of them. While Sufism is not the perfect and absolute solution to terrorism and radicalisation, its modicum of tolerance could be one of the tools to counter the rise of fundamentalism.\textsuperscript{51}

The terrorist and radical threats present in Central Asia have a transnational nature and mostly operate via Central Asian states into their immediate neighbourhood and beyond. The porous borders that characterise the whole region make it simple for the radical groups to move with relative freedom and therefore to intensify the links between the different extremist and violent movements active in the Heartland. One of the liveliest groups, which operates from Xinjiang to Waziristan, is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). This movement is considered a terrorist organisation by China, Kazakhstan,\textsuperscript{52} Kyrgyzstan and the United States,\textsuperscript{53} having perpetrated several attacks in Central Asian and Chinese territories. Training in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the ETIM works in close contact with the IMU, and China allegedly claims that it takes financing from al-Qaeda.\textsuperscript{54} On the other hand, the name ETIM itself created substantial confusion, because its members have never called the organisation with this label and the first time the name ETIM was heard was in 2000 from the Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

Since November 2003, another group appeared, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which claims to be the real representative of the Turkish community and, acting under ETIM’s umbrella, is emerging as a terrorist group. But on the contrary, the People’s Republic of China prefers not to refer to the latter as the culprit of the bombings and attacks, maintaining the “East Turkestan” label.\textsuperscript{55} In March 2014, the TIP was claimed to be the responsible for the Kunming knife attack at the South train station and also for the October 2013 car crash in Tiananmen Square. The TIP leader, Adullah Mansour, explicitly said that China was one of the main enemies of the Muslim community due to its heavy-handed repression methods.\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, in January 2014, another incident on the Chinese-Kyrgyz border recalled the responsibility of the Uighur separatists under the

\textsuperscript{50} Timur was a Turkish conqueror, born near Samarkand in 1336, which with his khanate reigned over an area stretched from Russia to India and part of Iran. He is well-known for his barbaric campaigns and for the establishment of the Timurid dynasty, which survived in Central Asia for centuries. His descendant Babur was the founder of the Great Mughals line in India. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Timur. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/biography/Timur.


\textsuperscript{55} On the other hand, the name ETIM itself created substantial confusion, because its members have never called the organisation with this label and the first time the name ETIM was heard was in 2000 from the Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, in January 2014, another incident on the Chinese-Kyrgyz border recalled the responsibility of the Uighur separatists under the
Growing Radicalisation?

Since the NATO mission “Resolute Support” started in Afghanistan and the 14 years-long ISAF mission ended, leading to the withdrawal of troops, a strong revival of violent extremism militancy took place in Central Asia. NATO’s manpower retreat from the area had a destabilising spillover effect, leading to several outbreaks of religious radicalism and terrorism.

This move weakened the Afghan security establishment and consequently their border control operations, proving that the harsh measures used against extremist factions without an understanding of the differences and motives that characterize each group were inefficient solutions and often counterproductive. Indeed, lacking religious freedom and employment opportunities, more and more generations of youth are increasingly radicalised and are joining extremist groups. The poorly funded social services, particularly in rural areas, and the lack of economic and political prospects are escalating the radicalisation of both men and women. The social and political circumstances and the unfulfilled desire for change is what the different populations in the five republics have in common, and is also what drives them towards a jihadist attitude and to fight for terrorist groups. Highly restrictive laws and police crackdowns on radical Islamists prompted even more people to support and join Daesh or other local violent religious militant factions in Central Asia.

Furthermore, it has been empirically proven that the countries that are more prone to terrorist attacks are the ones that use harsher measures against their population and terrorist militants: “Around 92 per cent of all terrorist attacks between 1989 and 2014, occurred in countries where violent political terror was widespread.” In fact, out of the estimated 25,000 foreign fighters that fortify Daesh ranks, according to the International Crisis Group, 2,000-4,000 come from Central Asia. Keeping in mind that this is just a fraction of the total amount and that, according to Associated Press, far more extremists join the self-established Caliphate from Western countries,

more engagement from Central Asian states, the international community and international organisations such as OSCE or NATO is needed. Without a comprehensive approach that encompasses different spheres of action such as social, political, religious and economic, and the involvement of different international actors that coordinate their policies it will be really difficult to accomplish remarkable results in the short and long term. Government responses in Central Asia emphasised always the sharp end, while the soft end is neglected.\(^{65}\) On a long-term perspective focusing solely on heavy-handed security measures is not an effective solution, therefore sharp-end and soft-end need to be combined to fight terrorism and violent extremism.\(^{66}\)

OSCE can support the fight against radicalisation beyond Western borders, by mitigating the problem of the return of foreign fighters that could potentially import the Jihad back home.\(^{67}\)

In this regard, Central Asian states are facing some difficulties, which also include their relations with Russia and their inadequate assimilation policy of Central Asian migrant workers. The increasingly restrictive measures adopted by Russia reduce the remittances of Central Asian workers that could be sent in support of their families back home. Unable to sustain their families, eradicated by their community and without religious leaders as guides, experiencing discrimination and/or harassment, Central Asian migrants are vulnerable victims for recruitment and radicalisation.\(^{68}\) There are multiple factors that lure these people towards a more fundamentalist approach. Experts identify three motivations behind their decision to follow the violent extremist path: ideological (political or religious), psychological, or situational (which includes a vast array of root causes from feeling of hopelessness to a community common belief that compel people to fight). Contrary to the common perception, the religious factor – namely, the aspiration to create a Caliphate – just concerns a minority of the militants. This concept is certainly not part of the traditional religious approach in Central Asia. Those attracted by this pan-Islamic quest to establish an Islamic State are just individuals, which are mislead and ill-informed with regards to their own religion. Without having access to multiple sources of information and high-level education, followers are often not able to understand their own religion completely and therefore they are easily influenced by others’ preaching and doubtful sources of knowledge, making them easy targets for radicalisation.\(^{69}\) For instance, the French judge, Marc Trévidic affirms that 90 per cent of jihadist that went to fight in Syria and Iraq, decided to act for personal reasons such as adventure, revenge or simply because they do not find their place in the society. Only ten per cent decide to fight for radical movements for strong religious beliefs. Therefore, focusing on de-radicalisation by only using the filter of religion is ineffective.\(^{70}\)

6 European Pivot to Central Asia

With the adoption by the Council of the Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia in 2007,\(^{71}\) the engagement of the Member States in the region, has been given a new dimension, while

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\(^{65}\) The term sharp-end includes all the heavy handed law enforcement measures, while the term soft-end embraces all the aspect of prevention.


remaining modest compared to the other major players in the area such as Russia, China and the United States.

All the actors involved in the “game” are interested in a stable and secure Central Asia and in the preservation of the economic development of the region.72 While Chinese and Russian investments were historically focused on infrastructure development and on the energy sector, the European approach has been completely different. “The EU emphasizes its resources in the area focusing on human capital and rule of law, with the intention to avoid the spread of radicalisation” as Mr Konur Alp Koçak of the European Parliamentary Research Service stated.73 The fear of extremism and aspirations to be part of a modern wider European space area drove Central Asian States to enhance their relations with the EU.74 Adopting a balanced regional approach, EU engagement in the region fosters good neighbourly relations, through regional cooperation on issues of common concern and shared challenges; such as climate change and water resources management, sustainable efficient energy, fight on drugs and border management.75 In addition, the EU, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, OSCE and the UN, promoted further democratisation and development of a stable framework that respects the rule of law and human rights.76 Through a dedicated flagship initiative on modernising education, involving directly the Member States institutions, they offered an incisive contribution for the future of Central Asia.77 “Created with the aim of developing higher education systems, modernising institutions, the learning process and aligning qualifications”,78 TEMPUS and now the ERASMUS Plus programs allow further options for closer association with the European Higher Education Area and the related Bologna, Stockholm and Torino Processes the program will allow further options for international cooperation.

Following the recent developments for regional security – such as the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan – along with the rising tension in the region; the EU’s strategy seems to have adapted accordingly. The historical soft power, which characterized EU’s Common and Foreign Security Policy for the five republics, has been implemented with more realistic tools such as the EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue.79 Established in 2013, the dialogue “provided a platform addressing political and security issues of shared concern, including terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking”.80 The EU also prompted the adoption of a Joint Plan of Action for the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia.81 In this context, EU Member States agencies were also given responsibility for implementing several initiatives such as the Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA),82 the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP)83 and the

73 Information obtained through interview with Mr Konur Alp Koçak of the European Parliamentary Research Service.
Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC)\textsuperscript{84} that is now also contributing to the Heroine route: Afghanistan Program. By including both institutional reforms and professional training, these initiatives provide support improving security and stabilization in all the Five Republics.

Due to the increasing presence of Daesh forces, the security of Central Asia remains a top priority on the EU security agenda. Indeed, following the second EU-Central Asia High Level Security Dialogue in Dushanbe,\textsuperscript{85} both parties agreed to a closer cooperation in the security field, which led the EU to grant EUR 8.79 million to improve the current initiatives.\textsuperscript{86}

The re-establishment of the role of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia during the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU, in June 2015, is another piece of evidence that confirmed the long term engagement of the EU with the Central Asia partners and underlines the geostrategic importance of the Heartland for Europe.\textsuperscript{87}

The rising threats of extremism in Central Asia represent a strong menace for EU interests. Europe cannot afford the risks of an unstable Heartland, which will have dramatic consequences also for the West, creating a drastic spill-over effect within the international scenario. Following Mackinder’s paradigm, Central Asia must remain a top priority for European Common Foreign and Security Policy.

7 Conclusions and 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 Gülen, 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.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{84} Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs. Retrieved from: http://caricc.org/index.php/en/.


\textsuperscript{86} Apokins I., Reviewing the EU Strategy for Central Asia: Results and Future Prospects, p.12.


\textsuperscript{88} Information obtained through interview with Ms Malika Hamidi, Director General of the European Muslim Network.
Raising awareness of the importance of rediscovering the “enlightened and ethical” Islam doctrine based upon the Hanafi School\textsuperscript{89} and social initiatives would play a crucial role in shaping a more inclusive religious sphere.

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.\textsuperscript{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. \textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{89} Zhussipbek, Religious Radicalism in Central Asia.
\textsuperscript{90} Mirsaitov, I., Sakeeva, V. Baseline Assessment Report, In the framework of the “Strengthening capacity to prevent violent extremism in the Kyrgyz Republic” project.
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