

Syrian jihad won't be replicated by returning combatants, but fundamentalist ideals are long-established in Central Asia and won't go away, regional expert says.

www.iwpr.net Timur Toktonaliev

A leading expert on Central Asia has told IWPR that even though Islamic State has recruited many fighters from the region, their return home does not automatically mean they will launch a jihad against regional governments.

Despite this, Alexei Malashenko said, the idea that corrupt, malfunctioning secular institutions should be replaced by an Islamic system has deep roots in Central Asia and is likely to endure, so it is important for national governments to find responses other than wholesale repression.

Malashenko, a Central Asia expert with the Carnegie Centre in Moscow, spoke to reporter Timur Toktonaliev about the dangers that Islamic State poses to Kyrgyzstan and the wider region.

Could Islamic State's violent militancy be exported to the Central Asian region?

The threat from Islamic State isn't really as great as people say. First, there is the geographical distance between the two regions, and second, the Central Asian countries have clearly defined themselves as different from the Middle Eastern region - psychologically, culturally, politically and otherwise.... I would say that based on that alone, the threat is exaggerated, although fears do exist - principally because combatants are returning and might start a war against the authorities here.

So far their activities haven't come to much; it's been more talk than action. However... if the social and economic position of people in the region begins to deteriorate sharply, these guys will naturally find a role for themselves.

No one knows the numbers; it's reported that 200 or 300 have gone [from Kyrgyzstan], although that may only be from the north, and more may have gone from Osh [in southern Kyrgyzstan].

So there are undoubtedly potential threats to Kyrgyzstan. But I would stress that the source of threats is primarily domestic, as well as [the impact] of sudden changes in the situation in neighbouring Tajikistan or Uzbekistan.

A recent report from International Crisis Group suggests that the people recruited by Islamic State include uneducated young people from impoverished backgrounds, but also people who are not badly off, for example those who have their own businesses. What does that say? Is it possible to identify a common reason why Islamic State attracts people? The radicals themselves are well-educated. They are people who have studied abroad and who come back home and stir things up. By contrast, the religious education offered in

Central Asia and Russia is poor.

It is true that socially-based protests are primarily driven by the poor. But there isn't a direct correlation between Islamism and radicalism and poverty. There are well-off, educated people involved, too. Why is Islamic State attractive? These people aren't attracted by Islamic State per se, but by radical ideas which are political and are about seeking social justice. It gives them an increased sense of self-worth. It is one thing to just sit in a mosque and believe in something, but quite another to take part in the activities of a party or organisation and get involved in the process.

Why are they returning home even though the war in Syria isn't over?

First, there's a degree of disappointment with Islamic State. Second, it's hard to fight continually, day in, day-out. You need a rest from it - and I mean that quite seriously. There are also internal disagreements within Islamic State, plus there is ethnic strife - Uzbeks don't like Chechens, Chechens don't like Tajiks and so on. It's unclear how things will develop from here.

Third, Islamic State has passed its peak, which was in October and November [2014]. Now things are more complicated. If the [United States-led] coalition strikes at them.... there are two possible scenarios - either they come together, or they don't have time to do so. But Islamic State supporters will continue to exist either way. They will exist as cells and in the mosques, because the idea they stand for is an eternal one.

How dangerous are those who return home?

Within Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security, there are two views on those who return - some say they should be arrested and kept locked up, whereas others argue they should be freed and left alone. There's nothing particular [to be concluded] from the fact that they've been fighting over there and come back. They won't gain much prestige here from the wartime murders which we've all seen video footage of. If some lad comes back to his home country from Islamic State, the first thing he needs to do is sort out his own situation and find a way of earning a living. He won't have much time to get involved in brainwashing others. So I don't see them as posing a great danger.

At the same time, the security services are detaining some of those who have returned, and also some who haven't been abroad. Yet there's little to be gained from this, because the problem isn't Islamic State, but the idea which lives on and is spreading. Whether Islamic State exists or not, the idea will always spread everywhere. This is parallel Islam which has no loyalty to the state. They might be called Islamists, Salafists, fundamentalists or whatever, but the essence remains the same.

The idea of creating a state based on sharia [Islamic law] has always existed here. They [supporters of this] have been hidden; they haven't been very visible. But as secular models of development have failed... people have started thinking, "Why not try Islam?" [They wonder] what is bad about an Islamic state when compared with authoritarian regimes,

economic crisis, corruption, nepotism and a lack of democracy. What are the downsides? I'm not saying everyone who lives in the Ferghana Valley thinks that way, but there's a definite trend. I haven't come from nowhere.... It is impossible to stop. It is certainly wrong to suppress it, as happened in the North Caucasus. The more you push, the harder it will come back and hit you.

When this radicalism started appearing, they [governments] should have initially heard them out rather than fighting against them. These people should have been engaged in some way, and then they would have become more moderate. And other methods could then have been used against those who refused [to engage].

Islamic radicalism is potent in Central Asia... because Islamic radicals represent a response to social and economic problems, an attempt to find solutions.

Why have so many people been moved to join Islamic State? This didn't happen when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan started.

The situation was different in Iraq.... Iraq wasn't a war for Islam.

The slogan now is different - it's about having a righteous state.... In addition, there are a range of logistical routes through easy-to-get-to countries, there is a well-developed network of recruiters, and all this works towards mobilising people for Islamic State.

How serious are reports that Islamic State has a specific group set up to fight the Central Asia regimes?

At the moment, Islamic State doesn't have time to do this since it has to sort out its internal differences first. It may be continuing to recruit, but that isn't on the same scale as before....

They are more engaged in fighting in Europe and Turkey than in Central Asia.

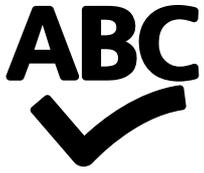
It has to be clearly understood that the gravest threat to Central Asia's secular regimes comes from within, from their own populations. External factors come second.

How do you view efforts by Central Asian governments to tackle Islamic State recruitment and the spread of jihadist propaganda?

At the moment they are just about coping, because it isn't on a mass scale. However, it's impossible for them to monitor every citizen who leaves the country, as there are lots of ways to travel undetected. But they do need to identify and track how people get dispatched to Islamic State from Central Asia - who's recruiting them, and whether it's done individually or via local branches of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or other groups. This is run-of-the-mill work for law-enforcement agencies, and they need to do it thoroughly.

Each country is tackling this problem on its own. There is no cooperation. As for the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, nothing is being done, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is even less effective. They mostly just talk.

Alexei Malashenko was interviewed by Timur Toktonaliev, IWPR's Kyrgyzstan editor.



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