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The Political Requirements for IS Prevention in Central Asia

Statement of the Problem

The following considerations deal with the necessity of challenging the advance of “Islamic State” (IS) towards Central Asia (the Caucasus and Caspian regions are no less at risk) by means of a common European and Central Asian strategy under the aegis of the OSCE. The OSCE is the pre-eminent European and Eurasian institution for creating and co-ordinating common statements of intent, political goals, principles, and instruments of execution in this case, because all the affected states participate in the Organization as equal partners, voting on and implementing the Organization’s decisions. The OSCE also includes states such as Russia that possess major influence within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).¹ The key partner states for IS prevention are the Russian Federation, China, and Afghanistan. Iran could also play a role.

Against this background, I will consider the following: the need to raise the profile of co-ordinated domestic and external strategies and options for action for IS prevention based on peaceful means; factors that favour the advance of IS; factors that favour anti-IS solidarity in society and hamper IS; conclusions.

Raising the Profile of Co-ordinated Domestic and External Strategies and Options for Action for IS Prevention Based on Peaceful Means

The advance of IS towards Central Asia can only be met effectively if co-ordinated domestic and external strategies and options for action based on civil political and diplomatic means are granted significantly more weight alongside security and military policy.

Currently, however, the established preference for strategies based on security and military means appears set to continue. The relatively advanced level of co-ordination within the CSTO framework provides evidence of this. The CSTO approach was most recently discussed in Dushanbe in June 2015 by the leaders of the CSTO member states and the heads of CIS border forces. A special delegation of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has also travelled to Central Asia to consider the same issue.

¹ The SCO agreed in July 2015 that India and Pakistan would become members. Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia, and Belarus are observer states within the organization.

What we need to ask is whether there is a danger that timely strategies and options for action based on peaceful means are again being neglected. That would contradict the experiences of over a decade of anti-terror strategies in neighbouring Afghanistan, as well as the Middle East. They show that jihadist Islamist movements can neither be militarily defeated, nor isolated in the societies they affect. It has also become apparent that the fighting potential of these groups and their ability to mobilize support have grown not only in Islamic societies, but now also in the West. The fact that at least 15,000 foreigners had travelled to Syria by mid-2014, to “stand at the side of the embattled Muslims in their struggle against the tyrant Bashar al-Assad [...] and that IS has succeeded in becoming one of the most significant problems in global politics”,² dramatically illustrates the dimensions of the conflict, which – if IS continues to expand, given its politico-religious ideology – should also be a spur to vigilance in Central Asia and the OSCE in general. Things are not helped by the fact that the situation in neighbouring Muslim regions is unlikely to stabilize in the foreseeable future, nor is an understanding on a *modus vivendi* between the jihadist movements in those regions and the West likely to be achieved any time soon. It is far more likely that IS will continue with its nascent efforts to penetrate Central Asia, one of the key historical and religious regions of the Islamic world, not least as a means of compensating for possible military reversals in Iraq and Syria by engaging the “Western enemy” in a new conflict arena and taking a step closer to the European “home continent”.

Given the limited ability of security- and military-based strategies to affect wider society, and their often counterproductive effects, such as massive streams of refugees and high levels of civilian casualties, the mobilization of internal opposition from the social strata and structures in which IS seeks to recruit support will be a central aspect of IS prevention. Military means are of little use in achieving this, as they focus by necessity on co-operation with governments, whose highest priority is to maintain their hold on power. Governments can thus use military and security co-operation to strengthen their authoritarian control of their societies in a situation where what is actually needed is greater social solidarity.

Factors that Favour the Advance of IS

The governments and political systems of Central Asia, which try to create an impression of monolithic solidity, are more fragile than they first appear. The administration of these states by similar political regimes under analogous social conditions has led to the emergence of serious development failings,

2 Guido Steinberg, *Kalifat des Schreckens, IS und die Bedrohung durch den islamistischen Terror* [Caliphate of Fear, IS and the Threat of Islamist Terror], Munich 2015, pp. 18, 13 (all translations from foreign-language sources by the author).

which have raised internal tensions and caused frustration in the societies of Central Asia. The key development failings are as follows:

- *Social Failings – Unacceptable Living Conditions*: With the exception of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which are able to build on the income and limited industrialization enabled by economic rents from oil and gas production, the entire region has seen a fundamental decline in living standards that has already resulted in widespread social exclusion and divisions within society.³ This not only undermines confidence in the government,⁴ but also acts to push people towards religion, which here generally means Islam. Against this background, social dissatisfaction and protest are already well on the way to being fortified by Islamic religious values. Above all, the desperate social conditions lend credence to the agitations of *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami* and *Salaftiyya* for social justice, Islamic alternatives, and the Islamic way of life and against corruption and the repression of religious activists. Their message is particularly attractive to young people, and to migrant workers, in particular.

Social movements, trade unions, and left-wing parties and groups with alternative projects for social justice have so far played little part in Central Asian politics. It is likely that political Islam will make use of the enormous potential for protest that exists as a result of the social conditions to gain political advantage. For IS, establishing social justice as part of an Islamic caliphate is a declared goal, one that has already been realized in the area under its control.

- *Failings with Young People, Families, Women and Girls*: The population of the Central Asian countries is growing by an average of 1.7 per cent each year, and 30 per cent of the region's inhabitants are younger than 15. This structural problem is manifest in acute youth unemployment, which is estimated to be above 20 per cent in all the Central Asian states with the exception of Kazakhstan.⁵ In Kazakhstan, 33 per cent of children (0-14) and 28 per cent of young adults (15-29) are socially ex-

3 The UNDP Social Exclusion Index defines social exclusion in terms of poverty, the lack of basic competences, limited employment and education opportunities, and inadequate access to social and community networks and activities. According to the 2011 report by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS, 32 per cent of the population in Kazakhstan, and 72 per cent in Tajikistan are considered socially excluded. Cf. United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Europe and CIS, *Beyond Transition. Towards Inclusive Societies*, UNDP Regional Human Development Report, Bratislava 2011, pp. 8, 38, at: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/Beyond-Transition-Inclusive-Societies.html>.

4 According to the UNDP, this situation has already been achieved in the region: "People don't trust [...] government institutions, which are supposed to protect their interests" and "a lack of trust in institutions leads to a breakdown in the social contract between citizens and the state", UNDP, cited above (Note 3), pp. 3, 32.

5 Cf. Andrea Schmitz/Alexander Wolters, *Revolutionen in Zentralasien?* [Revolutions in Central Asia?], in: *Zentralasien-Analysen*, 43-44/2011, pp. 2-5, here: p.2.

cluded, while in Tajikistan, the figures are 73 and 72 per cent, respectively. In 2005, 90 per cent of children in Kyrgyzstan, 80 per cent in Uzbekistan, and 75 per cent in Tajikistan lived in households with a daily per capita consumption of less than 2.50 US dollars.⁶ Young people probably also make up a major proportion of the migrant workers from Central Asia employed in Russia, of whom there were an estimated 4.5 million (plus 3.7 million irregular migrant workers) in December 2014.⁷

Though labour migration raises family income considerably, the division of families means that those left behind, mostly women and children, can become dependent on the religious support provided by local imams.

- *Failings with Regard to Fundamentalism – the Character of the Political System:* The majority of the population had no real influence on fundamental decisions within the transformation and state-formation processes. That is also true with regard to the question of whether the state should be secular or Islamic. At the time of the young Central Asian states' accession to the OSCE, the West perceived them as a kind of "Soviet Orient" – the Asian appendix of a Soviet Union that, while Communist, was at least secular. From the moment of independence, the secular leaders of these new states pursued a path that sought to contain, control, and marginalize the representatives of Islam – particularly its political representatives – and subject them to majority rule. This sowed the seeds of religious conflict in the early days in of the young states. In the early 1990s, 20 Islamic organizations were formed in Central Asia.⁸ The conflict over the character of the state and the "purity" of the Islam practised within it was particularly fierce in Uzbekistan: Should Uzbekistan be considered as part of the "House of Islam" (*Dar al-Islam*) and hence at peace, or as part of the "House of War" (*Dar al-Harb*), and thus dominated by "conflict between an unbelieving minority [author's note – the secular ruling elite] and the Muslim majority"?⁹ In this conflict over the religious and political foundations of the young state, in which President Islam Karimov played a

6 Cf. UNDP, cited above (Note 3), pp. 43, 18.

7 Cf. Irina Malyuchenko, *Labour Migration from Central Asia to Russia: Economic and Social Impact on the Societies of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan*, Bishkek 2015, p. 4, at: http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_21.pdf. Of the total number, 2.5 million are Kazakhs; 1.1 million Uzbeks, and 660,000 Tajiks, which amounts to eight per cent of the latter country's population. Cf. The World Bank, *Migration and Development Brief 22*, 11 April 2014, pp. 17-18, at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1288990760745/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief22.pdf>.

8 Seven in Uzbekistan, six in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan, two in Tajikistan, and one in Turkmenistan. Cf. Alexei Malashenko, *Islam i politika v gosudarstvakh Tsentralnoi Azii* [Islam and Politics in the States of Central Asia], in: *Tsentralnaya Aziya i Kavkaz* [Central Asia and the Caucasus] 4/1999, p. 59.

9 Bakhtiar Babazhanov, *Ferganskaya dolina: Istochnik ili zhertva islamskogo fundamentalizma?* [The Fergana Valley: Source or Victim of Islamic Fundamentalism?], in: *ibid.*, p. 130.

prominent role and faced personal attacks, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) emerged as the loser. The IMU also played a significant role in the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997). In Uzbekistan, political Islam has been subject to severe repression ever since.

To this day, the key issue of this conflict continues to smoulder in the background. It can be formulated as follows: State- and nation-building should be undertaken in accord with socio-cultural identity, while “being a Muslim” is considered self-explanatory by a majority of the population. Both of these should be reflected in the state, in politics, and in the political culture of the leaders. As long as this is not the case, the question cannot be one of whether the politicization of Islamic communities and their elites can be avoided, but rather of whether extremist Islamists will make use of this politicization for destructive ends.

In this context as well as with regard to the need for IS prevention, the ban on the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) at the end of September 2015, together with the toleration of that ban by the OSCE, the EU, and Western governments, can be considered an object lesson in how not to deal with a reform-oriented Islamic party in the OSCE area. That a Central Asian secular government and an Islamic movement were willing, with the mediation of the UN, to conclude a peace agreement (sealed in 1997) is still considered as practical evidence that jihadists¹⁰ can not only accept coexistence with and within a secular state, but may under certain conditions even be persuaded to help to keep such a state stable. This arrangement required the Muslim side to recognize the secular character of the state while the secular side accepted the right of the Muslims side to participate in the political life of society. To achieve this, they made a “grand compromise”: “The constitutionally anchored secular character of the state is recognized at the same time as the political participation of religious actors is constitutionally guaranteed.”¹¹ Precisely the IRPT’s exclusion from legal participation as a party was one of the main reasons that had been given by the political representatives of Islam for their claim that the secular state is anti-Islamic. After being banned in 1990 and 1993, supporters of IRPT are likely to consider the 2015 ban, which came after the conclusion of a peace agreement, as definite proof of the anti-Islamic nature of at least the leadership of the secular state. Given the challenges involved

10 A reference to the fact that the Muslim side refers to its struggle as a *jihad*, a holy war against a secular government that they consider to be “irreligious”. Cf. Chakim Rachnamo, Zur Koexistenz des Säkularen und Religiösen in Tadschikistan, in: Anna Kreikemeyer/Arne C. Seifert (eds), *Zur Vereinbarkeit von politischem Islam und Sicherheit im OSZE-Raum. Dokumente eines islamisch-säkularen Dialogs in Tadschikistan*, Baden-Baden 2002/2003, pp. 151-169, p. 159.

11 Ibid. p. 161.

in IS prevention, that can only be considered a major blow in terms of ensuring peace.

- *Failings of the Secular Governments' Religious Policy*: The governments of Central Asia cannot be accused of failing to recognize and respect the significance of Islam as the religion of the majority of the population. They are not opposed to Islam per se, but see Islam's political representatives as their rivals, rivals who, thanks to their religion, mosques, and madrasas, possess a broader national and social reach than they do themselves. They have not recognized that a co-operative relationship with key Islamic religious and political elites would benefit both their own position and national stability. Instead, to preserve their power, they make use of official state imams and muftis to interfere in the socially regulative function of religion. This last point is a particularly egregious infringement of religious principles in Islam.¹² Against this background, questions of religious policy and the state's relationship with political Islam and with leading clerics and religious dignitaries must be a key aspect of any IS prevention strategy.

The following mistakes have been made by all the governments of Central Asia to some extent or other in the area of religious policy:

- dictatorial control of the religious sphere;
- restriction of religious freedom;
- interference in religion and the religious concerns of the population;¹³
- absence of a constructive dialogue between state and religion;
- vilification or criminalization of political representatives of Islam as terrorists or extremists;
- neglect of religiously oriented youth;
- refusal to allow the development of a strong civil society, which would be in a position to regulate contradictions in the religious sphere. In the meantime, the religious sphere itself has become the most important component of civil society.

12 Islam considers religion and society to be an inseparable whole – the religious cannot be separated from the secular, and religion cannot be separated from politics.

13 The government of Tajikistan has drastically reduced religious freedom in the last five or so years: Children and young adults up to the age of 18 are forbidden from attending mosques. Parents are subject to large fines for breaches of this law. The ban on mosque attendance also extends to women of all ages, who are only allowed to pray in their own homes. The wearing of headscarves or other clothing that could be considered an indication of religious adherence in public or at educational institutions is also forbidden. Prayer is banned in public spaces, government buildings, educational institutions, places of business, to members of the police and armed forces, and even to villagers working in the fields. Prayer is only permitted in mosques and private dwellings. The right to freely select who will officiate at a funeral service has also been removed, and only imams recognized by the state may perform this function.

Overall, it can be said that the secular governments have far from exhausted the potential inherent of secularism and secular governance to create a democratic, conflict-averse relationship with the religious sphere. Adequate opportunities for them to make amends certainly exist even today.

At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that the political representatives of Islam themselves have demonstrated considerable failings in developing a modern Islamic approach to the tasks necessary to forming and stabilizing the young states. Key conceptual questions regarding the strategic goals and tasks of Islamic political movements in secular states remain to be clarified.¹⁴

- *Failings in Dealing with the Islamist Underground and the Lack of a Moderate Islamic Counterweight:* Every Central Asian state is now home to an extremist Islamist underground (particularly Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), which plays into IS's hands. No one knows precisely how strong this tendency is. What is certain, however, is that the inability of these countries to solve their enormous socio-economic and political problems means that the extremists can rely on a considerable potential for mobilization. That this underground aims at a violent shift in power relations is common knowledge. The Ferghana Valley, which cuts across the territories of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, is considered to be the centre of radical political Islam. Each of these countries has been the scene of violent confrontations with armed groups.

The Islamist underground profits from the absence of a moderate Islamic counterweight to its extremism. An alternative of this kind would have to be built by reformist elements that support the consolidation of the young states, and such elements certainly do exist within Central Asian society. They mostly belong to the younger generation, are well educated, and can be characterized by their symbiotic identification with both Islamic values and the national interest. Their lack of political weight is largely a result of steps taken by the secular rulers to block them from becoming legal political actors. The only exception is Tajikistan, where the IRPT was granted legal status as part of the arrangements that ended the civil war, though this has been revoked by the Tajikistani leadership, and the party's leaders thrown in prison.

14 We could specifically mention: The Islamic attitude towards a number of categories that are extrinsic to Muslim thought, such as the nation-state and questions of its future political order and orientation; democracy, the rule of law, and human-rights and their place within a modern Islamic state; the national interest; and the development of a modern understanding of the state compatible with both democratic principles and Islam. The Islamic side needs to answer these questions strategically, not just tactically.

Factors that Favour Anti-IS Solidarity in Society and Hamper IS

The motives for building anti-IS solidarity in society will be essentially defined in terms of the prospects that societies can expect from IS rule. This can be illustrated by reference to IS's ideological social dogmas, as Guido Steinberg from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) explains:

The ideology of IS is a particularly militant interpretation of Salafism. Salafism's proponents believe that they need to reform modern societies by reviving the idealized society of early Islam of Mecca and Medina in the seventh century. [...] Their key demand is for the complete implementation of their interpretation of Islamic law: Sharia. What they mean by this, however, is not just political, legal, and judicial measures, but rather a wholesale transformation of social, cultural, and economic life on the model (or according to the Salafist view) of the society of the time of the prophet Mohammad.

Wherever IS comes to power, it rigidly imposes Salafist codes of conduct and dress. [...] Religious and religiously inspired measures are the organization's absolute priority. [...] Courts are particularly important to IS. [...] It dispenses justice entirely in line with its own interpretation of Islamic law. [...] For instance, the inhabitants of the new "state" are required to pray five times each day. [...] During prayer times, all shops must remain closed. Men are urged to grow their beards, while women are encouraged to cover themselves from head to toe in black robes, including obligatory full-face veils. Alcohol, music, and the smoking of tobacco are forbidden. [...] The religious police enforce compliance with these regulations.¹⁵

In Central Asia and other predominantly Muslim regions in the OSCE area, the proponents of this kind of religious and political programme, even when they come directly from the region themselves, come up against political, national, social, religious, and cultural conditions that differ in key regards from those of their previous areas of operation and training in Arabia and Afghanistan:

- *Identity and the National Question:* For the societies of Central Asia, the recent achievement of independence was a historical turning point. For the first time in their history, the peoples of the region have their own states and an opportunity for national self-actualization. To sacrifice the nation-state for the sake of an Islamic caliphate under IS's totalitarian Salafist rule would not be in the interest of either the ruling

¹⁵ Steinberg, cited above (Note 2), pp. 121-22.

political elites, the traditional regional religions, or the bulk of the population. Consequently, the national question and the preservation of cultural and religious identity could be issues of central importance and uniting factors in the formation of anti-IS coalitions.

- *The Rootedness of Power*: The hold that the rulers of Central Asia have on power should not be underestimated. From year zero of the new states, they commanded the heights of the transformation and state-formation processes. This enabled them to interlock political, economic, military, and normative resources to create an exceptional concentration of power. Domestically, their situation is still strengthened by the fragmentation and subordination of those key parts of the elite that could build a counterweight. The immediate external environment to the east, west, and north is home to similar systems of power, and would rather see the Central Asian regimes remain than fall.

Alongside the crisis of social conditions, the crisis of trust between the secular regimes and political Islam is developing into the Achilles' heel of the former as a result of their authoritarian, repressive religious policy. The governments underestimate the potential of Islam, and political positions that legitimate themselves by means of Islam, to offer a far wider basis for national identity formation than does the secularism pursued by the governments, with its separation of state and religion. Overcoming the "dilemma of mistrust" is the key to building anti-IS solidarity.

- *Islamic Heterogeneity*: Though Sunni Islam predominates in Central Asia, there are certain features of Central Asian Islam that do not conform with the preferences of IS. "Traditional Islam" in Central Asia is characterized by a "traditional complex of rituals (which define what it means to be Muslim), including pilgrimages to shrines, prayers for ancestors, and so on".¹⁶ The liberal Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence¹⁷ may not easily sit with IS's brutal jihadism, which insists on a self-proclaimed conception of "pure" Islamic practice. Also relatively influential are the sharia-oriented Sufi brotherhoods, whose masters still attract the support of and influence entire regional and local communities. Finally, in the Tajik/Afghan border region, IS comes up against Shia Ismailis, whose current leader is the Aga Khan. All three of these movements have socially liberal tendencies. In practice, the boundaries

16 Jürgen Paul, *Zentralasien, Neue Fischer Weltgeschichte, Band 10* [Central Asia, The New Fischer World History, Volume 10], Frankfurt am Main 2012, p. 503.

17 The Hanafi school of law was founded by Abu Hanifa (d. 767). It is most widespread in Turkey, Central Asia, and on the Indian subcontinent. "In addition to the four legal foundations demanded by Shafi'i (Qur'an, sunna, *ijma'*, and *qiyas*), the Hanafis recognize two other juristic practices: the customary *ra'y*, or personal opinion, of their school from time immemorial, and *istihsan*, the preference for a particular solution as appropriate with respect to the society". Bernd Radtke, Sunni Islam, in: Werner Ende/Udo Steinbach (eds), *Islam in the World Today. A Handbook of Politics, Religion, Culture, and Society*, Ithaca, NY, 2010, pp. 36-50, here: p. 46.

and forms of relationships between the followers of the various tendencies are fluid and need not be antagonistic.

Within Muslim communities and the mostly private Koran schools, there is competition between these traditional forms of Islam and the Salafist *Hizb ut-Tahrir* organization, and the *Salafiyya*¹⁸ and *Tablighi Jamaat*¹⁹ movements. These externally directed organizations are “motors of fundamentalism”,²⁰ which create divisions with the home-grown religious environment, shifting the balance of power away from Central Asian religious leadership. The arrival in addition of IS preachers would only escalate this situation. For local religious leaders, the negative effects would include interference in their theology; the influence of foreign preachers; the alienation of entire mosques and religious communities from traditional religious circles; and loss of influence and income. Overall, this could provide motivation to consider solidarity with anti-IS forces.

- *The Contrast between Central Asian Values and the IS View of Society:* In Central Asia, both proponents of political Islam and the general Muslim population can be distinguished from the “normal” Islamist personality type common in the Middle East. These peculiarities are, at least to some extent, the result of the Russian/Soviet education system, which formed people differently than is the case in the Middle East. Central Asian Islamists are familiar with European philosophy and culture, with rationalism and dialectics. This not only means that they are closer to Europe in terms of how they evaluate social processes but also simplifies cross-cultural discussions and understanding.

The Muslim communities of Central Asia are characterized by tolerance and openness. This has been demonstrated by a worldwide comparative survey of Muslims,²¹ which reached the following conclusions about Central Asian Muslims: Only twelve per cent of Muslims in the

18 *Salafiyya* is a reformist movement that considers “the first Muslims [...] to provide a model for a new Islamic community. The aim is not to recreate the life of the earliest Islamic community, but rather to recapture the ‘spirit’ of these Muslims in order to create a social order suited to present times. *Salafiyya* has inspired numerous Islamic reformists and fundamentalists.” Ralf Elger/Friederike Stolleis (eds), *Kleines Islam-Lexikon* [Concise Dictionary of Islam], 5th ed., Munich 2008, p. 284.

19 *Tablighi Jamaat* emerged out of the Indian Deobandi movement (named after a place) in the 1930s, which had been founded as a Sunni revivalist movement, “to remind Muslims of their duties to uphold the commandments and prohibitions of Islam diligently”. The organization contributed “much to the revival of the idea of jihad in the twentieth century”. It sends missionaries around the Muslim world. One of the most influential preachers was Muhammadjon Hindustani, a native of Central Asia, who imported the ideas of the Deobandi movement to Central Asia and was imprisoned in Siberia for 15 years for his troubles. Cf. Rainer Freitag-Wirringhaus, Russia, the Islamic Republics of the Caucasus, and Central Asia, in: Ende/Steinbach (eds.), cited above (Note 17), pp. 269-296, and Munir D. Ahmed, India, in: *ibid.*, pp. 310-324.

20 Cf. Ahmed, cited above (Note 19).

21 Cf. Pew Research Center, *The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, Washington, 30 April 2013, at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview>.

region believe that the official legal system should be based on sharia law; 92 per cent are in favour of retaining freedom of religion; only 28 per cent believe that religious leaders should play a role in politics; 71 per cent see no contradiction between Islam and the modern world; 70 per cent support the right of women to divorce their husbands; 73 per cent believe that women should themselves choose whether to wear the veil; only 38 per cent consider Western pop culture to be morally damaging; not more than six per cent consider that tensions between more and less devout Muslims are a problem for society. Suicide attacks are condemned by 82 per cent of people in Kyrgyzstan, 85 per cent in Tajikistan, and 95 per cent in Kazakhstan.

This research illustrates that significant portions of Central Asian society approve of the secular way of life. The politicization of Islam is still at an early stage, which limits its current potential to be abused for the pursuit of extremist goals. Among political and intellectual elites, atheism is still widespread.

- *Openness towards Europe*: With the exception of Russia, European countries are unburdened with a history of colonialism in Central Asia, the drawing of artificial borders,²² and economic exploitation (unlike in the Middle East). Europe did not wage wars in Central Asia. In the OSCE, the Central Asian states are Europe's equal partners. On the whole, therefore, anti-Western stereotypes produced by IS do not apply to European-Central Asian relations. There is still a window of opportunity to ensure that Europe's relations to political Islam in Central Asia do not go down the same dead-end road that they have taken in the Middle East.

Conclusions

Possible Developments

- (1) IS is not simply advancing into Central Asia and other Muslim regions in the OSCE area as another extremist terrorist organization. In contrast to the extremist movements already active in Central Asia, it pursues an ultraconservative, violent, dehumanized, and transnational religio-political agenda and the goal of integrating existing states into an Islamic caliphate.

This would remove the Central Asian states as autonomous subjects from the map of Eurasia.

- (2) IS has demonstrated its uncompromising stance on all issues relating to the relationship between state and religion, modern "Western" life-

22 The borders of Afghanistan are an exception here.

styles, and secularism and related aspects of governance.²³ It is similarly hostile to national and religious minorities, and to varieties of Islam not in accordance with its doctrines. Specifically, this could lead to conflict with the Hanafi school of law, which has deep roots in the region; the Sufi orders, which are influential throughout Central Asia; the Pamiri Shia Ismailis; and with the traditional Muslim elites in general. In addition, there are significant numbers of non-Islamic religious communities in Central Asia.

IS thus poses a threat to the religious and cultural identity of Central Asian societies.

- (3) If IS were to seek to use political and military means to get its way, this would bring a new level of ferocity to domestic political and inter-religious disputes in Central Asia, in which the balance of power between the secular governments and the Islamist extremists would shift in favour of the latter. IS could win support for its caliphate programme among Salafist groups already active in Central Asia, who spread IS propaganda in secret and already enjoy considerable influence in society. Yet competition between these groups and IS cannot be ruled out.

Were they to forge a union, their strength would exceed not only that of the moderate, national, and reformist Islamic forces, but also of the government-loyal “religious apparatus”. Both would put the secular government and its supporters on the defensive by dramatically narrowing the field of available partners for co-operation necessary to support the continued existence of the nation-states and to reduce IS influence.

This could trigger a contest in the OSCE’s Central Asian area over whether the future political order and orientation of the OSCE’s Eurasian region should be secular or Islamic.

While it knows about the generally volatile situation, particularly, in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,²⁴ and waits for Uzbekistan’s Karimov to die,

23 In this context, it is worth noting that the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, explicitly prohibits coexistence, peace, and secularism as the weapons of the “unbelieving rulers”. By this he means not only the Western enemy, but “unbelieving rulers” in general, among whom he would count the secular leaders of Central Asia: “The Muslims were defeated after their caliphate had fallen; subsequently, even their state disappeared. [...] This occurred when the unbelievers [...] installed treacherous agents as rulers who [...] propagated deceitful, sweet-sounding concepts such as civilization, peace, coexistence, democracy, secularism, Ba’athism, nationalism, and patriotism. [...] These rulers are attempting to enslave the Muslims and to lead them away from their religion.” Steinberg, cited above (Note 2), p. 16.

24 In the 2015 edition of the Fragile States Index put together by the US NGO Fund for Peace, Tajikistan comes in as the 57th most fragile state (of 178 states) in the world, with 83.4 points (out of a maximum of 120), while Kyrgyzstan is ranked 62 with 82.2 points. The most fragile state is South Sudan, with 114.5 points; while Finland is the least fragile, with a score of 17.8. See: Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index 2015*, at: <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org>. The key indicators used by the Fund for Peace to determine fragility include population displacement (refugees and IDPs), uneven economic development, poverty, and infringements of human rights and the rule of law.

IS can fan the flames of conflict using tactics of gradual infiltration and military “pinpricks” designed to agitate the situation in the smaller Central Asian states. Military means are only of limited effectiveness in preventing the latter, particularly when the attacks are launched from the domestic hinterland.

The Mobilization of Domestic Counterforces

The analysis thus far makes clear that the first step in IS prevention has to be the reduction of domestic tensions. In view of the many factors that favour anti-IS social solidarity and those that inhibit IS’s advance, we conclude that the situation is not unfavourable:

- (1) *Threats as Motivation*: Concern at IS’s high threat potential is widespread among those who would stand to lose were the extremist organization to get its way. These include state and religious elites, the urban secular classes, civil society, and Islamic oppositions that accept the existence of the nation-state.

Europe is motivated by an interest in maintaining the security and stability of the Eurasian space, economic concerns, and the desire to maintain the strategic East-West and North-South bridging functions served by Central Asia, and the Caspian and Caucasian regions. It can be assumed that there is a large degree of agreement with regional actors on these issues.

- (2) *Bringing Together Those with Something to Lose*: Against this background of identical or similar motives on the part of local, regional, and international actors to engage in IS prevention, it is possible that opportunities will begin to emerge to bring together secular-state, religious, and other civil society forces (key ethnic minorities) in a “coalition of convenience”. Their common focus should be to preserve the nation-states and their identities from a “caliphate”, strengthening social solidarity, and combining their strengths to create a counterweight to extremist viewpoints.
- (3) *A “Coalition of Convenience”*: Before such a coalition can be formed, it is essential that certain contradictions be overcome. The starting point needs to be the formation of a minimal programme based on the shared interest in IS prevention. Particularly important is the creation of links between secular governments, Muslim elites, representatives of all religious traditions, and civil society. For political Islam, this has to start with those segments whose orientation is national and democratic. A current example would be for the Tajik leadership to reverse the ban on the IRPT. This could require mediation by third parties.

- (4) *Social Solidarity Needs to Be Built*: A process of the sort described above essentially amounts to an “exercise” in democratic co-operation among Central Asian governments and civil societies in attempting to deal with conflict factors that have a long-term tendency to destabilize their societies. The fact that IS prevention can function as a motor for the undertaking of such activities is by no means secondary, as opposing IS requires and justifies Eurasian co-operation rooted in solidarity. Thus, political IS prevention cannot be left to the discretion of the Central Asian governments alone, though it will not function without them. It requires the creation of a more or less binding framework for co-operation. It appears unlikely that the Central Asian governments would reject an offer of solidarity made by their European OSCE partners.

Summary

Creating political strategies and options for IS prevention in Central Asia appears to be possible. If the key resources for pursuing prevention by peaceful means are the interests and motives of domestic actors, then the relationship presented here between the factors that favour and those that hinder IS show that the balance can be shifted in favour of the latter. However, that will not occur automatically. Many Muslims, angered by their personal situation, could support IS without an understanding of the group’s overall aims. Furthermore, their most grievous complaint, which concerns the prevalent social conditions, will not disappear, as most governments are not in a position to solve these problems in the short term. This more or less brute fact needs to be offset by efforts to overcome domestic conflict situations that are within the power of the various involved parties to solve: These include discord caused by governments’ repressive religious policies, on the one hand, and, on the other side, a number of problems relating to the modernization of Islam in view of the requirements of state formation and the stabilization of the young republics.

Guaranteeing religious freedom, ceasing the interference of the state in internal Muslim affairs, and finding a *modus vivendi* between secular rulers and political representatives of Islam that support the existence of the nation-state – that now appears to be the necessary and, if the good will is there, possible path for action.