

New approaches in combating international terrorism and extremism in Central Asia

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Abstract

In recent decades, the Central Asian region has been characterized by the virtual absence of a terrorist threat within the region, but extremist sentiments exist in societies that threaten the existence of secular states. With this in mind, the aim of this study is to analyse new approaches to combating international terrorism at the regional and international level, as well as methods of countering radicalized elements of society in the Central Asian region. The methodological basis of the research is based on the analysis of articles, data, and indices of international organizations, reports, and publications of public authorities, speeches of top political officials, as well as reports of human rights organizations, including assessments by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. It is researched that the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan in its foreign policy adhered to the idea of modernization of the Afghan society, taking into account the vulnerability of the territories bordering Afghanistan, which did not give the expected results. Under the leadership of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, regular discussions take place, such as a seminar in Bishkek on countering extremism and terrorism and the implementation of a project to protect critical infrastructure and public places in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan from the destructive activities of international terrorist groups. At the national level, efforts are being made in Turkmenistan to counter international terrorism. The regional partnership within the framework of the “Turkmenistan-Ashgabat Model United Nations” shapes the development of critical thinking in academic circles and makes it possible to assess the risks from extremist propaganda on the Internet. The findings of the study indicate a constant search for new methods and solutions that will contribute to reducing the levels of terrorist and extremist threats. The Central Asian region borders states where international terrorist groups are active, so countering international terrorism and violent extremism in the region contributes to the overall reduction of risks from these transnational threats around the world.

Keywords

Reintegration - border control – counterpropaganda – modernization - national identity

Introduction

In today's world, the issue of the influence and spread of terrorist and extremist groups and their transnational component is of particular interest to researchers, academics, international governmental, non-governmental and civil society organizations. The fight against international terrorism is the basis for the vectors of work of numerical actors of international relations, both at the level of national institutions and in the international format. Among them are the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN) Counter-Terrorism Centre, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. International cooperation is an integral component in the development of new plans, strategies, mechanisms, and tactics to combat one of the most iconic threats of our time – international terrorism and extremism. At the same time, the governments of nation states that face the threat of terrorist organizations, whether within or in neighbouring states, need to objectively assess the risks and seek new mechanisms to counter the threats of terrorism and extremism. Violent extremism has no borders and manifests itself regardless of region, nationality, or stable belief system.¹ The consequences of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaeda or Boko Haram are marked time after time by religious, cultural and social intolerance, which negatively affects the sustainable development of states and even entire regions.²

Resolution adopted by the General Assembly No. 49/60 “On measures to eliminate international terrorism”³ notes that terrorism, its acts, methods, and practices pose a particular threat and disregard for the basic purposes and principles of the functioning of the organization, undermine friendly relations among States, threaten security and international peace, and may also lead to the undermining of the democratic foundations of society and violate human rights and fundamental freedoms. A typical example of a terrorist act for which ISIL terrorists have claimed responsibility was the killing of four Western cyclists in Tajikistan in the summer of 2018. In addition, in April and May 2022, terrorists from Wilayat Khorasan shelled the territories of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and a group of 20 terrorists crossed the Afghan-Uzbek border.⁴ The intensification of violence in the Central Asian region is a reminder that Islamist radicals from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have become active supporters of terrorist and extremist groups internationally.⁵

In the context of studying approaches and mechanisms to combat the growing problem of international terrorism and extremism, the growing Islamisation of the population of states in the Central Asian region, new restrictions and measures to counter threats against religious organizations, the involvement of civil society in the fight against extremism and allowing political parties to operate on a religious basis are considered. In addition, the assessment of objective and subjective factors influencing the spread of extremism among the

1 International day for the prevention of violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, 12 February 2024. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/prevention-extremism-when-conducive-terrorism-day>

2 V. Tymoshenko, ‘Terrorism as a threat to human rights’, Law Journal of the National Academy of Internal Affairs, vol. 12(3), 2022, pp. 30-38. <https://doi.org/10.56215/04221203.30>

3 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly No. 49/60 “On measures to eliminate international terrorism”. 1995. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/172281?v=pdf>

4 ISKP militants become more active in Central Asia, 2024, https://ecrats.org/en/security_situation/analysis/8464/

5 E. Lemon, V. Mironova and W. Tobey, ‘Jihadists from ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where are they? Why did they radicalize? What next?’, 2018, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/jihadists-ex-soviet-central-asia-where-are-they-why-did-they-radicalize-what-next>

population is important in the study.⁶ The role of the “Afghan factor” as a unique external factor influencing the formation of the regional security system in the Central Asian region is emphasized. Common principles of Central Asian countries in developing and ensuring national security systems are identified.⁷ The reasons for the emergence of extremist and terrorist activities in the Central Asian region are considered, and the ways of legal recognition and combating extremist organizations are analysed.⁸ The improvement of the system of countering the threats of terrorism and extremism should be directly related to the intensification of interaction between all actors of international relations, as well as the use of modern science.⁹ In addition, N.O. Akkozhina et al.¹⁰ highlighted the role of integration processes in Central Asia in the period of globalization and pointed out that coordination of joint actions and measures in the fight against terrorism and extremism should take place both at the bilateral and international levels.

In the work of K. Tuganbaev et al.¹¹, the authors revealed the essence of destructive religious teachings, their concepts, features, as well as identified the legal mechanisms of the Republic of Kazakhstan and international organizations in relation to such groups. Extremist activities on the Internet were characterized and analysed. Sh. Mussiraliyeva et al.¹² noted that only a comprehensive approach and the application of effective measures contributes to the qualitative suppression of extremist trends, as the phenomenon of extremism itself is developing extremely dynamically and requires constant analysis and monitoring. In the study by Z.K. Ayupova et al.¹³, the authors highlighted that mainly in Kazakhstan within the framework of the State Programme on Countering Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2018-2022 measures of prohibition or forceful nature were applied, and among the most dangerous threats were international terrorism and the increasingly complex system of its financing.

Given the above, international terrorism and extremism as one of the most important problems in the modern world, the purpose of this study was to analyse the legal, institutional and international mechanisms used by the governments of the Central Asian states to minimize the consequences and eliminate the causes of such phenomena as international terrorism and violent extremism.

6 A. Alipbayev, B. Byuzheeva and A. Anerova, ‘Problems of the fight against international terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia’, *Bulletin of the Karaganda University. History. Philosophy Series*, vol. 98(2), 2020, pp. 37-46.

7 K. Abuov, A. Dalekhan and K. Sheryazdanova, ‘Contemporary security issues in Central Asia and ways to solve them’, *Public Administration and Civil Service*, vol. 84(1), 2023, pp. 112-120. <https://doi.org/10.52123/1994-2370-2023-980>

8 A.K. Rahmetullin and S.K. Karsaidarov, ‘The role of Kazakhstan in the international fight against extremism and terrorist activities in Central Asia’, *Bulletin of Kazakh Humanitarian-Legal Innovation University*, vol. 48(4), 2020, pp. 91-95. <https://vestnik.semuniver.kz/index.php/main/article/download/355/357>

9 K.K. Karymsakova, ‘International terrorism and internet propaganda’, *Suleyman Demirel University Bulletin: Social Sciences*, vol. 52(1), 2020, pp. 59-65.

10 N.O. Akkozhina, K.G. Darkenov and U.M. Orakbaeva, ‘The features of integration initiatives of the Republic of Kazakhstan in ensuring regional security’, *Bulletin of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Political Science. Regional Studies. Oriental Studies. Turkology Series*, vol. 144(3), 2023, pp. 129-137.

11 K. Tuganbaev, M. Akhmullaeva, T. Espenova and Zh. Isengalieva, ‘The experience of combating destructive religious movements in post-secular Kazakhstan: Features and social responsibility’, *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 33(1), 2023, pp. 68-77. <https://doi.org/10.26577/EJRS.2023.v33.i1.r8>

12 Sh. Mussiraliyeva, M. Bolatbek, M. Sagynay, Zh. Yeltay and K. Bagitova, ‘The concept of extremist data and a systematic review of anti-extremism projects’, *News of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Series “Physics and Information Technology”*, vol. 347(3), 2023, pp.112-130.

13 Z.K. Ayupova, D.U. Kussainov, B.S. Rakhmetullina, Zh.A. Alimbetova and B.Zh. Saparov, ‘Legislative basis for combating terrorism and religious extremism’, *The Bulletin of National Academy of sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, vol. 394(6), 2021, pp.250-255. <https://doi.org/10.32014/2021.2518-1467.229>

Materials and Methods

The systematic and detailed analysis identified the main state programmes, methods of international cooperation, and principles of building a security system in the Central Asian region, taking into account the manifestations of terrorist and extremist threats. The states represented in the study, namely the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, are of particular interest for the study because they border Afghanistan and are vulnerable to the spread of terrorist and extremist threats. Although the terrorist and extremist threat is not of deep concern to governments within the states, there are trends of citizens leaving and joining international terrorist and extremist groups, for example in Afghanistan or Syria.

In order to analyse approaches to countering international terrorism and extremism, speeches by top political representatives of Central Asian states and experts from regional research centres were studied. Attention was paid to the dynamics of the spread of terrorist groups in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, based on comments by the Minister of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan, R. Rakhimov.¹⁴ The comments of experts from the Ma'no Research Centre in Tashkent related to Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan were also analysed.¹⁵ An analysis of the speech by the head of the International Relations Department of the French Ministry of the Interior allowed identifying the common interests of Europe and Central Asia in countering ISIS and Al-Qaeda.¹⁶

In the course of analysing the legal and regulatory framework that constitutes new approaches in countering the development of international terrorism and violent extremism, Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 1920 "On patriotic education of citizens"¹⁷ and Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 629 "On the State programme of education of patriotism, sense of civil responsibility and strengthening of national identity of youth of Tajikistan for 2023-2027 years"¹⁸ were highlighted. The fundamental role in the patriotic education of young people as the part of society most susceptible to the influence of destructive and radical religious movements has been noted. This emphasizes the importance of shaping and strengthening national values and contributes to increasing resistance to the threats of terrorism and extremism in society.

In order to study the trends of influence and activity of international terrorist groups in the border areas of Central Asian states, statistics and indices of the number of deaths from terrorist attacks in Afghanistan in the period 2007-2023 were analysed.¹⁹ Furthermore, "On amendments to order No. 99 "On approval of budget programmes of the state institution "Religious affairs department of Astana city" for 2024-2026"²⁰ was

14 On Central Asian militants in Afghanistan and Syria, 2023: https://ecrats.org/ru/archive/facts_of_terrorism/1965/

15 The danger has always been, is and will be, it hangs over Central Asian countries – expert on the situation in Afghanistan, 2023: <https://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/opasnost-vsegda-byla-est-i-budet-ona-visit-nad-stranami-tsentralnoy-azii-ekspert-o-situatsii-v-afgan/>

16 Protection of soft targets from terrorist attacks: Government officials from Tajikistan conclude OSCE-led study visit to France, 2023: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/558567>

17 Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 1920 "On patriotic education of citizens", 2022: <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=146712>

18 Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 629 "On the State programme of education of patriotism, sense of civil responsibility and strengthening of national identity of youth of Tajikistan for 2023-2027 years", 2022. https://continent-online.com/Document/?doc_id=38125435#pos=0;0

19 Global Terrorism Index 2024, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2024>

20 On amendments to order No. 99 "On approval of budget programmes of the state institution "Religious affairs department of Astana city" for 2024-2026", 2023: <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/astana-udr/documents/details/634789?lang=ru>

analysed, which gave an understanding of the general trends of the relevant ministries and the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the rehabilitation and prevention of the spread of the influence of destructive religious and radical teachings among the population. A national report submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21* was examined: Uzbekistan²¹, where particular attention was paid to the qualitative and effective efforts of the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan in repatriating its citizens from war conflict zones, based on international law and advanced strategic partnerships with actors in international relations.

Results

In 2010, the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force initiated a project to develop a Counter-terrorism in Central Asia²² strategy. The project encompassed four phases of action aimed at supporting Central Asian states in countering the terrorist threat, addressing security challenges and building capacity to counter terrorism and extremism. The first three phases covered the period from 2010 to 2021, and the fourth phase is currently underway.

The Counter-terrorism Early Warning Network for Central Asia²³, developed in 2022, has become one of the main instruments in the fight against international terrorism. Its main goal is to strengthen regional cooperation in coordination among government agencies, provide access to advanced and innovative technologies, and expand and intensify cooperation among regional and international organizations, independent experts, academia and civil society organizations. By the end of 2023, several expert meetings were held between representatives of Central Asian states, the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and the UN Counter-Terrorism Office on the work of the Terrorism Early Warning Network for Central Asia. The conferences highlighted positive developments in the fight against international terrorism and discussed research on online advocacy of religious radicalization.²⁴ Multilateral discussions helped identify a new spectrum of transnational and national threats in the Central Asian region that should receive more attention and concerted efforts from all stakeholders. In particular, delegates pointed to the involvement of civil society organizations to monitor and identify threats, including from Afghanistan. In addition, the conferences include training courses aimed at learning innovative methods for assessing terrorism risks and threats, understanding their causes and consequences.²⁵

In Afghanistan, an Islamic radical movement called the Taliban emerged among the Pashtuns in the mid-1990s. They are subject to numerical sanctions, and in a number of countries, such as Canada, Kyrgyzstan,

21 National report submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21*: Uzbekistan. 2023. https://upr.info/sites/default/files/country-document/2023-11/A_HRC_WG.6_44_UZB_1_EN.pdf

22 Counter-terrorism in Central Asia, 2024. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/cct/counter-terrorism-in-central-asia>

23 Ibid.

24 UNRCCA co-organizes Third Regional Conference on the counter-terrorism early warning network for Central Asia, 2023: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/12/21/unrcca-co-organizes-third-regional-conference-on-the-counter-terrorism-early-warning-network-for-central-asia/>

25 UNRCCA co-organizes Regional Conference on the counter-terrorism early warning network for Central Asia, 2023. <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/10/16/unrcca-co-organizes-regional-conference-on-the-counter-terrorism-early-warning-network-for-central-asia/>

Tajikistan and others, the Taliban is recognized as a terrorist organization and its activities are banned.^{26, 27, 28, 29} At the same time, the Uzbek authorities are interested in developing quality and effective cooperation with the government of Afghanistan in order to prevent the development of a network of international terrorists in Central Asia. IntelBrief: Uzbekistan navigates relations with Afghanistan³⁰ reports that the interest of the Tashkent and Kabul authorities is centred on preventing Islamist and extremist anti-Tashkent groups from being granted political asylum in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, this approach did not have a positive effect in such a short-term perspective when in April 2022, ISIS launched a missile attack on a military base in one of Uzbekistan's border towns from Afghanistan. The first instance of terrorism affecting Uzbekistan occurred in 1999, when 13 people were killed in Tashkent in rocket attacks and the attack was attributed to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU was briefly an Al-Qaeda affiliate and later became part of the Islamic State. Although the IMU followers were killed, the interests of the Kabul and Tashkent authorities remain, as each side fears international terrorism from ISIS and its affiliate in Afghanistan, Wilayat Khorasan.

Afghanistan is home to dozens of terrorist groups that pose a threat to global security, and their plans include the overthrow of secular governments in Central Asian states and the establishment of Sharia governments in their place. The director of the Ma'no Centre for Research Initiatives in Tashkent notes that countries that cooperate with Afghanistan have an understanding that Kabul's problems can affect neighbouring countries as well.³¹ One such problem is the spread of terrorist and extremist groups. The vector of bilateral relations between Tashkent and Kabul is oriented towards ensuring the transformation of the economic, political and social spheres in Afghanistan in order to deeply modernize its society. This approach is linked to the Uzbek authorities' understanding of the vulnerability of their border with Afghanistan, as it is a desert area without mountains, which at any moment can become a starting point for terrorist raids inside Uzbekistan.

An important approach to combating international terrorism is to work actively with young people in order to prevent the future development of extremist attitudes among them while ensuring respect for human rights. Within the framework of the Turkmenistan-Ashgabat Model United Nations, a regional conference on a healthy, safe, and secure society was held, emphasizing the importance of youth engagement in countering extremism.³² The event, attended by about 100 students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, focused on developing critical thinking skills and raising awareness of the risks associated with online radicalization. Discussions at the conference were aligned with international

26 Canada passed a law equating the Taliban with terrorists, 2013. <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20130517/kanada-prinyala-zakon-priravnivayushchii-talibov-k-terroristam>

27 List of organisations whose activities are prohibited on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2024. http://religion.gov.kg/ru/religion_organization/blocked

28 Republic of Tajikistan: Organisations that have been recognised as terrorist or extremist in accordance with the procedure established by the national legislation of the CIS member states. 2024. <https://webcitation.org/6IEMSsJdr?url=http://www.cisatc.org/134/160/209>

29 A. Vilks, 'The Taliban movement as a challenge to security and political order in Central Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 34(5), 2024, pp. 120-130. [https://doi.org/10.46493/2663-2675.34\(5\).2024.120](https://doi.org/10.46493/2663-2675.34(5).2024.120)

30 IntelBrief: Uzbekistan navigates relations with Afghanistan, 2022. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-june-9/>

31 The danger has always been, is and will be, it hangs over Central Asian countries – expert on the situation in Afghanistan, 2023. <https://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/opasnost-vsegda-byla-est-i-budet-ona-visit-nad-stranami-tsentralnoy-azii-ekspert-o-situatsii-v-afgan/>

32 UN Agencies and USAID partner with the Government of Turkmenistan on conducting the 1st Turkmenistan Ashgabat Model United Nations Regional Conference, 2023. <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/11/11/un-agencies-and-usaid-partner-with-the-government-of-turkmenistan-on-conducting-the-1st-turkmenistan-ashgabat-model-united-nations-regional-conference-2/>

human rights standards, particularly concerning the protection of freedom of expression and the prevention of discrimination in counterterrorism policies.³³ Another aspect that the Uzbek government is focusing on is the reintegration of individuals who have been influenced by extremist ideologies. While earlier approaches primarily relied on punitive measures that contributed to further radicalization, current policies emphasize education, psychological support, and socio-economic reintegration. These efforts are in line with recommendations from international human rights bodies, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, who has highlighted the necessity of balancing security measures with respect for human dignity and fundamental rights. Reintegration programs now prioritize rehabilitation over repression, ensuring that individuals have access to education, vocational training, and psychological assistance, thereby reducing the likelihood of recidivism. Efforts in the region underscore the necessity of a comprehensive strategy that not only addresses security concerns but also safeguards human rights. The active involvement of international organizations and human rights mechanisms in discussions on counterterrorism and extremism prevention demonstrates a growing recognition of the need to balance state security interests with fundamental freedoms.

Similar preventive actions are characteristic of most states in Central Asia. For example, the formation of the state budget of Kazakhstan in recent years obligatorily includes psychological work to prevent the spread of extremist religious movements. In January 2024, the communal state institution Department for Religious Affairs of the city concluded Contract No. 200740020249/240002/00³⁴ with the private foundation SAYONE to continue the activities of the Centre for Counselling and Rehabilitation for persons who have fallen under the influence of radical and pseudo-religious ideology of destructive and extremist religious movements. At the same time, Contract No. 200340007386/240004/00³⁵ was concluded between the state institution “Astana City Department of Religious Affairs” and the limited liability partnership “Centre for the Study of Religions” to organize and conduct a set of activities to prevent extremism and terrorism. The complex of measures consists of information and awareness-raising activities, monitoring, and analysis of the religious situation, counterpropaganda in the Internet space, sociological research in the field of religion, rehabilitation of persons who suffered from the activities of destructive religious movements. The total amount of these two contracts alone is about 450 million tenge, or almost \$1 million of the USA.

Uzbekistan’s repatriation and reintegration efforts, recognized as a best practice, stand out in the region. By focusing on rehabilitating citizens returning from conflict zones, the government has reduced the risks of re-radicalization and successfully reintegrated individuals into society. Similarly, initiatives aimed at countering online radicalization and promoting education have played a vital role in curbing extremist ideologies. Border security measures have further prevented cross-border spillovers, particularly from Afghanistan, where ISIS-affiliated groups remain active. However, the Global Terrorism Index underscores that over 90% of terrorism-related deaths occur in conflict zones, highlighting the importance of Central Asia’s proactive measures in mitigating potential threats.³⁶

33 Expert: How the UN resolution “Education and religious tolerance” is being implemented in Uzbekistan, 2023. https://plov.press/news/osoboe_mnenie/ekspert_kak_v_uzbekistane_realizuetsya_rezolyutsiya_oon_prosveshchenie_i_religioznaya_tolerantnost/

34 Contract No. 200740020249/240002/00, 2024. <https://goszakup.gov.kz/ru/egzcontract/cpublic/show/19374484>

35 Contract No. 200340007386/240004/00, 2024. <https://goszakup.gov.kz/ru/egzcontract/cpublic/show/19383554>

36 Global Terrorism Index 2024, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2024>

The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2024 further highlight the regional security landscape. Table 1 highlights terrorism impact levels in Central Asian countries, while Table 2 offers a comparative perspective of terrorism trends globally. These data underscore the region’s relative stability but also emphasize the need for sustained vigilance given its proximity to high-risk areas.

Table 1 Eurasia GTI score, 2023

Country	Overall Score (out of 10)	Change	Change
		2013-2023	2022-2023
Russia	3.016	3.747	0.328
Ukraine	1.686	-0.460	1.124
Tajikistan	0.871	-1.653	-1.335
Armenia	0.423	0.423	0.423
Uzbekistan	0.423	-0.029	-0.297
Kazakhstan	0.000	-2.196	0.000
Kyrgyz Republic	0.000	-1.870	0.000

SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHORS BASED ON GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX 2024 (2024). ³⁷

Table 2 Average GTI score and change by region

Region	Average Score (out of 10)	Change 2013-2023	Change 2022-2023
South Asia	4.374	-0.582	-0.203
North America	2.947	0.862	-0.152
Middle East and North Africa	2.702	-1.139	0.018
Europe	0.774	-0.156	-0.144
Eurasia	0.535	-1.339	0.020

SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHORS BASED ON GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX 2024 (2024). ³⁸

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

The data indicates that the terrorism impact in and Eurasia is relatively low, with an average GTI score, significantly lower than regions like South Asia and the Middle East/North Africa. Over the last decade, the region has seen a notable decrease in terrorism impact. However, between 2022 and 2023, there was a slight increase in terrorism impact.

Based on the findings of the Global Terrorism Index 2024, it is essential to strengthen preventive measures and reintegration programs for populations vulnerable to radicalization. Educational initiatives and the development of critical thinking skills are pivotal in countering extremist ideologies. Proactive measures, such as utilizing artificial intelligence technologies to analyse online extremist propaganda, enhance monitoring and threat assessment capabilities. Complementing state-led efforts, grassroots campaigns have proven effective in addressing radicalization. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, local NGOs have utilized social media to disseminate counter-narratives targeting youth. These campaigns employ digital storytelling and community workshops, including testimonials from rehabilitated individuals and local influencers, to promote resilience and critical thinking. Such community-driven initiatives fill gaps in regions where state influence is limited, directly addressing socio-cultural dynamics.

Regional states must also enhance border security, intelligence exchange, and rapid response mechanisms to address transnational threats effectively. International partnerships, such as those led by the OSCE and UN, integrate grassroots insights into broader counter-terrorism strategies. These collaborations adapt global policies to local contexts, tackling unique socio-political, economic, and cultural factors contributing to extremism. By directly engaging communities, such initiatives foster trust and understanding, crucial for effective counter-terrorism. Collectively, these actions reduce terrorist threats and enhance regional security.³⁹

The same goes for human rights compliant Security Council measures and policies by the government. See e.g. UNSC Res. 2178: “Reaffirming that Member States must ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law, and international humanitarian law, underscoring that respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law are complementary and mutually reinforcing with effective counter-terrorism measures, and are an essential part of a successful counter-terrorism effort and notes the importance of respect for the rule of law so as to effectively prevent and combat terrorism, and noting that failure to comply with these and other international obligations, including under the Charter of the United Nations, is one of the factors contributing to increased radicalization and fosters a sense of impunity”.⁴⁰

Uzbekistan’s proactive approach to countering extremism is marked by its legal frameworks fostering collaboration between national authorities and community organizations. For instance, the government’s policies on repatriating citizens from conflict zones have established a legal foundation for community participation in rehabilitation and reintegration programs. These initiatives align with the principles outlined in the Counter Extremism Project, which highlights Uzbekistan’s focus on de-radicalization laws and

39 A. Sohail, ‘Central Asia geopolitical dynamics and the dilemma of transnational terrorism’, 2024. <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/10/21/central-asia-geopolitical-dynamics-and-the-dilemma-of-transnational-terrorism>

40 United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 2178’, 2014. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2178.pdf

grassroots collaboration.⁴¹ By involving local communities in addressing the psychosocial needs of repatriated individuals, the government ensures sustainable and effective reintegration processes, demonstrating the importance of institutional support in amplifying grassroots efforts. This integrated model exemplifies how tailored legal mechanisms can bolster national counter-terrorism strategies while empowering local communities.

Such preventive measures demonstrate the strategic course of the Central Asian states aimed at combating and eradicating extremist and terrorist trends within the state. In the medium term, this approach can have a qualitative impact on the fight against international threats of terrorism and extremism not only in the Central Asian region, but also worldwide, given the transnational nature of the threats in question. The dynamics of attracting finances in the sphere of rehabilitation, preventive and educational work and activities indicates the concern of the Kazakhstani authorities in combating domestic terrorism and extremism (Table 3). Islamist religious movements can threaten the security and effective functioning of all state structures and destabilize civil order. In addition, the lack of domestic mechanisms to combat extremist groups and individuals can lead to an exodus of these citizens abroad and, as a consequence, to join international terrorist organizations such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda.

Table 3 Current and planned activities in the sphere of preventing the spread of ideas of extremism and terrorism in Astana city (unit of measurement – number of events)

Type of work/year	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Outreach activities	650	700	750	750	750
Theological lessons	-	-	270	270	270
Rehabilitation of convicts	150	500	600	250	250
Counter-propaganda in social networks, creation of video content	1283	1267	2562	1271	1271

SOURCE: COMPILED BY THE AUTHORS BASED ON ON AMENDMENTS TO ORDER NO. 99 “ON APPROVAL OF BUDGET PROGRAMMES OF THE STATE INSTITUTION “RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT OF ASTANA CITY” FOR 2024-2026.”⁴²

Trends in the fight against destructive religious movements (DRT) in Kazakhstan are marked by increased attention and financing of this sphere up to 2024. The planned programme of activities for 2025-2026 indicates a vision of gradual reduction of the influence of DRT and confidence in the effective and qualitative work of the Department of Religious Affairs in Astana with DRT, preconditions for their emergence, various manifestations and results of activity. A separate important step in countering international terrorism and extremism is combating the preconditions for people to join organizations like ISIS or Al-Qaeda, rather than actually trying to destroy a well-established and financially stable terrorist group. However, repressive governmental action is also an extremely important reason. See e.g. “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement”, p. 18: “Government action, accompanied by human rights abuses, continues to trigger, fuel

41 Counter Extremism Project, ‘Uzbekistan: extremism and terrorism’, 2024. <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/uzbekistan-extremism-and-terrorism>

42 On amendments to order No. 99 “On approval of budget programmes of the state institution “Religious affairs department of Astana city” for 2024-2026”, 2023. <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/astana-udr/documents/details/634789?lang=ru>

and accelerate recruitment towards violent extremism. Seventy-one percent of the 48 percent who described having experienced a trigger event, cited government action, including the killing and arrest of family or friends as the specific event that ultimately impelled them to join a VE group, similar to the 2017 study. Trigger events were also found to be a significant accelerator of recruitment, with higher levels of anger and fear featuring more prominently among those who joined more quickly, compared to those who joined more slowly and reported primarily feeling hope. Thus, consistent with the previous Journey to Extremism research, this highlights how recruitment into VE groups presents a unique ‘pull’ opportunity for change and an opportunity to rebel against the status quo. These findings further illustrate that, in most cases, state action, accompanied by a sharp escalation of human rights abuses, appears to be the prominent factor finally pushing individuals into VE groups in Africa.”⁴³

Since 2019, the government of Uzbekistan has implemented five humanitarian operations to repatriate women and children from armed conflict zones. The “National report submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21*: Uzbekistan”⁴⁴ notes that 531 persons, mostly women and children, have been returned to Uzbekistan. The Government of Uzbekistan provides repatriated citizens with all the necessary services for reintegration into society, including social programs, employment, and educational initiatives, in line with international human rights standards. According to the UN report, the Uzbek model of repatriating its own citizens is recognized as an example of best practice, not only for its adherence to international legal norms but also for its commitment to fundamental human rights principles. This approach ensures that returnees are treated with dignity, provided with opportunities for rehabilitation, and protected from discrimination, aligning with obligations under international human rights, humanitarian, and refugee law.

Internationally, there are many organizations influencing and helping to prevent the spread and influence of terrorist and extremist groups around the world. At the end of 2023, a round table was held with the participation of high-level representatives of the Kyrgyz Government and the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek.⁴⁵ The main topic of discussion was the implementation of the Programme of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2023-2027. The participants of the round table noted that the implementation of the programme is aimed at strengthening the existing mechanisms of cooperation and coordination between both governmental and non-governmental institutions. The Director of the Anti-Terrorist Centre of the State National Security Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic stated that extremism and terrorism are threats to every country in the world, so all structures need to work coherently, decisively and continuously, involving civil society institutions in the interaction. Later, in 2024, OSCE regional staff at a workshop in Bishkek on the implementation of the Kyrgyz Republic Cabinet of Ministers’ Programme on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2023-2027 highlighted the role of using advanced monitoring and risk assessment methods in countering extremism and terrorism as a basis for building a world free of these threats.⁴⁶ Workshop participants performed exercises tailored to the monitoring and evaluation

43 United Nations Development Programme, ‘Journey to extremism in Africa: Pathways to recruitment and disengagement’, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement>

44 National report submitted in accordance with Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21*: Uzbekistan, 2023. https://upr.info/sites/default/files/country-document/2023-11/A_HRC_WG.6_44_UZB_1_EN.pdf

45 Kyrgyz Republic and OSCE join forces to counter terrorism and violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism, 2023. <https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-bishkek/559701>

46 OSCE-supported workshop advances monitoring and evaluation of Kyrgyz Republic’s counter-terrorism programme, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-bishkek/562770>

framework developed by the Hedaya Centre, which includes resource allocation, goal setting, data collection, and evaluation and indicator identification. International events make a significant contribution to efforts to combat domestic terrorism, its causes and consequences, which has a qualitative impact on understanding the risks and trends of the phenomenon of international terrorism and extremism in Central Asia, giving stakeholders the opportunity to share information, data, best practices and technologies.

The Government of Turkmenistan has also made efforts in the area of preventing terrorist attacks. In particular, the 2023 regional seminar in Tashkent focused on countering bioterrorist attacks using toxic substances.⁴⁷ The seminar was organized by the OSCE Regional Centre in Ashgabat and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre. In addition to the high-level representatives of Turkmenistan present, some 90 officials from all Central Asian States with expertise in the control of infectious viruses, bacteria, and toxins attended the event. The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness of biological threats associated with international terrorism for law enforcement, medical and border officials. The OSCE has organized a project on Protecting Vulnerable Sites from Terrorist Attacks⁴⁸, funded by the governments of the United States and Germany. The purpose of this project is to improve national systems and approaches to security at critical infrastructure facilities, as well as to obtain specialized recommendations, comprehensive dialogue, and technical assistance to ensure security. As of today, most of the Central Asian states have joined the project announced by the OSCE representatives. In Tajikistan, in July 2023, a workshop on building resilience of critical infrastructure and public places to terrorist attacks was held.⁴⁹ The event was coorganized by the Government of Tajikistan, the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre at the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe. Experts from the above-mentioned agencies shared best practices on the protection of vulnerable targets with Tajikistan representatives and presented the National Action Plan for Tajikistan, which included tips on how to improve public order protection.

In December 2023, Uzbekistan hosted an interactive workshop on protecting critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks, attended by representatives of relevant ministries and the OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department.⁵⁰ The workshop participants learnt best practices in critical infrastructure protection, including physical security methods, risk management systems, business continuity and interdependency management, and mitigation of insider threats. The Oliy Majlis, the parliament of the Republic of Uzbekistan, noted that such cooperation is beneficial for both Uzbekistan and Europe, and contributes to the security, stability and economic development of the Central Asian region. At the end of March 2024, national experts from line ministries of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the OSCE Action against Terrorism Unit and the OSCE Programme Office in Astana held an interactive national workshop on protecting critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks.⁵¹ The importance of strategic cooperation and partnerships among both governmental

47 OSCE and UNOCT organize a regional workshop in Turkmenistan focused on prevention of bioterrorism attacks, 2023. <https://www.osce.org/centre-in-ashgabat/545479>

48 PROTECT: Project on the protection of vulnerable targets from terrorist attacks, 2023. <https://www.osce.org/project/PROTECT>

49 UNOCT and OSCE join efforts to support Tajikistan in making their critical infrastructure and public places ("soft targets") more resilient to terrorist attacks, 2023. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/events/unoct-and-osce-join-efforts-support-tajikistan-making-their-critical-infrastructure-and>

50 OSCE launches project PROTECT in Uzbekistan at national awareness-raising workshop on critical infrastructure protection from terrorist attacks, 2023. <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/561050>

51 Protecting public spaces and critical infrastructure from terrorist attacks – first national awareness-raising workshop in Kazakhstan, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/565657>

structures and with the private sector was highlighted. During the workshop, participants noted that only a collective network of actions and strategies can contribute to a qualitative and effective response to terrorist groups. Y. Fenopetov, Deputy Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Astana, stated that in many countries in the region, close cooperation between governments, institutions, emergency services and other security actors contributes to the continuous improvement and strengthening of critical infrastructure protection.

Attention should be paid to Afghanistan, where international terrorist and extremist groups have developed for decades. Four major Central Asian terrorist groups exist within the borders of Afghanistan, namely the Islamic Jihad Union, the Afghan wing of Qatibat Imam al-Bukhari, Jamaat Ansarullah and the IMU. Each of these groups poses a threat to the Central Asian states, especially Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which border Afghanistan. A vivid example of this is the shelling of the territories of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2022.⁵² At the same time, since the Taliban came to power, the activity of terrorist groups in Afghanistan has decreased dramatically.⁵³ However, even such positive trends in reducing the influence of international terrorist groups in the territories bordering the Central Asian states pose a significant security threat. Tajik Interior Minister R. Rakhimov stated that the Afghan government had issued more than 3,000 passports to members of terrorist groups, including those from Central Asia.⁵⁴ The minister labelled the situation in the northeastern Afghan provinces as complex and tense, especially in Takhar, Balkh and Badakhshan provinces. In this regard, he outlined deepening cooperation between the governments of Pakistan and Tajikistan in the areas of intelligence, military-technical cooperation and counter-terrorism⁵⁵. Tajikistan's and Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan and similar challenges and threats underline the prospects for such cooperation.

On a regular basis, the Government of Uzbekistan is taking measures to strengthen the infrastructure and material supplies of the areas bordering Afghanistan.⁵⁶ As of the end of 2023, Tajikistan's Ministry of Interior has vehicles equipped with equipment to detect nuclear and radioactive materials that could be used for terrorist purposes. In addition, there are plans to further equip Tajikistan's security services with all the necessary equipment needed to conduct complex counter-terrorist operations in mountainous terrain. In order to counter radiological and nuclear terrorism, the Government of Uzbekistan is cooperating with Western partners such as the Netherlands, the United States, Romania and several structures under the auspices of the United Nations. During the mid-2023 event, the parties held expert discussions on the most effective mechanisms for regional cooperation to investigate, prevent and prosecute radiological and nuclear threats.⁵⁷ One of the important areas of work to counter the development of terrorism, extremism and other forms of transnational crime is the patriotic education of young people. In this connection, the Government of Tajikistan has adopted a number of legislative acts, namely Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 1920

52 ISKP militants become more active in Central Asia. 2024. https://ecrats.org/en/security_situation/analysis/8464/

53 Global terrorism index 2024, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2024>

54 On Central Asian militants in Afghanistan and Syria, 2023. https://ecrats.org/ru/archive/facts_of_terrorism/1965/

55 Countering Jihadist threats: Pakistan-Tajikistan defence cooperation in focus and geopolitical implication, 2023. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/07/06/jihadist-threat-pakistan-tajik/>

56 Tajikistan's Ministry of Interior strengthens equipment on the border with Afghanistan, 2023. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20231229/mvd-tajikistan-osnaschenie-granitsa-afganistan-1061123605.html>

57 Snow leopard exercise, 2023. <https://tj.usembassy.gov/snow-leopard-exercise/>

“On patriotic education of citizens”⁵⁸ and Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 629 “On the State programme of education of patriotism, sense of civil responsibility and strengthening of national identity of youth of Tajikistan for 2023-2027 years”⁵⁹. Patriotic education is a key component of the state’s social policy, with an emphasis on fostering national identity and civic responsibility among young people. President E. Rakhmon highlighted that more than 70% of Tajikistan’s population is under 35 years of age, making youth engagement a central focus of government initiatives. However, the implementation of such policies raises questions about the balance between national cohesion and the risk of ideological control, particularly in the context of promoting critical thinking and pluralism in society.⁶⁰ On the one hand, this is the most promising and productive part of the population, but on the other hand, these people are most vulnerable to involvement in the activities of international terrorist and extremist groups. This is why patriotic education, along with other fundamental aspects of youth development, shows the significance and importance of the laws adopted in the Republic of Tajikistan.

The OSCE Office in Tajikistan regularly holds meetings and discussions aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism and radicalization leading to terrorism.⁶¹ Cooperation with authorities, relevant ministries, including the Prosecutor General’s Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, helps detect and suppress acts of terrorist financing and trains government officials to prevent the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. The OSCE Office also offers effective and quality expertise in the development and implementation of strategies aimed at combating terrorism. Security partnerships with international partners are also an important component in protecting vulnerable targets and public infrastructure from terrorism and violent extremism. In November 2023, Tajikistan’s representatives met with representatives of Paris and the French Government.⁶² During the meeting, a plan of action was agreed upon in the case of emergencies in schools, hospitals, religious sites, shopping centres and other public places. The head of international relations at the French Ministry of the Interior stated that for many years, France has been a target for groups like ISIS or Al-Qaeda, and the experience of such visits demonstrates a desire to strengthen forward-looking cooperation and exchange of best practices with states facing similar threats. Given Tajikistan’s difficult terrain, which is dominated by mountainous terrain, it is important to practice and gain skills in mountain warfare. In 2023, the Virginia National Guard exchanged experiences with counterparts from the Republic of Uzbekistan.⁶³ Officials from the two states continue to increase cooperation and exchange of experience aimed at countering terrorism and violent extremism, as well as enhancing timely emergency response capabilities to maintain security in the Central Asian region.

58 Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 1920 “On patriotic education of citizens”. 2022. <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=146712>

59 Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 629 “On the State programme of education of patriotism, sense of civil responsibility and strengthening of national identity of youth of Tajikistan for 2023-2027 years”. 2022. https://continent-online.com/Document/?doc_id=38125435#pos=0;0

60 Education of citizens’ patriotism as the main factor and the most important way of development of the state and society. Reflections of Emomali Nasriddinzoda within the framework of the Address of the Leader of the Nation, 2023. https://tajsotmon.tj/ru/news_ru/16795-vospitanie-patriotizma-grazhdan-kak-glavnogo-faktora-i-vazhneyshego-puti-razvitiya-gosudarstva-i-obschestva-razmyshleniya-emomali-nasriddinzoda-v-ramkah-poslaniya-lidera-nacii.html

61 Countering terrorism, 2024. <https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-dushanbe/191906>

62 Protection of soft targets from terrorist attacks: Government officials from Tajikistan conclude OSCE-led study visit to France, 2023. <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/558567>

63 M. Vrabel, ‘Virginia guard conducts mountain warfare exchange in Tajikistan’, 2023. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3493308/virginia-guard-conducts-mountain-warfare-exchange-in-tajikistan/>

A separate vector in Tajikistan's cooperation with international partners is working with non-governmental and even private companies. Blockchain system and one of the largest online digital currency exchange services, Binance, is working closely with the Financial Monitoring Department of the National Bank of Tajikistan to counter regional and international terrorist threats emanating from the regional ISIL group in Afghanistan – Wilayat Khorasan.⁶⁴ In addition to banking structures, Tajikistan's law enforcement agencies, such as the State Committee for National Security, have been involved in this type of cooperation. The main successes between the parties have been the capture of several high-ranking members of Vilayat Khorasan who were planning to commit acts of terrorism and violent extremism. Binance continues to work to identify networks of illegal terrorist financing, as well as qualitatively and effectively builds interaction with government structures, providing information at the request of law enforcement agencies in the field of possible financing of illegal extremist organizations. The issue of combating international terrorism and extremism is one of the priority tasks for the Central Asian states (Table 4). These problems are of particular importance due to the geographical location of the states and the presence of Afghanistan to the south of the region, where terrorist groups are actively developing.

Table 4. Approaches of Central Asian states to combating international terrorism and extremism

Country	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan
Approaches	Prevention of destructive religious teachings, protection of critical infrastructure, cooperation with international organizations	Prevention, repatriation, reintegration, protection of public places, cooperation with international organizations	Cooperation with private companies, OSCE, UN, transformation of legal frameworks	Cooperation with OSCE, UN, Programme on Countering Extremism and Terrorism	Regional Seminars at the OSCE, UN Model for Countering Online Extremism

Source: compiled by the authors

Governments are developing and deepening cooperation with international partners, private companies, and improving the legal and regulatory framework. However, effectively countering international terrorism and extremism also requires action to improve national law enforcement structures, combat corruption and improve the overall socio-economic situation in the region.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism has highlighted concerns regarding the balance between counter-terrorism

64 Binance aids Tajikistan's efforts to combat the financing of terrorism against an Islamic State affiliate, 2023. <https://www.binance.com/en/blog/ecosystem/binance-aids-tajikistans-efforts-to-combat-the-financing-of-terrorism-against-an-islamic-state-affiliate-5224099286084242998#idrichtexttextconfigcontentbuilding-collaborative-securitystyle>

measures and human rights in Central Asia. In the report following the visit to Kazakhstan in 2020 (A/HRC/43/46/Add.1)⁶⁵, it was noted that while efforts to prevent violent extremism were necessary, there were instances where broad counter-terrorism legislation had been used to suppress political dissent and restrict freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Similarly, the 2022 report on Uzbekistan (A/HRC/49/45/Add.1)⁶⁶ raised concerns about the use of counter-extremism measures to target religious communities and political opponents. The reports emphasize the need for states in the region to ensure that counter-terrorism policies comply with international human rights standards, particularly in areas related to due process, non-discrimination, and the protection of civil liberties.

Discussion

The analyses presented in this study point to the commitment of Central Asian governments to a world that is safe and free from the threats of international terrorism and violent extremism. To combat these threats, governments, line ministries and security services are using the full range of possible strategic cooperation, both at the bilateral level with neighbouring states in the Central Asian region and with European partners, as well as within the framework of major regional and international organizations.

The study analysed current approaches to countering violent extremism and terrorism in the Central Asian region. Although the level of terrorism is extremely low in the states of the region, governments are making efforts and developing international and regional partnerships to combat the rapidly and widely developing networks of international terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The same thought is held by R. Pantucci⁶⁷, referring to the paradox of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia. The author stresses that terrorist attacks in the region are rare and, at the same time, threatening jihadist networks are spreading widely in the world, but organizing terrorist acts in the Central Asian region is not of interest to them. A similar view on the spread of terrorism in Central Asia is held by A. Python et al.⁶⁸, noting the degree of threat posed by terrorism at 0.022%.

It has been revealed that the relevant ministries of the Central Asian states are taking a wide range of actions aimed at the rehabilitation and reintegration into society of people who have been or may be influenced by destructive and radical Islamist movements. To this end, training sessions, discussions and theological lessons are being held. E.B. Rodriguez⁶⁹ notes in his study that radicalization tendencies within the phenomenon of Islamisation in the Central Asian region are exaggerated and are part of state policies aimed at justifying

65 United Nations, 'A/HRC/43/46/ADD.1: Visit to Kazakhstan - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism', 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc4346add1-visit-kazakhstan-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and>

66 United Nations, 'A/HRC/49/45/Add.1: Visit to Uzbekistan - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism', 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc4945add1-visit-uzbekistan-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and>

67 R. Pantucci, 'Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 16(1), 2024, 79-86.

68 A. Python, A. Bender, A.K. Nandi, P.A. Hancock, R. Arambepola, J. Brandsch, and T.C.D. Lucas, 'Predicting non-state terrorism worldwide', *Science Advances*, vol. 7(31), 2021, no. eabg4778. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abg4778>

69 E.B. Rodriguez, 'Religion and state in Central Asia: A comparative regional approach', *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, vol. 6(1), 2023, pp.79-99. <https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i1.766>

the strictness of their regimes. A different view is held by N. Tucker⁷⁰, speaking of qualitative changes in the policies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan aimed at a responsive and positive approach to citizens who experience marginalization and injustice. In the article, L. Grip and J. Kotajoki⁷¹ indicate that in conflict contexts, deradicalization, and rehabilitation of former extremists and their families contributes to achieving peaceful coexistence in society. F.C. Buranelli⁷² notes in his study the actions of Central Asian governments towards dissenting citizens under the guise of combating international terrorism and extremism, citing the killing of around 700 civilians during an anti-government protest in Uzbekistan as an example. Such incidents highlight the complex relationship between counterterrorism measures and human rights, as the excessive use of force and repressive policies can contribute to the very radicalization they seek to prevent. Restrictive legislation, suppression of political opposition, and limitations on freedom of expression often create grievances that fuel extremist narratives. Understanding how state actions influence radicalization processes is crucial in developing effective and human rights-compliant counterterrorism strategies. While cross-border cooperation remains essential in addressing security threats, a balanced approach that addresses underlying socio-political causes of radicalization is necessary to prevent the escalation of extremist sentiments.

The ever-expanding threat landscape associated with international terrorism contributes to Central Asian governments seeking new strategic allies and partners. For example, the Uzbek side's political dialogue to modernize society in Afghanistan, which will prevent terrorist and extremist groups from further developing in their northern provinces. Or the desire of the government of the Republic of Tajikistan to deepen cooperation with Pakistan, which has similar interests in eradicating international terrorist groups from Afghanistan. G. Tekir⁷³ notes that the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are much more concerned about the security situation in Afghanistan and the possibility of renewed influence of international terrorist groups on the Central Asian region, increasing their armed presence on their borders while at the same time seeking to maintain economic relations with the Afghan side. H. Hamidzada and R. Ponzio⁷⁴ suggest that joint large infrastructure projects between Afghanistan and Central Asian states can help change the vision of Afghanistan as an equal partner in development rather than a breeding ground for extremist ideology.

The analysis notes that Central Asian states need to take action to strengthen domestic institutional systems to counter terrorism and extremism, as well as to combat corruption. Q. Fatima and S. Zafar⁷⁵ note that most of the problems of Central Asian states, including extremism, are related to the challenges of the domestic

70 N. Tucker, 'Foreign fighters, returnees and a resurgent Taliban: Lessons for Central Asia from the Syrian conflict', *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 32(1-4), 2022, pp.69-82. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-bja10010>

71 L. Grip and J. Kotajoki, 'Deradicalisation, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremists in conflict-affected contexts: A systematic literature review', *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 19(4), 2019, pp. 371-402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2019.1626577>

72 F.C. Buranelli, 'Authoritarianism as an institution? The case of Central Asia', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 64(4), 2020, pp.1005-1016. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa058>

73 G. Tekir, 'The security implications of Afghanistan for Central Asia', In: *Proceedings of International Congress 2023 "Changing Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Challenges and Prospects"*, 2023, pp.72-85. Istanbul: Istanbul Arel University.

74 H. Hamidzada and R. Ponzio, 'Central Asia's growing role in building peace and regional connectivity with Afghanistan', *United States Institute of Peace*, vol.453, 2019, pp.1-26.

75 Q. Fatima, and S. Zafar, 'New great game: Players, interests, strategies and Central Asia', *South Asian Studies*, vol. 29(2), 2014, pp.623-652.

political environment in the states. Considering regional trade and economic ties, S.N. Rahman et al.⁷⁶ also note the role of the threat of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia, which hinder the strengthening of cooperation in the region.

The governments of Central Asian states, in particular, Uzbekistan, are actively cooperating with non-governmental and private companies to prevent the illicit financing of terrorism by monitoring financial transactions. Such cooperation has resulted in the capture of individuals involved in Wilayat Khorasan activities. However, as A. Acharya⁷⁷ indicates, to stop terrorists from using blockchain systems and digital currencies, governments will need to stop every computer in the world. B. Fishman⁷⁸, B. Ganesh and J. Bright⁷⁹ emphasize in their papers that the focus on governments as the sole actors in online counter-terrorism operations is outdated as a plethora of technology and private companies are actively countering international terrorism and extremism. It has been researched that the government of Uzbekistan regularly undertakes humanitarian operations to repatriate its citizens from conflict zones and to further provide these individuals with the full range of services necessary for successful reintegration into society. However, H. Stenger⁸⁰ writes about the gender aspect of coverage of such humanitarian operations in the Internet space, as often only benevolent and deceived women and children are shown to the public, while men are absent or portrayed as threatening in such news.

Young people are the most vulnerable to involvement in the activities of terrorist and violent extremist organizations. At the state level, programmes aimed at patriotic education of young people are being adopted, which in the long term can build public immunity to radicalization, develop critical thinking and prevent the outflow of citizens to participate in international terrorist and extremist groups. In their study, M. Ahmad et al.⁸¹ confirm the above thesis, saying that deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes have long been an important component of a comprehensive policy to combat radicalization. The task of public policy should be to use all means and methods to change the ideological mentality by creating counter-narratives against terrorist and extremist organizations.

In recent years, Central Asian governments have been most active in organizing seminars, meetings, discussions, exchanges of views and experiences with their regional and international strategic partners. Such events promote understanding of regional and global policies to counter international terrorism and violent extremism, and help find effective methods and solutions to these threats. The processes involve the most experienced regional and international organizations, such as the OSCE, the UN Regional Centre for Preventive

76 S.N. Rahman, D.M.S. Shah, S. Tomonobo and A. Mirwais, 'Afghanistan factor in regional energy security and trade: Existing and projected challenges and opportunities', *AIMS Energy*, vol. 11(2), 2023, pp.213-238. <https://doi.org/10.3934/energy.2023012>

77 A. Acharya, 'Countering financing of terrorism', In: *Good Practices in Counter Terrorism*, 2022, pp. 59-83, Ankara: Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism.

78 B. Fishman, 'Crossroads: Counter-terrorism and the Internet', *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 2(2), 2019, pp.82-100. <http://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/1942>

79 B. Ganesh and J. Bright, 'Countering extremists on social media: Challenges for strategic communication and content moderation', *Policy & Internet*, vol. 12(1), 2020, pp.6-19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.236>

80 H. Stenger, 'Victim versus villain: Repatriation policies for foreign fighters and the construction of gendered and racialised "threat narratives"', *European Journal of International Security*, vol. 8(1), 2022, pp.1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.28>

81 M. Ahmad, M.J.I. Khan and Z. Shahid, 'Challenges of deradicalization in Pakistan', *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 10(2), 2022, pp.711-719. <https://doi.org/10.52131/pjhss.2022.1002.0236>

Diplomacy for Central Asia and the UN Counter-Terrorism Office. Researcher P. Dunay⁸² promotes a similar idea, referring to the positive attitude of Central Asian governments towards the politico-military dimension of the OSCE. In this regard, the sides actively welcome a “complementary” approach involving seminars, exchanges of views and best practices.

The study noted that the Government of Turkmenistan is taking action to prevent and deter the threat of bioterrorism. In particular, discussions were held with stakeholders and officials from all Central Asian states at a regional workshop in Tashkent, with the support of the OSCE Centre in Turkmenistan and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre. At the same time, C. Santos et al.⁸³ emphasize in their study that incidents of biological and chemical terrorism are most prevalent in South Asia, Western Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. In the work of S. Wolf et al.⁸⁴, authors note that as of today, the OSCE is developing bilateral programmes aimed at supporting member states on security and stability issues, including the threats of terrorism and extremism. However, according to interviewees, such engagement does not reflect the full potential that the OSCE has for establishing security in the region.

To enhance critical thinking and prevent the development of radical and extremist ideas among young people, regional conferences are organized with the participation of students from the Central Asian region. Such conferences contribute to the involvement of young people in addressing regional and global security issues, as well as developing an understanding of the scale of threats and helping to prevent cases of online extremist propaganda. Within the framework of the Turkmenistan-Ashgabat Model United Nations, a regional conference on a healthy, safe and secure society was held. About 100 students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan participated, and one of the main topics of the conference was to discuss the role of young people in preventing online extremism. S.A. Al-Ajeely and M.A.S. Khasawneh⁸⁵ note that today there are many examples of increasing radicalization and extremist ideas among students. This may subsequently pose a threat to national and regional security; therefore, actions should be taken to reduce extremist sentiments in the academic environment. Researchers S. Zeiger and J. Gyte⁸⁶ highlight the role of counternarratives in countering radicalization online, which can address structural and personal grievances among groups of people most exposed and vulnerable to radicalization.

The results of this study and their comparison with the works studied above have highlighted the shortcomings in the political and institutional features of the states of the Central Asian region. It was found that scholars and researchers have a similar opinion to the study on the question of the advisability of international cooperation to counter international terrorism, although many of its forms are not the main threat to the region.

82 P. Dunay, ‘The OSCE in Central Asia: Engagement, presence, problems’, *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 32(1-4), 2022, pp.17-27. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-bja10013>

83 C. Santos, T. El Zahran, J. Weiland, M. Anwar and J. Schier, ‘Characterizing chemical terrorism incidents collected by the global terrorism database, 1970-2015’, *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, vol. 34(4), 2019, pp.385-392. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X19004539>

84 S. Wolf, A. Bayok, R. Kakar and N. Yau, ‘The OSCE and Central Asia: Options for engagement in the context of the crisis in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine’, 2023, Birmingham, Hamburg, Vienna: OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions.

85 S.A. Al-Ajeely and M.A.S.Khasawneh, ‘The role of university education in confronting the phenomenon of terrorism and promoting belonging among young people’, *Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing*, vol. 6(1), 2022, pp.3206-3211. <http://184.168.115.16/index.php/jppw/article/view/5194>

86 S. Zeiger and J. Gyte, ‘Prevention of radicalization on social media and the Internet’, In: *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*, 2021, pp. 358-395, Hague: ICCT Press Publication.


Conclusions

The study identified new methods and approaches to countering the threats of international terrorism and violent extremism in the Central Asian region. Although international terrorism does not pose a significant threat to Central Asian states, the populations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are under the influence of destructive radical currents, which favours citizens joining international terrorist groups such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda. It is noted that the above threats are of particular interest to the cooperation of Central Asian states with both regional and international partners.

The vision of the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan for building security in the Central Asian region was examined. In particular, the Uzbek side wished to establish broad economic, commercial, political and social cooperation with the Taliban in order to modernize Afghanistan's underdeveloped society. Such cooperation, according to the Uzbek government, could solve the problem of the existing and active development of the international terrorist group ISIS in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, but the shelling of Uzbek territory in 2022 showed the ineffectiveness of such a policy in the short term. In the course of the analysis, it was found that the governments of Central Asian states are taking measures to reintegrate into traditional society citizens who in the past were influenced by destructive and extremist religious movements. Firstly, the initiatives of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and their relevant ministries were analysed. It was found that Kazakhstan has a reintegration plan until 2026, involving outreach activities, theological lessons, rehabilitation of convicts, as well as counterpropaganda on social networks and the creation of video content.

Central Asian governments have been identified as being interested in holding seminars, discussions, exchanges of experience and information with international partners. Cooperation is based on working with the most experienced regional and international organizations in the field of countering international terrorism and violent extremism, such as the OSCE, the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and the UN Counter-Terrorism Office. For example, the Turkmenistan-Ashgabat Model United Nations, a seminar in Bishkek on the implementation of the Programme of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2023-2027 chaired by the OSCE and a project on protecting vulnerable targets from terrorist attacks chaired by the OSCE. The study also shows the role of Western cooperation with states such as the United States, the Netherlands, and Romania to prevent acts of nuclear and radiological terrorism in the Central Asian region.

Future research on new approaches to countering international terrorism and extremism in Central Asia may focus more on the policies of the government of Turkmenistan in combating international terrorism and extremism. In particular, Turkmenistan's membership in the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism is a useful consideration. It is necessary to pay attention to the limitations of the study, among which are the general closeness of Turkmenistan's information resources, as the state is deeply authoritarian and secular. Also, some legal acts related to countering terrorism and extremism in Turkmenistan are not publicly available.



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