

“The intertwining of crime with radical ideology is a social phenomenon that requires thorough study and comprehensive analysis. The analysis of this problem should also take into account another aspect related to the youth criminal subculture in that it serves as a breeding ground for splicing together crime and jihadist ideology”- sociologist Serik Beisembaev, writing for [cabar.asia](http://cabar.asia), identifies factors of youth radicalization in the context of Kazakhstan.



### **At-risk youth**

In Kazakhstan, the close intertwining of criminals and radical extremist groups has long been talked about. Many consider it is due to radicalization in prison when extremists engage with a number of criminals, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon of criminalized extremism. However, according to this study, the analysis of this problem should also take into account another aspect related to the youth criminal subculture in that it serves as a breeding ground for splicing together crime and jihadist ideology.

Extensive work has been carried out in the past few years on preventing religious extremism from taking hold among young people aged 16 to 29, which is one of the main “at risk groups” in terms of radicalization and acts of violent extremism. It is conducted within the framework of the State program “On Combating Religious Extremism and Terrorism, 2013-2017”. It places special emphasis on outreach work among this group of citizens. In 2017, it plans to provide 100% total outreach to students in secondary, vocational, and higher education institutions while teaching critical awareness of information received on religious topics.[\[1\]](#)

The vulnerability of young people to radical religious rhetoric is primarily associated with the psycho-emotional phase peculiar to the age group when life values are not yet formed, and the person is open to all sorts of new and exciting things. As shown by foreign studies, the desire to assert themselves and become part of “something more” are the main

motivations involving young people in the activities of extremist groups and for their departure to Afghanistan and Syria to participate in armed conflicts.[2] In Kazakhstan, according to the Prosecutor General's Office, the average age of people convicted of extremism and terrorism is 28 years old.[3] There are also cases of the radicalization of young boys and girls between ages 16-17.

Studies of Kazakhstanis convicted of extremism and terrorism have shown that radicalization based on Salafi-jihadist ideology occurred most often among marginalized youth.[4] These individuals, before they approach radical ideology, are already in a state of life crisis due to social and economic precariousness or an inability to adapt to new conditions. According to statistics, over 80% of those convicted of religious extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan are people who did not have formal employment or work in the informal sector of the economy (markets, private transportation, etc.). A significant portion of them were children of internal migrants who moved from rural areas to larger towns and experienced, in this regard, some problems of adaptation.

Analysis of the socio-psychological portrait and life experiences of those convicted indicates that another important driver of youth radicalization appears to be their criminal history. It was found that those youth brought up in areas of criminal activity and absorbing the concepts of "thieves" are more susceptible to the tenets of radical ideology (referring to Salafi-jihadism and Takfirism). This category of persons easily digests the Salafi-jihadist idea on the necessity for armed confrontation with infidels/kafirs and to provide financial support to fellow Muslims found in conflict zones. Agreeing with a special study, 7 out of 11 studied episodes of extremist and terrorist activity that took place in Kazakhstan in 2011-2012 in one way or another contained a criminal factor.[5] In some cases, the leaders of radical cells had a history of racketeering while in other cases extremists had engaged in banal criminal activity such as extorting money from businessmen or committing muggings and robberies.[6]

### **Criminal subculture and jihadist ideology**

The criminal factor manifested itself also in the case of recent terrorist attacks in Almaty and Aktobe. According to official sources, some of the attackers in Aktobe previously spent time in prison for various crimes. The same thing was known about the lone terrorists who staged the massacre in Almaty. Moreover, the official version stated that the attack on law enforcement representatives in the southern capital was committed out of revenge for incurred hardships while serving their prison terms. While much remains unclear, however, in these cases we can already say that the criminal experience played a role in the radicalization of these persons to commit a violent act.

Intertwining criminals with radical ideology presents oneself with social phenomena that require thorough study and comprehensive analysis. Yet based on the available data, we can conclude the following factors determining the convergence of these two destructive subcultures in the context of Kazakhstan.

Firstly, Salafi-jihadism and Takfirism espouse aggressive ideologies elevating violence against the infidels in a cult. With promotional online commercials distributed by extremist organizations, suicide bombers (kamikaze) are always portrayed as brave warriors fighting desperately against the “enemies of Islam”. This brutal image is good “salesmanship”. First of all, a portion of the young people brought up in the spirit of street gangsterism romanticizes “cool guys” and crime bosses, hence the reason for the attractiveness of Salafi-jihadism among not only criminals but also among power sport athletes. The story of Dolkun Mamedov is indicative. He was a Kazakhstani kickboxing champion and member of the Asian Games in Astana but was also one of the members of the extremist group liquidated in Almaty in 2011.

Secondly, in Takfirism, taking money from infidels is considered part of Amal, i.e. an acceptable way to earn money, especially if the taken funds are spent for the purposes of jihad and to help fellow Muslims. As shown by examples from several extremist groups in Kazakhstan, such a belief was widespread in this environment. Committing thefts and robberies, members of radical groups were assured of the legitimacy of their actions in terms of the rules of Islam. The possibility of such an interpretation of an ordinary criminal act generated attraction to Takfirism among criminalized young people. For example, in 2012 there was a neutralized radical group in Aktobe involved in a robbery and who also killed a police officer. The youngest member of the group, Gabit Kurmankul (17 years old), survived after a shootout with police. In an interview during the course of the study, he said that he went to thievery for the money.

Third, both the Salafi jamaat and criminalized youth are found in an alienated position relative to the rest of society. In a geographical sense, this alienation manifests itself in the localization of their representatives in the suburbs, cottages, buildings, and markets, i.e. in places where traditionally marginalized populations gather. Social and cultural alienation due to the fact that the majority of society perceives criminality and the Salafis as outcasts bears in itself a threat to ordinary citizens. The rejection of society and a concentration on certain areas sets the stage for convergence and the merging of radicals with criminalized youth. It is significant that the primary areas of involvement in the Salafi communities are in the markets, and often representatives of jamaati themselves live in the suburbs and rural towns.

## **How to deal with it?**

The competent national authorities have long fixated on cases of religious conversions among organized crime members in the ranks of the Salafi community. As early as 2012, the Prosecutor General's Office has reported that the expansion of Salafi jamaati among members of the criminal world has taken on new dimensions in the country. In particular, it was reported that radicalized criminals continue to commit ordinary crimes but under the guise of religious motives. The most famous example is the case when a local cell of the terrorist group, Jund al-Khilafah, engaged in petty theft and robberies to finance their extremist activities.<sup>[7]</sup> It is also said that Salafi communities are trying to seize control of shady business spheres in some regions of the country.

Combating the splicing of crime and radicalism is being carried out in various areas, but the main focus is on the state authorities preventing radicalization in prison. To this end, there are active preventative efforts in prisons among persons convicted of extremist and terrorist activities. Also, some have voiced plans to build a cell-type prison (instead of barracks) where inmates will be isolated from each other, thereby reducing the risk of radical ideologies spreading in the penitentiary.

However, as has been shown, the prison environment is not the only source of merging the Salafi community with the criminal underworld. The problem is deeper since the merger does not take place only at the expense of prisoners but also by criminalized young people who are located on the outside. The study found that almost none of the members of those radical groups who were engaged in theft and robbery had any experience of prison life. However, most of them were from poor areas where they led a rowdy lifestyle and were prone to deviant behavior. Moreover, an important conclusion obtained is that those gone to violent actions on the basis of jihadist ideology often were the ones who were more criminalized both in terms of everyday experiences and outlooks on life. That is yesterday's bullies with an aggressive attitude towards the world with a moral-psychological point of view turned out to be more prepared for armed confrontation with security forces.

The experience of foreign countries, confronted with religious extremism, indicates that the merging of crime and Salafi-jihadism is a global trend. For example, a special report by USAID on the problem of radicalization provides information revealing that there are an increasing number of individuals with previous involvement in petty crime and illegal activities such as drug trafficking, theft, extortion, racketeering, etc. among the new generation of jihadists around the world.<sup>[8]</sup>

In particular, there is an increase in criminal elements among jihadists observed in

connection with the activities of the international terrorist network ISIL whose ranks also very often contain former criminals. The most glaring example is the terrorist attack in Paris where the organizers and participants had criminal pasts and were to some extent involved in the criminal world. Foreign experts call these people “part gangster -part terrorist”.<sup>[9]</sup> Their main advantage over conventional jihadists is that when organizing terrorist acts and other acts of violence these people commonly use their experience and skills acquired as criminals. This greatly complicates the job of law enforcement bodies to track down and eliminate these individuals.

The provided information allows one a new angle to observe the problem of the merging of some of the criminal community with the Salafi-jihadi community in Kazakhstan. It is obvious that it is necessary to abandon the narrow interpretation of the problem while taking into account the wider context. In preventing extremism, it becomes important to work with marginalized young people living in depressed areas and prone to criminal associations. It is recommended that special emphasis be placed on them while conducting outreach in the field. To date, unfortunately, the efforts of advocacy groups are increasingly focused on working with higher education and school youth. Alas there is practically no coverage of the “main at-risk groups”. For example, mechanisms does not provide for conducting information and educational activities among youth employed in bazaars, private transport, or other kinds of informal employment.

It is also necessary to conduct a study on youth exposure to criminalization and shadowy relationships. According to the study, a program for the decriminalization of youth must be developed. Separately, there is a need to develop special programs for social adaptation and informal employment training for difficult “at risk youth” in terms of radicalization and involvement in criminal relations. It is important to take into account the practice of foreign countries such as France, Belgium, Denmark and the United States, who already have extensive experience implementing such programs.

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[5] The study was conducted by the public foundation Center for Social and Political Studies "Strategy" and the Center for Security program in 2013. Within the study's framework, visits were made to prisons in Aktobe, Arkalyk, Atbasar, and Aktau with 13 interviews conducted with prisoners serving sentences for extremism and terrorism.

[6] Ibid.

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***The views of the author may not coincide with the position of cabar.asia***



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