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## The Renaissance of Islam in Central Asia – Specifics in Preventing Religious Radicalization

### Introduction

“*In the battle against religious radicalization, there is no front line, only individual minds.*”<sup>1</sup> In this simple statement based on experience, a Kyrgyz security officer summarized the essence of the prevention of religious radicalization and the extremism degenerating into terrorism in Central Asia.

He was amongst the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Russian representatives who took part in interviews examining the specific conditions for preventing religious radicalization in Central Asia. The starting point for this discussion can be traced back to the statement by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office in 2016, who said that the causes of radicalization and extremism should be countered with a “comprehensive approach”, with prevention playing a crucial role.<sup>2</sup>

In order to achieve this, it was first important to examine the specific social, political and socio-psychological conditions in Central Asia to understand what would be required for prevention. We started with the most obvious: The conditions behind the actions of jihadist movements in Western OSCE States are significantly different from those in Central Asia. Where such movements in Europe function as Islamist *minorities* within Christian majorities, in the Eurasian regions, they operate among *majority Muslim populations*. There, the consequences of difficult transformation and state-formation processes put a strain on the population and play into the hands of these movements. These consequences include poor governance, particularities of the religious situation, secular extremism, high social exclusion, gender and youth problems, as well as the latent potential for national and transnational conflict. Such obvious regional differences in the conditions for preventing radicalization provided the motivation for examining the specifics of the situation in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Interview partner in Osh, Kyrgyzstan.

2 Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the opening of the OSCE Counter-Terrorism Conference “Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism”, Berlin, 31 May 2016, at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/160531-bm-osze-antiterror/280936>.

3 “Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia” Project, Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH), at: <https://ifsh.de/en/core/central-asia/>. The research was funded by the Federal Foreign Office division for International Cooperation against Terrorism, Drug dealing, Organized Crime, and Corruption.

The empirical research was carried out in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and at a conference at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. In order to guarantee a certain level of comparability and generalization, the interviews and meetings were based around the methodology of a list of questions and theses. Seventy-five conversation and interview partners from civil society, Islamic circles, academia, and some state institutions were involved in the research activities, answering questions and taking part in discourse via interviews and round table discussions. The participants approached the research subject with consistent openness and recognized this as an attempt to address a difficult problem.

*Issue: Civilian Prevention of Religious Radicalization or  
“Counterinsurgency” – What Is at Stake in Central Asia?*

This issue needed to be broken down in order to investigate to what extent the aims, means, prevention and use options correlated with the *political priorities* guiding them. The aims of the OSCE strategy “Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism” (VERLT) served as a basis for preventing religious (Islamist) radicalization, extremism, and terrorism under specific Central Asian conditions.

In its VERLT strategy, the OSCE accurately assumes that “Although much of the work that takes place on countering terrorism is located within the first – that is, political-military – dimension [...] countering terrorism and violent extremism stretches across all three dimensions, including social and economic issues as well as human rights and good governance. This is consistent with all empirically grounded models and theories of radicalization, which have shown that terrorism does not occur in a vacuum, but seeks to leverage wider grievances, frustrations, or other ‘conducive conditions’.”<sup>4</sup> The emphasis of this strategy is, however, on the politico-military dimension of security; this occupies the top spot with the most activities.<sup>5</sup> The latter is also true of Central Asia as well as other Muslim states and areas of the Eurasian OSCE region. This choice of means correlates with the aim of protecting people from terror and preventing the expansion of jihadist movements, such as the “Islamic State” (IS). However, it falls short of the actual crossroads situation the region is facing in terms of religion and political order. In this case, the primary aim is to *prevent* Salafi-oriented movements gaining

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4 *Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region. Report by Professor Peter R. Neumann, OSCE Chairperson in Office’s Special Representative on Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), King’s College London, 28 September 2017, p. 41, at: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/346841>.

5 Cf. *ibid.*

hegemony over the process of Islam's search for orientation – modern or Islamist – which would entail risks including the question of power.

At the same time, regarding the choice of preventative measures, prevention and use options must be weighed up. Options for prevention such as impeding Salafi-oriented religious hegemony only become sustainable when they are successfully concentrated on dispelling the reasons for radicalization, which benefit extremists and terrorists. At its core, this amounts to removing the social, political and socio-psychological causes of radicalization. However, this is precisely what the fight against terror and “counterinsurgency” practised in the Greater Middle East and Africa has failed to do adequately. The experiences here are only of limited relevance for Central Asia and the Muslim OSCE regions.

Applied to Central Asia, such an approach is detrimental to civilian prevention. In contrast to prevention strategies in the Greater Middle East and Africa, in the Eurasian OSCE region, highly developed and socially specific peace policy resources should be sought. This includes not only an autochthone Hanafi school of Islam. Undeniable benefits of having been part of the former USSR, which brought significant progress in development such as education, equality for women and a high level of literacy, also carry weight.

Islamic believers and activists in Central Asia tend to be educated and not yet completely anti-Western. The proximity and closeness to the global political and economic centres of Europe, Russia and China place Central Asia in a position of unique potential to collaborate for civil, security- and military-political prevention, which still needs to be developed and co-ordinated.

The complexity of the issue will be described in the following, focusing on the political specifics<sup>6</sup> of civilian prevention. Progress still to be made and deficits in current strategies, as well as the dangers these deficits present, will also be examined. This contribution will also address aspects for which neither Europe nor the OSCE is prepared. It concludes with an outline of the need for political action and possibilities based on the thoughts and recommendations of the interviewees.

### *Complexity*

When considering the prevention of radicalization, it is necessary to take account of the specificities of the Central Asian social, political, socio-economic, religious, and historical context. Its central determinants are:

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6 Insights into social specificities are summarized in the CORE Working Paper: Frank Evers/Jeanette Klötzer/Arne C. Seifert/Esther Somfalvy, *Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia*, Hamburg, April 2018, CORE Working Paper 30, at: [https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/Working\\_Papers/CORE\\_WP30\\_en.pdf](https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/Working_Papers/CORE_WP30_en.pdf).

*First: The near complete “re-Islamization” of Central Asian societies.*<sup>7</sup>

As early as 2005-2010, the return to a traditional confessional link to Islam in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Central Asia in general began to show new characteristics, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In terms of quantity, this took on the character of a mass movement. In Kazakhstan, the Islamization of ethnic Kazakhs in the sense of confessional religious faith can be considered complete. In Kyrgyzstan, 88 per cent of the population profess Islam; in Tajikistan, with 7.5 million Muslims, practically the entire population is Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

In a qualitative sense, however, it should be recognized that the level of religious knowledge across the population is still superficial. Particularly amongst young people, knowledge of the Islamic texts is still poor. In all the interviews conducted, this “vacuum of religious education”, a leftover of the anti-religious Soviet period, was described as the gateway to external Islamist indoctrination. In conversations, the participants warned that the rapid renaissance of Islam could be observed as a primarily externally sponsored phenomenon. On the other hand, the “renaissance” of Islam, the low level of religious knowledge, and the incompetence of the secular regimes in actively guiding these processes represent an opportunity for external Islamist movements.

A good example of the specific nature of the Islamic renaissance is the individual, familiar relationship of “young”<sup>9</sup> believers to “their Islam”. The process of Islamization is beginning to form new personal, cultural and religious consciousness identities, which academic partners assessed as an “emancipation of Islam”. This is indicated by the fact that our conversation partners warned against using “extreme” terminology which reduces radicalization to terrorism, and the verbal equation of terms such as “Caliphate” and “Salafism” with terrorism.

This lends more depth to a superficial search for the causes of rampant Islamization. It also points to the phenomenon of marked individual sensitivities, barely considered in the prevention discourse regarding post-Soviet Muslim states, which are an intrinsic part of independence and state-formation processes. In this context, the realization of religious freedom is posited as a sublime good and its curtailment as a personal violation. It should also not be overlooked that the phenomenon of the individual’s connection to religion is beginning to displace the connection to the (secular) state. This implies that a reformation of the secular politics of religion is the key to preventing Islamic

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7 In the last twenty years, out of 57 million Central Asians, 52.8 million or 92.6 per cent of the population professed Islam (numerically small atheist, national, and religious minorities are excluded). This throng will continue to grow by an average population increase of 1.7 per cent per year, with thirty per cent under 15 years. Islam has practically “nationalized” itself.

8 Cf. Abdurakhim Kholikow, former Chairman of the State Commission for Religious Affairs in Tajikistan, in an interview with *Asia Plus*, 11 July 2011, at: <http://news.tj/ru/news/nes-toit-sozdavat-stereotipy-chto-v-tadzhikistane-vse-zapreshcheno>.

9 This does not indicate any specific age cohort, but a time period since states became independent, during which the majority of the population professed faith in Islam.

radicalization and the construction of a democratic relationship between secularism and Islam.

Overall, the comprehensive “renaissance” of Islam can be understood as a particularly prominent break in the period of independence of the young Central Asian states. It is a turning point for both religion and secularism – with possible consequences for the future political order and orientation in these states. Without doubt, Islam is becoming the overarching religious and social determinant. As a religion with a holistic understanding of God as the indivisible unity of religion and state, its politically active adherents will first and foremost demand an Islamic social system that permeates all areas of life. This changes the frames of reference and orientation of secular governments. Their handling of political, social, and religious problems may be judged against Islamic dogma. This means the secular governments must decide whether to adapt or isolate themselves, with consequences that may lead to conflict.

The comprehensive renaissance of Islam raises new questions for the OSCE, in particular regarding its basic “anti-terror philosophy” vis a vis Central Asia. If islands of “non-Western” culture are emerging in the hitherto monolithically secular OSCE area, the Organization’s members will have to react to new points at issue: What does it mean for the OSCE community of values and its shared normative basis if Islam and its structures, including political Islam, become part of the common OSCE space? According to the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, it is “urgent that the OSCE, as a norms-based organization, start to deal with the fact that its presupposed shared normative basis has broadly disappeared”.<sup>10</sup> Will this situation be aggravated if the OSCE fails to adapt its approach? The time has surely come for including Islam-related issues in a dialogue involving both academics and representatives of the generation that will shape interstate and inter-societal relations in the next decade, starting with the mapping of the status quo, identifying common interests, and preventing conflict.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Wolfgang Zellner (principal drafter)/Irina Chernykh/Alain Déléroz/Frank Evers/Barbara Kunz/Christian Nünlist/Philip Remler/Oleksiy Semenyi/Andrei Zagorski, European Security – Challenges at the Societal Level, OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, Hamburg, December 2016, p. 26, at: [https://ifsh.de/file-OSCE-Network/documents/European\\_Security-OSCE\\_WEB.pdf](https://ifsh.de/file-OSCE-Network/documents/European_Security-OSCE_WEB.pdf).

11 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 32. In “The OSCE and Islam – A Chance at Self-Fulfilment?” published in the OSCE Yearbook 2000, the author argued that the OSCE would have to face the consequences of the Islamic renaissance in Central Asia, the effects of which had become clear in the context of transformation, and the forming of states and nations: “It should be in the power of the OSCE to face the challenges, also in the area of tolerance, and develop a broad plural conception of itself as a ‘community of values’ in which individual ‘communities of values’, whether this means its Muslim or any of the others, are equal partners without having to fear being outvoted and segregating themselves politically. This would strengthen the co-operative character of the OSCE. This is where there is a chance to understand the ‘Islam factor’ as a resource for self-fulfilment and to accept it positively.” Arne C. Seifert, *The OSCE and Islam – A Chance at Self-Fulfilment?* In: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2000*, Baden-Baden 2001, pp. 217-226, here: p. 226.

The OSCE anti-terror strategy cannot ignore the consequences of Islamization either. As with the secular governments, Islamization and Islam are also the overarching reference values and conditions for success for the architects of VERLT. Fending off jihadist terrorism in a majority Islamic population cannot succeed without speaking to and involving the Muslim majority. Even one of the central VERLT pillars, civil society, draws on the Muslim majority. Their religious values are one of the essential bridges to prevention that are crucial for reaching adherents of radical Islamist positions. This is how the socio-political “equilibrium” upon which VERLT is currently based conceptually has begun to shift. This does not apply to secular governments, however, who persevere in their security- and military-political orientation that links them to Eurasian powers such as China and the Russian Federation, currently in the Western OSCE states’ bad books. In this respect, balancing the weight of the civilian prevention of radicalization becomes the deciding factor for Eurasian powers.

*Second: The balance of power within Islam.* Although the Sunni school of Islam, in the shape of the balance-oriented Hanafi school of law,<sup>12</sup> or the Sharia oriented Sufi brotherhoods predominate in Central Asia, Islamist activities are on the increase, striving towards the “rule of God” with violent or socio-political means. “In their eyes, discussions should not centre around one change or another at the edge of society, but the complete reorganization of public order, a new constitution including policies in the various political fields such as education, media, criminal law, etc.”<sup>13</sup> Two Islamist movements are particularly active in this direction. One of them, including IS and al-Qaida, is striving for a violence-oriented Islamization in the shape of an Islamic state. The other, which is described as “neo-fundamentalist”, is mostly made up of Arab or Pakistani-controlled Salafist movements such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Islamic Liberation) and the *Salafiyya* and *Tablighi Jamaat* movements.<sup>14</sup> They have long been active underground in the region, others even legally,

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12 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.

13 Dieter Senghaas, *Zivilisierung wider Willen [Unwilling Civilization]*, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, p. 192.

14 *Tablighi Jamaat* came out of the Indian Deobandi movement in the 1930s (Deobandi is a place) and was created as a Sunni revivalist movement “to remind Muslims of their duties to diligently uphold the commandments and prohibitions of Islam.” The organization contributed “greatly to the rediscovery of the idea of jihad in the 20th century”. It dispatches volunteers who make themselves available for missions to Muslim regions worldwide. One of the most influential preachers was Muhammadjon Hindustani, who came from Central Asia, and imported the ideas of the Deobandi movement to Central Asia and spent 15 years in Siberia in prison. Cf. Rainer Freitag-Wirringhaus, Russia, the Islamic Republics of the Caucasus, and Central Asia, in: Ende/Steinbach (eds.), cited above (Note 10), pp. 269-296, and Munir D. Ahmed, India, in: *ibid.*, pp. 310-324.

such as *Tablighi Jamaat* in Kazakhstan. They aim for a “civilian” Islamization of society “from below” at a grass-roots level. Both movements have their supporters.<sup>15</sup>

The “neo-fundamentalist”<sup>16</sup> trend should be seen as the more sinister, both due to its aim of religious hegemony over the not yet concluded process of Islamization, and as a direct competitor to the secular constitution of the Central Asian states. In the short term, this appeals to the “vacuum of religious education” and young Muslims’ search for “their” Islam. In addition, Salafists operate flexibly and in relation to people, families, and communities individually. In the discourse about “*Salafiyya*”, they are defined as “religious virtuosos who derive from it a lifelong programme of work on themselves with the aim of achieving self-perfection. The transition of this approach to a political Wahabi-style ‘Salafism’ is fluid, as is that to a ‘Salafism’ that appeals to youth culture and has now been equated with rapid radicalization.”<sup>17</sup>

As a religious counterweight to these trends in Central Asia stands the autochthone Sunni Hanafi school of jurisprudence which is, however, in a state of theological and spiritual stagnation. The secular state hesitates to bring it

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- 15 The third largest contingent of foreign “Islamic State” (IS) fighters in Iraq and Syria came from the region, today IS continues to pursue this aim from Afghanistan. The militant jihadist wing, principally of Arab origin, also includes a number of Central Asian, Caucasian and North-West Chinese fighters.
  - 16 The French scholar in Islamic studies Olivier Roy differentiates between Islamic fundamentalists and neo-fundamentalists as follows: “Fundamentalism, meaning a return to the ‘true’ tenets of religion, is as old as Islam itself. The contemporary trend called neo-fundamentalism combines technical modernism, de-culturization, the rejection of both traditional Muslim and modern Western cultures, and globalization. [...] organizations [...] like Al-Qaeda and Hizb ut-Tahrir [...] are part of the de-territorialized Islamic networks that operate in the West and at the periphery of the Middle East. Their background has nothing to do with Middle Eastern conflicts or traditional religious education.” An Interview with Olivier Roy, in: Columbia University Press, New York, at: <https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/roy-globalized-islam>.
  - 17 Werner Schiffauer, *Sicherheitswissen und Deradikalisierung* [Security Knowledge and Deradicalization], in: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Forum Berlin, *Handlungsempfehlungen zur Auseinandersetzung mit islamistischem Extremismus und Islamfeindlichkeit* [Recommendations for action in analysis of Islamic extremism and Islamophobia], pp. 217-242, here: pp. 228-229 (author’s translation). The Tajik political scientist Parviz Mullojanov describes the practice of the Salafi approach in Central Asia as follows: “The ‘civilian strategy’ of the Salafist approach consists in three stages: infiltration of the cultural and educational sphere; taking possession of religious administration; assuming power. [...] They seek to ideologically infiltrate the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and to transform local communities for their own purposes. [...] The Salafists are also successful in the region because, thanks to a skillful and well organized strategy, they are able to influence authorities, state bodies, and civil servants. Theoretically, Salafism refuses any collaboration with the secular state. In practice, it does, however, carry out lobbying within state structures. It manipulates civil servants with their fear of Islamization into eliminating competing Islamic groups with the help of administrative decrees. It then uses these online to accuse governments and local bodies of anti-Islamic behaviour. [...] In fact, some of the more recent government decrees and decisions give the impression that they were written by Salafists themselves.” *Postsoveetskaya Srednyaya Aziya i musulmanskij mir: salafizatsiya kak instrument geopolitiki* [Post-Soviet Central Asia and the Muslim World: Salafization as an Instrument of Geopolitics], in: *Asia Plus*, Dushanbe, 24 April 2017, at: <https://news.tj/ru/news/central-asia/20170424/postsoveetskaya-srednyaya-aziya-i-musulmanskii-mir-salafizatsiya-kak-instrument-geopolitiki> (author’s translation).

out of this situation, to strengthen its theologians and imams, and hence develop a modern Islamic counter argument to the extreme Islamist movements.

The question of religious hegemony over the process of Islamization – Arab/Pakistani Salafi or Central Asian Hanafi – thus becomes a key strategic issue. It is not, however, discussed adequately in the OSCE strategy, nor is the secular governments’ inability to set effective religious counter arguments against the neo-fundamentalist movements in order to gain ground. Moderate Islamic dignitaries offer their theological support and criticize the impotence of the governments in offering effective arguments. Their condemnation is justified, as the governments, with their security and military orientation, actually have control of terrorist *fringe groups*, while *their control* of the Salafists, acting in the *centre* of society, is slipping away. The whole spectrum of society, which the “civilian” neo-fundamentalist radicalizers are aiming for, thus proves to be more or less as an “open flank”.

*Third: Position of the secular governments on religion and Islamization.*

In relation to the governments’ policies on religion, the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh conversation partners gave the following concurring statements:

1. The secular governments have no constructive approaches to dealing with the Islamization of their societies. They cannot keep pace, either with the mass “renaissance” of Islam, its speed and social breadth, nor with the resulting changes to the parameters of their government. It is difficult for them to move on from the traditional Soviet secular principle of a division between the state and religion.<sup>18</sup>
2. Governments are looking for ways to react to Islamization and radicalization, but not finding any effective approaches. They are immobilized by fear of religion, especially Islam, which they see as potential political competition. They drift between ineffective legal regulation, interfering in religious affairs, limiting religious freedom, and repression.<sup>19</sup>

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18 The original European understanding of secularism signifies the division of state and church, not of state and religion. A state cannot simply separate from the religion of its people. The difficulties in the relationship between the secular state and Islam come from the faith’s holistic understanding of religion, and from the fact that there is no church institution in Islam.

19 Tajikistan is considered a glaring example of the limits on religious freedom. There, the following legal restrictions apply: Children and young people under 18 are prohibited from attending mosques; parents are responsible for compliance under threat of a considerable fine. Women and girls are also forbidden from attending mosques; they are only permitted to say prayers inside their own house. Wearing headscarves or other clothing that could be linked to religion is forbidden in public places or educational institutions. Praying is not permitted in public spaces, in government institutions, the armed forces, the police, educational institutions, companies, businesses and even working in the fields in villages. Prayers are only permitted in mosques or in private dwellings. The personal freedom to choose a preacher for funerals has been abolished; only officially appointed imams are permitted.



3. Governments have overall decided on a strategy of “securitization”<sup>20</sup> of Islam.

It should be stressed that of all the Central Asian heads of state, only the former Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambaev, speaking at an international conference in September 2017, recommended establishing a “democratic relationship of the state to rational representatives of Islam.”<sup>21</sup>

In Tajikistan, the government led by Emomali Rahmon is pursuing a distinctly more repressive policy on religion compared to its Central Asian neighbour states. The 2015 prohibition of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) – their partner in the 1997 peace agreement to end the Tajik civil war – marks a serious strategic error given the need for secular-Islamic co-existence and prevention of terrorism. In addition, the prosecution and incarceration of IRPT members has led to a worsened domestic climate. The tolerance of these events on the part of the OSCE, the EU, and Western states can only be described as disconcerting.

Conversation partners point to the following errors in the religious policies described:

- the internal issues of the religion are subjected to control by the secular state, which does not have the necessary theological competencies;
- the secular state thereby undermines its relationship to Islamic clergy, elites and communities;
- the “securitization” of Islam by the state turns out to be an ineffective strategy for preventing religious radicalization because the “young” religious masses do not see enemies in Islam, even in its radical representatives, but rather in the secular state.

Overall, it can be stated that the secular governments have far from exhausted the inherent potential for finding balanced, co-operative solutions in secularism and secular forms of government to develop a democratic, conflict-avoidant relationship to the religious sphere. In this respect, there is already considerable scope today.

*Fourth: The question of gender in the prevention of radicalization.* In Central Asia, women and girls are a risk group in the context of radicalization, and a potential aid in its prevention. The majority identify as belonging to the

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20 According to “securitization theory”, “securitization” explains “that the securitization of an issue takes place when a reference object is presented as threatened in a securitizing move.” Securitization has mostly counterproductive consequences: “A vicious circle develops because a securitizing move on one side also results in the securitizing of the opposing side.” Kathrin Lenz-Raymann, *Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle, Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia*, Bielefeld 2014, p. 252.

21 Author’s transcript.

Muslim world without necessarily reducing this in every sense to a strictly religious way of life. It was particularly in families that Muslim practices survived the Soviet period.

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, girls and women are seen as a particular target group by radical Islamist groups. They are developing an increasingly subtle, gender specific approach, using social networks and direct contact as well as personal address, suggesting a knowledge of the circumstances and social deficits at play. They successfully target single young women in particular, socially isolated because of their status, with promises of marriage to IS fighters. Their supposedly equal treatment as fully-fledged fighters for the Islamist cause also speaks to young women who seek an active role in society.

There has been a reduction in the participation of women and girls in education and training. In rural areas in particular, increasing numbers of girls no longer go to public schools, but only Koran schools. Compulsory education is no longer generally enforced. However, a large number of women are still studying at universities. This is not always solely driven by the emancipatory desire for education, but also by the potential to avoid early forced marriages and the general pressure of male family members.

There are several women's organizations, i.e. NGOs, which are involved in deradicalization and the prevention of radicalization, albeit not exclusively. They operate largely without relevant training in this area and only have a low level of support from the respective states. Projects are largely supported by international organizations and usually limited to 1-2 years. Contributing to the development of Islam is part of the purpose of Islamic women's organizations, whereby extremism and terrorism are strictly opposed.<sup>22</sup>

*Fifth: The causes of religious and Islamist radicalization.* Religious radicalization cannot be put down to one single cause, but rather the "Islamist renaissance" is carried by a diffuse socio-psychological state of the masses, in which different driving forces combine. This began with Karl Marx's concept of religion as the "opium of the people", "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world",<sup>23</sup> and more recently has become the impetus for the phenomenon described as the "individual relationship" of young believers to "their Islam". Marxism often refers to mass social exclusion and poverty, whose victims mainly belong to the younger generation and naturally tend to be "new" Muslims. The state of constant impoverishment is made clear by the calculations of the World Bank in 2014. According to them, poverty in Central Asia (households with daily per capita consumption of less than 4.30 US dollars) has become a permanent burden on society since the collapse of the USSR.<sup>24</sup> During the transformation period from 1990 to 1999 alone, twenty

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22 Cf. Evers/Klötzer/Seifert/Somfalvy, cited above (Note 6), p. 7.

23 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Translated from the German by Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley, Cambridge 1970, written 1843/1844, Introduction.

24 Definition of poverty by the World Bank: "Per-capita income level needed to satisfy such basic human needs as education, health care, and access to information; or as a threshold

million people in Central Asia fell into poverty. In 2011 in Kyrgyzstan, 70 per cent of the population lived on less than 4.30 US dollars, and 25 per cent lived on less than 2.15 US dollars, in Tajikistan the figures were 79 per cent and 31 per cent respectively. Only Kazakhstan had brought down levels of absolute poverty from 50 per cent of the population in 2005, although in 2014, 30 per cent were still considered poor with 5.40 US dollars.

A study presented in November 2015 in Vladikavkas, capital of the Republic of Northern Ossetia-Alania within the Russian Federation, showed that members of the age groups from 1991 identified particularly strongly with the cause of IS. These people in particular were born and grew up in conditions with no convincing state ideology, with a falling level of education, breaking social ties and families, without work, money, possibilities for social advancement, prospects, and self-realization.

This context also explains why Islamist indoctrination is targeted at young people in particular. The population in Central Asian states is becoming ever younger. It is growing at 1.7 per cent on average each year, 30 per cent of the inhabitants are now under 15 years old. This structural problem can be seen acutely in the level of youth unemployment, which is estimated at over 20 per cent in Central Asian states, with the exception of Kazakhstan.<sup>25</sup> A quarter of the Kazakh population was born after 1991. In Kazakhstan, children (0-14 years) and young people (15-29 years) make up 33 and 28 per cent respectively of the socially excluded section of the population, and in Tajikistan, the figures are 73 and 72 per cent.<sup>26</sup> In 2005, 90 per cent of children in Kyrgyzstan lived in households with a per capita consumption of less than 2.5 US dollars. This figure was 80 per cent in Uzbekistan and 75 per cent in Tajikistan.<sup>27</sup> Among the 1.5 million Tajik migrant workers, 53 per cent are aged 15-29,<sup>28</sup> and among the unemployed in the Tajik agricultural sector, 83.6 per cent are under 40.<sup>29</sup> This generation is currently at its peak.

This draws attention to the fact that the *causes* of vulnerability to conflict have reached transnational and transregional dimensions. The roots of this transregional vulnerability to conflict can be found in the crisis situation brought about by the relational triangle of social causes, religion, and inadequate governance. They are upheaval phenomena that have become constants

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below which low-income individuals in the region are 'vulnerable' to poverty." At: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20202198~menuPK:435055~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367,00.html>.

25 Cf. Andrea Schmitz/Alexander Wolters, *Revolutionen in Zentralasien?* [Revolutions in Central Asia?], in: *zentralasien analysen* 43-44/2011, 29 July 2011, pp. 2-5, here: p. 2.

26 Cf. United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Europe and CIS, *Beyond Transition. Towards Inclusive Societies, UNDP Regional Human Development Report*, Bratislava 2011, p. 43, at: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/Beyond-Transition-Inclusive-Societies.html>.

27 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18.

28 Cf. Khojamakhmad Umarov, *Krisis v Tadjikistane* [The crisis in Tajikistan], Duschanbe 2010, p. 217.

29 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 218.

as a result of the transformation process and are today driving the socio-political crisis dynamic in Central Asia. This means, by implication, that a clever Islamist counter-strategy could transform Islam from its true religious calling into a transnational and transregional anti-secular ideology of integration too.

In the conversations we held, it was expected that radicalization would strengthen with the return of Central Asian IS fighters.<sup>30</sup> They could take on an organizing role for the expansion of an Islamist religious-political programme. Such fears were expressed in particular regarding the transregional Fergana Valley and the Kyrgyz region of Osh.

### *Interim Assessment*

The causes of radicalization arise both from internal and external sources. To prevent radicalization *internally*, the main priority is resolving the severe deficits in development and political shortcomings which lead to social dissatisfaction. When looking at the *external* sources, the main priority is to prevent a Salafi Islamist thrust primarily from the Arab region and Pakistan. This thrust is based on the idea that it will succeed in diverting the still unconsolidated state-formation process with its religious-political transformation into Islamic state-formation processes. Its success, in combination with “big money” (Saudi Arabia) in the Eurasian OSCE region plus China and India, could mature into a geopolitical challenge of the highest magnitude.

The primary causes of radicalization are overwhelmingly in the subjective sphere, above all in governments. Consequently, prevention would genuinely be possible, but depends largely on the subjective understanding, will, and readiness of the relevant actors. This has a particular significance for the relationship between state and religions, as well as for socio-economic and democratic reforms. It is crucial for the prevention of radicalization that secular leaders approach influential clergy and dignitaries.

The issues and consequences of external religious influence and foreign infiltration of Central Asia as well as further Muslim regions of the OSCE require serious international attention and collaboration, particularly with the Russian Federation and China. It must also be examined whether the OSCE represents the right framework for this. Given the transnational nature of existing risks and threats, a certain confidence-building effect may emerge between the Eurasian states by addressing these together. It should be taken into account that in the first instance, the Russian Federation and China have up to

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30 The number of IS fighters from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan was estimated at from 3,000 to 4,500 at the end of 2016. In addition, there are another approx. 5000 people from other CIS states. Russian is the third most common foreign language in IS.

now been countering the “Islamist infiltration” of Central Asia, primarily with military means.

### *Key Areas in Prevention*

Research on the specific prevention requirements of Central Asia from the perspective of the relationship between aims and means, prevention and use options, and the political priorities guiding them also invites the categorization of the prevention requirements that arise. The top political priorities expressly include commonalities on which consensus seems possible and should be aimed for within the OSCE framework.

First, these include countering the advance of external Islamist groups to Central Asia with a decisively greater emphasis on civilian, non-violence oriented strategies and options for action based on peace policy in concert with security and military policies. Second, it seems possible to assume today that a majority of OSCE states will have a common interest in retaining the security and stability of the Eurasian region, stabilizing economic spaces, and keeping the strategic East-West, North-South bridging function of Central Asia and the Caspian and Caucasian regions open. In these issues, agreement with regional actors and the Russian Federation, China as well as other neighbouring states such as Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan might be assumed.

From this perspective, civilian, non-violence oriented prevention strategies should be designed to be as clear, acceptable, pragmatic and practicable for as many of the affected parties as possible. The following approach would be useful here. The goal of civilian, non-violence oriented prevention strategy policies should start with the dangers and their character. The following criteria could be used to determine these:

- a) the societal reach of the danger (whole society, specific groups such as social classes, religious communities, women and girls, youth etc.);
- b) the character of the causes and their origins (objective or subjective in nature);
- c) assessment of the controllability of causes of radicalization (easy to control; difficult to control or controllable under certain conditions; not currently controllable. In intractable contradictions, the secular and Islamic sides should agree not to use violence, to coexist peacefully with each other with the intention of achieving compromise solutions.)
- d) assessing and clarifying conditions required for control;
- e) determining control priorities and sequence of actions;
- f) clarifying potential for action both of a material (economic, social, housing etc.) and immaterial nature (freedom of religious worship, religious education, gender equality, law, media etc.);
- g) administrative decisions.

Using the above criteria, on the one hand, dangers affecting the whole society *and* their causes can be filtered out, and on the other hand, their controllability using *civil prevention methods not reliant on the use of violence* via collaboration between the state and civil society can be ensured.

For example:

- *Overcoming social polarization in society and its structural causes.* Courses of action would be, e.g.: state support programmes for socially weak population groups; stimulation of social engagement funded by the private sector using legal social instruments of control; economic reforms.
- *Driving back the religious-political indoctrination of the population by Islamist forces.* Appropriate measures would include: strengthening the traditional Central Asian Hanafi Islam denomination; raising the level of education, with religious education receiving special attention; funding and training Islamic scholars and theologians in the interest of creating a counterweight to external radicalizing indoctrination; establishing platforms for academic exchange regarding religious questions between Central Asia and European partners; and promoting theological exchange between scholars in Islam in Germany Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and the Russian Federation.
- *Gender issues in the prevention of radicalization.* Women and girls are multipliers in religious family life and thus have an enormous potential to play a role in prevention.
- *Introducing confidence-building.* Confidence must be built between the state and its administrative bodies such as the police, legal institutions, and religious authorities on the one hand and Islamic communities, religious dignitaries, and elites on the other.
- *Dialogues.* The sides should conduct a dual dialogue, both on issues where agreement can be achieved and on issues where agreement cannot be expected soon. The first line of dialogue serves to frame platforms for co-operation, whereas the second serves to avoid misperceptions arising from disputed issues.<sup>31</sup>
- *Societal support.* The governments could turn to academic or other societal bodies to deal with contradictory narratives.<sup>32</sup>
- *Co-operation.* The sides should co-operate wherever possible, on any given subject, at any level, be it state or society. Unnecessary conditions for cooperation should be avoided.<sup>33</sup>

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31 Cf. Zellner, cited above (Note 10), p. 5.

32 Cf. *ibid.*

33 Cf. *ibid.*

- *Activating the autochthone Hanafi school of Islam.* This could include training imams, qualification of religious education, and other related aspects.
- *Controlling ethnic and territorial conflict situations that serve as gateways to terrorist groups.*

Research has, however, revealed complex issues which can largely be traced back to the difficulties for the secular and Islamic sides in adapting to the process of Islamization, which cannot be avoided in Europe either.

### *Islam's Renaissance – Challenge and Opportunity*

The revitalization of Islam is taking place within the context of Central Asia's history. Memory and the experiences of societies have a real effect. When speaking about Islam, Islamism, or "political Islam", the traditional framework of socialization and action is fundamentally different in the Arab world, Asia, or Africa from that in Central Asia. This difference is evident in the socio-cultural nature of Central Asian societies and influences the process of Islamization in the region.

Central Asian Muslims, who today span across about three generations, are characterized by the modern secular values and lifestyles<sup>34</sup> from the Soviet period, blended with the socio-cultural Islamic values and norms, which survived during this period. Other specific social conditions include a certain tolerance for authoritarian leadership models.

This "hybrid" socio-cultural transition situation, as we might call it, between secular liberal lifestyles and Islam creates unique conditions for and in Central Asia – millions of "young" Muslims are moving between secularism

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34 The Muslim communities of Central Asia are characterized by tolerance and openness. This has been demonstrated by a worldwide comparative survey of Muslims. For the group of Central Asian countries, the following median values were determined in the surveys: (1) Support for making *Sharia* law the official law in their country: twelve per cent; (2) support for freedom of religion with the proviso that the possibilities for people of other faiths to practice their religion is rated very good: 92 per cent; (3) support for political influence of religious leaders: 28 per cent; (4) consent to the statement that there is no contradiction between religion and modern society: 71 per cent ; (5) support for the right of women to divorce their husbands: 70 per cent; (6) Consent to women's right to choose whether to wear the veil: 73 per cent; (7) consent to the statement that Western pop culture is morally damaging among those who actually advocate Western cultural influences: 38 per cent; (8) consent to the statement that tensions between more or less religious Muslims are a major problem for their country: six per cent. In addition, 82 per cent of respondents in Kyrgyzstan, 85 per cent in Tajikistan, and 95 per cent in Kazakhstan consider suicide attacks unjustified. Cf. Pew Research Centre, *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>. In this study, the Central Asian country group comprises Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. No surveys were conducted in Uzbekistan on the issues of making *Sharia* law the official law in their country, the political influence of religious leaders, and the legitimacy of suicide attacks.

and Islam. In religious terms, they have chosen Islam, which does not yet mean that secularism has become or must become a “battle cry”. The latter will be decided in the political sphere. The art of politics is in creating bridges between secularism and Islam and modernizing their relationship.

The relationship to VERLT and anti-terrorism strategies is as follows:

*First:* To alter the balance of power in this “hybrid” religious transition period, the main priority is to find Islamic associates and mobilize them. They are to be found among national and reform oriented Islamic forces.

Here it is important to note that phenomena and categories such as Islamist extremists and terrorists “cannot be clearly isolated” against the backdrop of the highly differentiated forms of Islam described. In particular for “prevention and deradicalization” purposes, a common “categorical knowledge” about and of Islamists, Salafists, and “political Islam” proves counterproductive.<sup>35</sup> Warning against this is particularly relevant when dealing with the processes of Islamization in Central Asia.

*Second:* The democratic content of expressed Islamic concerns or demands should not be struck down with the battle cry of “political Islam”. Mass movements towards Islam will inevitably also lead to Muslim circles rising up to speak from religious positions, taking a stand on issues of religious policy, joining forces in parties or organizations, or courting access to parliaments. *Against this*, secular governments bring in a constitutional prohibition on religious parties or ostracize “political Islam” as protagonists of the Caliphate.

*Third:* A debate about the content of Islam-related categories is needed.<sup>36</sup> The relationship between democracy and Islam (and vice versa) requires new answers, also regarding how secular governments can position themselves on the right of their Muslim citizens to political participation, even when this has an Islamic connotation. It is also worth considering whether democratic pressure from believers can change traditional Islamic dogma.

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35 Schiffauer, cited above (Note 17), p. 236.

36 Schiffauer criticizes “the mapping-classifying approach which comes from the political demand that extremists be treated symmetrically.” This means that the same basic categorizations must be used for very different phenomena. Schiffauer points out that such a distortion “in relation to the symmetrical treatment of Islamism is even more problematic. [...] We do not understand Islamism sufficiently if we define it as a ‘political ideology’ – this does not tell us about what drives it, nor about its debates and development logic. Instead, labelling it a ‘political ideology’ seems to have sprung from the political necessity to exercise a symmetrical approach. [...] Islamists appear as those who ‘instrumentalize’ and ‘abuse’ religious sentiment. The fact of a genuine religious violation is therefore not taken into consideration and no longer seen as a motive for political action.” Schiffauer, cited above (Note 17), p. 231 (author’s translation).



*The OSCE and Islam's Renaissance in Central Asia*

The VERLT work programme cannot replace an OSCE strategy for dealing with its now increasingly Islamic member region of Central Asia, even more so as the prevention of radicalization and extremism is already proving to be a challenge of trans-regional proportions, of which the OSCE represents the political Eurasian bracket. With or without the necessity of VERLT, Central Asia is important for the OSCE, even more so as it remains irreversibly Muslim.<sup>37</sup> Strictly speaking, such a challenge faces all Eurasian participating States, even those who have not been able to commit to civilian prevention. However, the latter should not avoid civilian prevention, since, according to the results of this analysis, most central fields of prevention can be classified directly or indirectly as *civilian* “Islam issues”. Salafism has captured space regionally, with jihadist terrorism, and Salafist indoctrination of the population on the one hand; and filling the vacuum of religious education; supporting the autochthone Hanafi school; reforming religious policies; and secular-Islamic trust building on the other.

The European dimension is particularly indispensable to the latter. The context is as follows: The aforementioned prohibition of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan convinced Central Asian Islamic politicians that they cannot achieve an equal place in the political community,<sup>38</sup> nor religious freedom in their own homeland – even if they demonstrate democratic willingness to compromise towards secular governments, or even renounce military means. The events in Egypt (fall of Mursi and prohibition of the Muslim Brotherhood) strengthened their mistrust.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, the Egyptian repression gave confidence to the secular state leaders of Tajikistan with their long-cherished intention to ban the IRPT and incarcerate its functionaries. Europe tolerated this and thereby overlooked its own risk: Islamic elites and communities could lean towards “foreign” helpers as long as they were not granted any space in their homeland compatible with their Islamic rules. These “helpers” would then come precisely from the Islamist camp that VERLT aims to prevent.

The processes described point to a “dilemma of mistrust” which exists in Central Asian Islamic circles towards Europe too. For these, it has become

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37 In this context, the OSCE should note that its self-conception as providing a common Eurasian political framework is no longer incontestable. With the state alliances in the East, serious Eurasian political competitors to the Western OSCE and EU States have come into being. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) also have other Islamic members, in addition to Central Asian ones. They are far more pragmatic regarding the Islamic issue than the OSCE and the EU.

38 A “political community” is understood as “the members of a political system and their basic value system”. Susanne Pickel/Gert Pickel, *Politische Kultur- und Demokratieforschung* [Political Culture and Democracy Research], Wiesbaden 2006, p. 79 (author's translation).

39 We did indeed meet with open Islamic conversation partners, but also received a rejection due to the “uselessness” of meetings with Western representatives.

questionable whether European OSCE States would recognize Islamic parties who come to power via democratic means. There is also a question regarding whether moderate Islamic parties, if they were to come to power, could guarantee the stability of constitutional order or whether radical Islamist forces could tempt them to overthrow it.

The bottom line of this problem is that VERLT can only begin to show real long-term effects when it acts within the framework of an OSCE concept that clarifies the OSCE's relationship to the "Islamic factor" in the Eurasian region as well as the process of Islamization in Central Asia. Europe is therefore required to set a new direction for its basic political strategy regarding Islam. It is not enough for Europe to merely avoid the clash and confrontation between different civilizations in Eurasia; it must instead achieve co-operation and coexistence.

In such a context, Europe should also examine and differentiate its traditional perception of "political Islam" as a solely negative factor, a "problematic carrier of conflict", which leads to terrorism. The key to achieving this aim is the awareness that stability in the Eurasian region can only be guaranteed in the future through a common understanding, which accepts the integrity of different cultures, religions, and civilizations. This by no means requires that principles should be abandoned, but means that relationships need to be built based on co-operation and coexistence. In this area, Europe has a rich historical experience that could prove to be valuable.

Finally, the most important result of this analysis is that significantly more space must be made for a peace-oriented approach to the civil prevention of religious radicalization and extremism which develops into terrorism, and not as an addition or accoutrement to the politico-military dimension of security. In order to take into account the real circumstances regarding the loss of Central Asian Muslim population majorities to Salafist movements and the preservation of Central Asian independent states, a comprehensive strategy is needed, co-ordinating a division of labour between civilian prevention across society and security and military political action against terrorist threats where it is unavoidable and does not diminish the success of civilian strategies.