Features of Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Kazakhstan

«In Kazakhstan there is no term as “violent extremism” in the conceptual construct, and as a result at the legislative level. Too vague definition of the terms extremism and terrorism significantly complicates the work on prevention and counteraction», – said Anna Gusarova, an expert in international security, director of the Central Asian Institute for Strategic Studies, in her article written specifically for CABAR.asia.

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Countering violent extremism in Kazakhstan is combined with several key points that reflect the understanding, approach and measures of state bodies to solve this problem. Firstly, it concerns the terminology. In the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), the term “violent extremism” is absent in the conceptual construct, and as a result at the legislative level. The term violent extremism, widely used in English-language literature and professional communities, has not received widespread support and understanding at the official level, although it continues to be used by both parties while working with foreign partners and international organizations. The same applies to the meaning of the terms “counteraction/prevention” and “battle”.

However, in the context of Kazakhstan, as in all countries of Central Asia, these terms are used as synonyms, although they are noticeably different in Western expert communities (the former includes the whole range of measures and tools, and the latter focuses more on the physical and military components). The too vague definition of the terms extremism and terrorism significantly complicates the work on prevention and counteraction.

Secondly, the state program, in the name itself, reflects the priority areas of activity in this direction – this is counteraction to religious extremism and terrorism, believing that the other types of extremism (indicated in the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Countering Extremism”) do not pose the same threat. The same document presents the main measures by which the state authorities of the country are guided to ensure the security of the country, society and people.

Third, special attention and resources at this stage are given to the guerillas returning from Syria and their families, including women and children, and working with them. As for radicalization, today there is no single or main reason, since the process is purely individual
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and depends on so many factors. However, today we are talking more about the radicalization of the Muslim part of the country, and as a result state policy is focused on this issue.

The threat level of extremism and terrorism: expectations vs. reality

In the context of crimes committed on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan and related to extremism and terrorism is uncertain, since the legal statistics available in 2017 on the website of the Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Accounts of the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan are currently completely absent.[1]

However, we can try to refer to the figures of the main security agency of the country. According to the press service of the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan (NSC RK),[2] as of June 27, 2019, for crimes related to terrorism and religious extremism, 662 citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan were convicted and are serving sentences, 14 of them are women. In fact, this figure alone does not mean anything: on the one hand, the proportion of people convicted of these crimes on a national scale is a drop in the ocean. On the other hand, this number is growing steadily over the years, which is once again shown in numerous publications in the mass media and statistics voiced by representatives of relevant authorities at press conferences. In addition, let us not forget about those citizens who have been to the zones of military conflicts, in particular to Syria, to join the ISIS over the past five to six years. However, collectively, these numbers remain quite low and unrepresentative.

If we compare the number of crimes under certain articles of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the picture is even more vague. For comparison, the study “Online Freedom in Kazakhstan vs. Countering violent extremism: the case of Kazakhstan ” by A. Gusarova[3] states that there are fewer crimes related to terrorism and extremism than, for example, incitement of hatred (Article 174 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan).

For example, in 2017, under the Article 256 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, paragraph 1, 10 people were convicted of propaganda of terrorism or public appeals to commit an act of terrorism: four were imprisoned for 1 to 3 years, three - from 3 to 5 years, and three more - from 5 to 8 years. Three of them are residents of Almaty, the rest represent Astana, South Kazakhstan, Akmola, Atyrau, Pavlodar, Karaganda and Mangystau regions.

Table 1. Convicted persons under articles 256 and 273 of the Criminal Code of the Republic
As can be seen from table 1, according to paragraph 2 of Article 256 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan propaganda of terrorism or public appeals to commit an act of terrorism, as well as the manufacture, possession with intent to distribute or distribution of materials of the indicated content, 62 people were convicted and deprived of their liberty. In terms of regions, these are practically all regions, except the north and east: 19 – in the Aktobe region, 6 – in Almaty, 7 in the South Kazakhstan region, five each in Astana, Karaganda and Zhambyl regions. In 2017, 41 people were convicted of knowingly false reports about an act of terrorism (Article 273 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan). The leaders in this article are Karaganda (9) and Kostanay oblasts (8), as well as Nur-Sultan (8). Most were sentenced to 1 to 3 years. For comparison, in 2015, there were no crimes related to a false report of a terrorist act, and in 2016 seven such cases were considered by the courts in Nur-Sultan.

If we talk about the statistics of 2019, then for the crimes related to religious extremism and terrorism, the figures are still missing. However, for comparison, some data on other types of criminal offenses, are provided and presented in the table below.

Table 2. Criminal offenses for the 10 months of 2019

For example, for comparison in only 10 months of 2019, Kazakhstan recorded 674 criminal offenses under article 99 Murder (94 for Almaty, 47 for Karaganda, 38 for Aktobe, 32 for each in Nur-Sultan and Kostanay, 31 for Ust-Kamenogorsk). Over the same period, under article 120 Rape (see Map 1), 945 criminal offenses were recorded. At the same time, according to Article 291, theft or extortion of weapons, ammunition, explosives and explosive devices from the beginning of 2019 revealed 74 criminal offenses (27 in Almaty, 5 in Shymkent, 4 in Taraz and Nur-Sultan, 2 in each – Taldykorgan, Kyzylorda, Karaganda and Ust-Kamenogorsk).

Map 1. Map of criminal offenses of the Republic of Kazakhstan under Article 99 Murder
It would appear, and it is quite logical that the number of criminal offenses not directly related to extremism and terrorism significantly exceed the figures of the latter. But at the same time, it is important to understand that the general level of offenses (under certain
Articles) reflect the same geographical scales as extremist and terrorist crimes. For example, Almaty, Aktobe (plus the Aktobe region), Shymkent (plus the South Kazakhstan region), Nur-Sultan are characterized by high rates, while northern and eastern Kazakhstan are less common in static data on extremism and terrorism. At the same time, it should be noted that citizens of these parts of the country also did not stand aside and went to zones of military conflicts (Syria, Ukraine). It is enough to recall a four-year-old case about a young 23-year-old girl from Zyryanovsk (a city in the east of the Republic of Kazakhstan, now Altai), who converted to Islam (formerly Christian) and prepared her younger brother to become a suicide bomber. This case is quite indicative, because it speaks of different ways, motivations and reasons for the radicalization of citizens of one country, different from the point of view of religion, ethnic group and language. In the future, it would be interesting to conduct a study on this topic, collect a case and make a comparison according to different criteria.

Radical ideology in Kazakhstan

According to the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the citizens of Kazakhstan who studied in dubious foreign theological educational institutions remain the sources of the spread of radical ideology. Despite the measures taken, the problem of participation of Kazakhstanis in terrorist activities abroad remains relevant. If we talk about radicalization, then this process is purely individual, and as a result for one person it will become a trigger or push / pull factor, for another it will not be relevant at all.

In practice, it means that in addition to the traditional reasons that are constantly voiced by government departments, participation and / or joining extremist and terrorist organizations or committing crimes of an extremist and terrorist nature is mainly associated with the socio-economic environment, low level of religious literacy, as well as activities of destructive pseudo-religious groups in the country and region. Ultimately, the process of radicalization is somehow related to the search for identity, and for the most part it is about what it means to be a true Muslim, in fact, it is discussed in most online propaganda by Anwar al-Avlaki or Furat Media, the Russian-language propaganda portal ISIS with accounts on social networks. If we talk about geographic distribution, it’s enough to look at the results of an elementary search for those convicted of terrorism on Google, which names completely different cities and regions of the country (west, center, south in particular).

In 2017, Deputy Chairman of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nurgali Bilisbekov noted that the main terrorist threat for Kazakhstan comes from the followers of the non-traditional religious movement of Salafism, which represent the basis for the formation of new radical groups in Kazakhstan. It is enough to
recall the discussions about whether or not Salafism should be prohibited, how to do it and what it will mean for the country’s security in terms of countering religious extremism and terrorism and religious freedom. As well as last year’s widely discussed amendments to certain legislative acts on religious activities and religious associations, providing for the length of a beard, pants, etc. It is logical to assume that over the past few years this topic has moved from the category of taboos to an open public plane, as evidenced by growth of publications in the mass media. Moreover, it is important to understand that three groups are generally accepted in Salafism, and only one of them uses violence in the commission of jihad.

However, if we talk about the attacks of the last ten years, it remains unclear who the criminals are and what terrorist organization they belong to, since only the “Caliphate Soldiers” took responsibility for the attack in Aktobe in 2011. In other cases, it was proved in court that others were inspired by a radical religious ideology, in particular ISIS online. For example, in April 2019, a person was detained and sentenced to 10 years of prison due to preparing for an act of terrorism, propaganda of terrorism, inciting religious hatred and illegal possession of firearms. Employees of law enforcement agencies noted that the convict planned to organize a terrorist attack in Almaty in crowded places, in particular in a shopping and entertainment center. Earlier in September 2019, seven Tajik citizens were sentenced to 12-18 years of prison for preparing terrorist attacks – explosions in the buildings of the Iversko-Serafimovsky Monastery, located on L. Hamidi street and the building of “ATF Bank” on the M. Mametov street using a makeshift explosive device with a ban on entry into the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan Counter-Terrorism Strategy: State Response

In addition to efforts undertaken in the international arena to counter violent extremism and terrorism, Kazakhstan has developed key documents in this direction. Of course, the strategy is comprehensive, includes many different soft and power components that take into account stakeholders, legislation and areas of work.

Thus, in accordance with the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Countering Extremism” of 2005, three types of extremism are presented in Kazakhstan.

Table 3. Extremism in Kazakhstan
by the title of the document, the most important issues of national security are religious extremism and terrorism for Kazakhstan. The Anti-Terrorism Act also provides key definitions. Thus, terrorism in Kazakhstan is considered as the “ideology of violence and the practice of influencing decision-making by state bodies, local self-government bodies or international organizations by committing or threatening to commit violent and (or) other criminal acts related to intimidation of the population and aimed at causing harm to the person, society and the state”.[14]

In accordance with the Action Plan for its implementation, state bodies have set many important tasks and criteria for their implementation. At the same time, it should be noted that most measures (though, as well as resources) are more associated with improving the potential and qualifications of specialized law enforcement agencies - the NSC, the Ministry of Internal Affairs - both on a republican and local scale.[15] And this is no coincidence, since the attacks were more directed against representatives of law enforcement agencies, i.e. 85% of the victims of these acts of terrorism, compared with 15% of the civilian population.

Mainly, measures to prevent and combat religious extremism and terrorism are aimed at:

- the prevention of religious extremism and terrorism, the formation of immunity to radical ideology within society and zero tolerance for radical manifestations.
- reducing the influence of external factors on the radicalization of the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
- increasing the efficiency of revealing and suppressing the facts of religious extremism and terrorism, including by improving the system for ensuring the activity of special state and law enforcement bodies.
- improving the system for responding to acts of religious extremism and terrorism, as well as minimizing and (or) eliminating their consequences.

Alongside with traditional measures to increase the potential of specialized law enforcement agencies, a lot of work is being done both offline[16] and online. For example, “in order to protect Internet users and social networks from the influence of the propaganda of terrorism, information space is being monitored.” According to the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in 2018, more than 620 thousand materials were blocked on the Internet and social networks (for comparison, in 2015 - 150 thousand, in 2016 – 700 thousand) with the propaganda of terrorism and extremism. Earlier in 2011, 400 websites were blocked in Kazakhstan for propagating the ideas of radicalism and terrorism (in 2012 – 500, in 2013 – 600).[17] At the same time, relevant departments have been criticized more than once for excessive closure, blocking and control, as well as lack of
creativity in the development of counterpropaganda and counter-narratives. As a result, the press service of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan prepared a release on the Zhusan special operation and the documentary “Flowers in chains” (Цветы в оковах), which tells about women serving sentences for crimes related to religious extremism and terrorism.

In the final count, it is important to understand how to measure the effectiveness of the implementation of the indicated measures and what criteria to operate on, since this is an ideology. Not so long ago, international experts involved in countering violent extremism and terrorism came to the conclusion that de-radicalization is not an effective measure, since it does not provide an opportunity to talk about efficiency and is a resource-intensive and time-consuming process. In this regard, the creation of immunity to radical ideology in Kazakhstani society is becoming particularly relevant, which is extremely difficult to measure and calculate.

The last question, which is practically not presented in the information and communication strategy of Kazakhstan in the fight against religious extremism and terrorism, is related to awareness and dialogue with citizens. Much remains to be done in this direction, starting with transparent statistics on court cases, foreign terrorist fighters, and convicted persons in order to conduct qualitative research that will help the process of political decision-making. And the main point is to explain the citizens what extremism and terrorism are, what is allowed or prohibited by law, to communicate with the majority of citizens along with adherents of destructive religious movements and not to securitize the problems.

**Instead of a conclusion**

Ultimately, to understand the real extent of the threat of terrorism and extremism in the Republic of Kazakhstan, it is important to pay attention to three points. The first is the official discourse generated by the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan that terrorism and religious extremism pose a threat to Kazakhstan’s national security, whereas 30 terrorist attacks have been prevented and foiled since 2014 (2014 – 3, 2015 – 4, 2016 – 12, 2017 – 11). [18] According to other data for the same period, experts mention 78 cases.[19] According to the State program on combating religious extremism and terrorism, the problem of radicalization of citizens, leading to violent acts of an extremist nature and terrorism, remains a real threat to the national security of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The second is the global terrorism index and the global peace index 2018-2019, in which Kazakhstan occupies the 75th and 64th places respectively (letting Tajikistan go ahead in
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the first). At the same time, it has been noted that for several consecutive years there has been a tendency in reducing total number of terrorist attacks and the number of victims around the world.

And thirdly, the participation of citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the activities of terrorist organizations abroad and their subsequent return. According to the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan,[20] from 2013 to 2016 – the period of active recruiting and the activity of the ISIS – 546 Kazakhstan recruits were not allowed to depart to the zones of terrorist activity (2013 – 168, 2014 – 136, 2015 – 151, 2016 – 91). In addition, in 2019, about 600 citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan were returned as part of the Zhusan special operation, including more than 400 children.[21] Collectively and individually, these components may indicate what the level of threat represents religious extremism and terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

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[5] Punished by imprisonment for a term of five to nine years with confiscation of property.


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[9] A resident of the East Kazakhstan region was convicted of recruiting his brother to the ISIS, https://informburo.kz/novosti/za-verbovku-brata-v-ryady-ig-osudili-zhitelnicu-vko.html


[12] Seven foreigners were preparing a terrorist attack in Almaty, https://www.zakon.kz/4985759-semero-inostrantsev-gotovili-terakt-v.html


[16] Religious, educational, ideological and other components. Full measures to counter religious extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan can be found in the State Program and the plan of measures for its implementation on the website of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

[17] Ibid

[18] In Kazakhstan, 30 terrorist attacks were prevented in four years, 2018, https://informburo.kz/novosti/v-kazahstane-za-chetyre-goda-predotvratili-30-teraktov-.html

[19] Two attacks per year: why the Kazakhstanis are not ready to cooperate with the special services, https://ru.sputniknews.kz/persona/20180718/6474801/kazakhstancy-sotrudnichestvo-specsluzhby.html


[21] ISIS participants who returned from Syria were convicted in Kazakhstan, https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/vernuvshiesya-iz-sirii-uchastnikov-ig-osudili-v-kazahstane
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