

THE RADICALIZATION OF ISLAM IN KAZAKHSTAN: A VIEW FROM THE ALONSO PYRAMID

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Abstract. This article discusses the stages of emergence of religious radicalism in Kazakhstan and describes the internal and external factors which led to terrorist acts in the country and the relocation of entire Kazakh families to the war zones in the Middle East. The authors also look into the key questions related to the term “radicalization” which is widely used in academic literature. In this paper, this term is used as a shorthand for complex processes whereby certain individuals and communities may become extremist, militant and violent. Also, there is neither a generally accepted perception of a radical nor a straightforward path to radicalization, it is a kind of process to shape an individual’s worldview, and also is part of the socialization process. Notably, the empirical studies cited by the authors suggest that violent attitudes are not forced upon individuals.

Keywords: Alonso pyramid, radicalization process, fundamentalism, islamization of radicalism, jihadism.

Introduction

Over the last decade, “radicalization” has become a dominant analytical paradigm for the interpretation and explanation of the phenomenon of political violence especially within the studies of jihadist terrorism and involvement of “foreign militants” in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq. As such, by opening, to a certain extent, new paths of research, this concept has significantly modified the tools for the analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon of political violence by focusing the researcher’s attention on radicalization as a process. The trajectory of radicalization is constantly evolving and changing. It is important to note that the

values preached by the ideologists of radical groups are humanitarian: religious education, help to fellow believers, consolidation of brotherhood, idealization of life in a perfect society.

Methodology

The research methodology is based on the analysis of the cases of jihadi terrorists in Europe since 2000 and the analysis of dozens of books and articles written on the radicalization process. The content analysis of the chats between 171 members of a WhatsApp group who are based in different regions of Kazakhstan and share Salafi ideology was also used.

The Alonso Pyramid. Describing the Radicalization Process

The “radicalization process” is a widely accepted term to describe how some people transform themselves into violent ones, attacking others’ lives. There are several models that offer such description, and everyone is interesting as it is focused on a specific aspect of the process. In 2008, Professor Alonso created a new model to describe that itinerary in Islam. Of course, it is unnecessary to say that similar pyramids (using different terms) can be applied to other religions, political ideologies, philosophical streams or even to the adherence to sports teams.

The Alonso Pyramid model, according to his thesis, takes the shape of a pyramid, as there are much more people that are non-radical believers than jihadists. So, apart from those believers, following an ascending movement, the first step is the “radicalism”. The term “radical” comes from Latin *radix, radicis*, which means “root”. This is a religious concept to name that way of thinking and life where people want to recover the original meaning (and forms) of the religious message, in this case the Muhammad’s message. Is that a threat for the security of the state? The answer to this question depends on what implies exactly; only if it implies violence against others, it is a threat. Is it dangerous worshipping God by praying five times per day? Stopping one’s activities could be considered a waste of time or unproductive by other people, but not a threat as such. The term “extremism” is similar, comes from the Latin word *extremus*, which means “extreme”; can be used to refer to those people or to any movement defending the purity of the origin times, avoiding the contamination provoked by posterior ideas. Only a small portion of normal believers wants to live their faith like in the 7th century, so radicalism means a little part of Muslim people in the world.

The next step should be the “fundamentalism”. The use of this term comes from the publication of some pamphlets titled “The Fundamentals” in the begging of the 20th century in the USA. “The Fundamentals: A Testimony To The Truth” was a set of ninety essays published between 1910 and 1915 by the Testimony Publishing Company of Chicago. They were published to counter the liberal interpretation of

the Bible, looking for a return to the origin, the fundamentum (in Latin, “basement”, “foundation”) [1, c.67]. As a consequence, those fundamentalist ideas had political implications. To sum up, “fundamentalism” means the transformation of religious ideas in political ones. Some people instrumentalize religious messages to create a political ideology or to justify political decisions. They are the fundamentalists. And, again, here comes the same question aforementioned: “Is that a threat for the State security?”; and the same answer: “It depends”. In democratic countries, the limit is the legitimization or the direct usage of violence. In secular states or countries, maybe it is not very common to find political parties based on religion, but, what is wrong if there are? How many people would vote for them? Why a political ideology based on religion is a security concern? If a fundamentalist deputy, based on his religious ideas, suggests at the Parliament a law which forbids drinking alcohol, what could happen? The Parliament could vote in favor or against, and that would be the reflection of the society (as the political parties are channels to communicate society and decision makers). Where is the danger there? The problem could be that the success of such ideology in a given country could transform the political system, adopt a new constitution, etc. Should we accept such political evolution, if it is what the (high, qualified) majority of the Parliament decides and people support in referendum? It is possible to find examples of fundamentalism (the application of religious ideas to political realm) in Islam in Saudi Arabia, Iran or Afghanistan.

The last step in this ascending scale should be the jihadism, both as a supporter of using violence to get those political goals or as a person directly involved in the preparation, financing, logistic support or attacking other people. The term *jihad*, in Arabic, means “fight, struggle”, which, at the end of the day means violence. There are, at least, two different types of *jihad*: the inner (“greater”) *jihad* (*al-jihād al-akbar*), and the lesser *jihad* (*al-jihād al-asghar*), usually translated as “holy war”. As said before, fortunately, there are not many people supporting violence, most Muslim people are peaceful; and there are even less people involved in such actions. The problem here is that only one person can cause terrible personal or material damages, and their actions have an expansive effect on the society confidence and feeling of protection or safety (essential for the normal course of life). It is clear that this is a security concern for the States.

There are two ways to make someone obey the law: law and education. The capitalist way of life has produced an existential vacuum in some of the cases studied of jihadist terrorists: young people who used to go to nightclubs (even gays nightclubs) to immolate themselves as “martyr” (*shahid*) in the name of God. Appreciation for money, consumption, lavish lifestyle, pleasure at any price, contempt for everything spiritual or authentically religious, leaves the human being without an instrument that helps him find answers to questions that arise from within, questions that for a long time millennia arise spontaneously within the human being and that even Philosophy seeks to answer: who am I, where do I come from, where am I going.

According to some authors, this process usually started many years before the involvement in violent actions, when they were children (in their families) or youngsters (in their peer groups).

Besides that, some authors discuss about whether it is possible to retrace this path, to undo this process.

External and Internal Factors for Radicalization

In Kazakhstan, the environment for the emergence of religious radicalism was formed in the period from 1991 to 1998, which, according to D. Wilkovsky [2] and K.I. Polyakova [3], was influenced externally, in particular, through the educational migration of Kazakhstanis to religious educational institutions in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan and the activities of private, primarily Arabic, charitable foundations in Kazakhstan. Eventually, the scene was joined by local preachers of radical Islam, including students at the Medina Islamic University in Saudi Arabia: Nazratulla Abu Maryam [4], Dilmurat Abu-Muhammad, Kuanysh Bashpaev and Denis (Abdulla) Korzhavin.

The deployment of the terrorist network in Kazakhstan dates back to 2002 when the Union of Islamic Jihad (the UIJ), after its split from a larger group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (the IMU) over the disagreements on the strategy of promoting terrorist ideology, sent two of its members – Zhakshybek Biimurzaev and Akhmad Bekmirzaev [5] – to Kazakhstan. The envoys an extensive undercover terrorist network Jamaat of Central Asian Mujahideen which was joined by citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. It took as short as 6-8 weeks for the leaders to recruit new members who were trained as *shahids* and sent to Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The group, among other things, engaged in assaults and robberies in Kazakhstan [6, p.67-78].

That said, after 2011, they resorted to using more violent methods of protests in Kazakhstan.

On May 17, 2011, the 25-year old suicide bomber Rakhimzhan Makhatov blew himself up in the office of the Aktobe Department of National Security Committee.

On October 31, 2011, an explosive device detonated in a garbage bin near a residential building in Atyrau [5] and the second bomb accidentally went off and killed the suspected bomber, Bauyrzhan Sultangaliev [7]. Prior to that, as instructed by the leaders of the international group Jund-al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate), Bauyrzhan Sultangaliev, Alimzhan Sagenov and Meirambek Usabekov were supposed to plant improvised explosive devices in some of the city's busy areas aiming to kill a large number of people. However, the group members ditched this scenario and placed the bombs near the buildings of the Administration (Akimat) and the Prosecutor's Office of the Atyrau Region [6, pp.122-123].

On November 12, in Taraz, 34-year old Maksat Kariev killed two officers of the Department of National Security (DKNB) who were watching him under external surveillance as well as two officers of the designated security department. During the gun shop assault, he killed a security guard and fatally wounded a casual visitor. On the same day, Kariev fired a rocket from an RPG-26 launcher at the building of the regional DKNB. Maksat Kariev blew himself up while officers of the separate traffic police battalion were attempting to arrest him which resulted in the death of police captain Gaziz Baitasov.

On December 3, 2011, five members of a terrorist group and two law enforcement officers were killed during a special operation in the village of Boralday of the Ili District in the Almaty Region. Earlier, on November 8, 2011, members of a criminal group killed two police officers and planned to carry out more acts of violence in Almaty.

On July 11, 2012, in the village of Tausamaly of the Karasai District in the Almaty Region, the improper assembly of an improvised explosive device resulted in an explosion in a private residence killing nine people – four women and five children.

On July 30, 2012, during a special operation six terrorists were eliminated in a rented apartment in the AkKent residential complex in Almaty.

On August 13, 2012, twelve people were killed by religious extremists in the Kordon-Aksay Gorge in the Ile-Alatau National Park. According to investigation, during the summer of 2012, religious extremists organized a criminal gang in the Almaty Region which was hiding in the national park.

On June 5, 2016, a group of 26 radicals attacked two gun shops in Aktobe killing one of the owners and stealing some weapons. Afterwards, the extremists carried out an armed assault on the military unit of the National Guard killing three and injuring six servicemen. The extremists were detained and the leader of the group was killed. In total, eight people, including civilians and policemen, were killed and about forty were injured. It was established during the trial that the persons involved in the terrorist attack planned to leave for Syria and join armed *jihād* but failed to do so as they had no money and passports. Instead of going to Syria, this group decided to perform *jihād* in Kazakhstan during the month of Ramadan.

On July 18, 2016, in Almaty, 26-year old Ruslan Kulekbaev attacked a police post and a branch of the National Security Committee killing ten people, including eight policemen and two civilians. Ruslan Kulekbaev was sentenced to death on charges of terrorism. However, President N.A. Nazarbayev by his decree imposed moratorium on death penalty. Kulekbaev will be held in strict isolation in solitary confinement. Notably, Ruslan Kulekbaev's radicalization took place in the correctional facility where he was serving his sentence for illegal possession of weapons [8].

According to open sources, the targets of terrorist acts in Kazakhstan were mainly law enforcement officers and national security officers as opposed to foreign militants who tend to commit terrorist aimed against large numbers of victims among civilians. Another difference of terrorist acts in Kazakhstan from those in

Western countries is that the European jihadists are second and third-generation immigrants while Kazakhstan's terrorists are local residents. However, low level of institutional trust is also characteristic of radical groups based in Europe.

In addition, the period from 2013 to 2015 was marked by the relocation of entire families of Kazakhstan citizens to the armed conflict zones in the Middle East. Some experts have been eager to characterize this phenomenon as “family *jihād*”. According to the National Security Committee, approximately 800 Kazakhstan citizens, including some 120 men, over 250 women and 500 underage children, relocated to Syria and Iraq.

The deployment of Central Asian militants to Syria was facilitated by international sponsors. The prestige and historic and religious significance attributed to the military actions in Syria greatly influenced Central Asian militants in their decision to fight in the Middle East [9, p. 69].

In 2017, relocations to Syria stopped as international terrorist organizations were being pushed out from Syria and Iraq by the military coalition as well as due to the preventive actions of Kazakhstan's law enforcement.

Kazakhstan's researcher Serik Beissembayev names the low socio-economic status, criminal subculture, shadow economy and radical Salafi ideology as key factors that have contributed to the spread of violent extremism in the country [10].

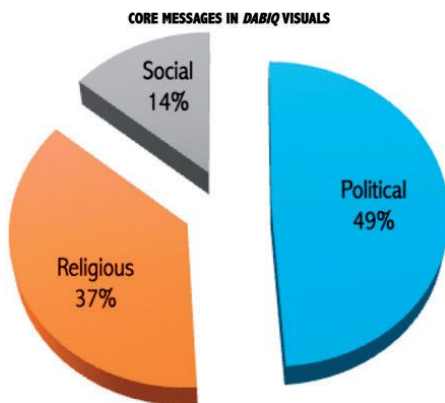
The research conducted by Dina Sharipova and Serik Beissembayev who took 20 interviews from prisoners convicted on charges of extremist and terrorist activities in 2011 as well as from relatives of the radicals who were killed during police raids in Kazakhstan, the convicted extremists are young people coming from poor and deprived backgrounds. They were unable to obtain good education and found themselves unemployed which resulted in their social and economic marginalization. Many of them eventually ended up in grey zones, such as markets where the young people were exposed to the Salafi networks. Salafism emerged as an important alternative ideology that offered these young people a new identity, social justice, solidarity and support. Also, according to this research, the repressive practices of the law enforcement agencies towards the followers of the Salafi version of the Muslim faith contribute to violent extremist. In addition, a favorable environment for the internalization of radical ideas was created by the criminal subculture among the youth. The fact that the law enforcement agencies became targets for former criminals is the manifestation of the “we versus them” attitudes which were developed by the young people prior to adopting Salafi-jihadist ideas [11, pp.8-12].

Thus, radicalism is a process and the transformation of a radical is a deeply individual and distinct phenomenon. It is not unlikely that the first step toward the examination of radicalization is the understanding that radicalization is not something in and of itself. There is no particular practice and particular thought which could be defined as radicalization. In sociological terms, it is all about socialization. Individuals function in the world through normal socialization, learn about what it means to be a human –

i.e. how to live their life, how to communicate with others and which code of conduct and forms of religious practice to follow – from their friends, family and people whose opinion is respected by them. As such, what we see is not an isolated process to be labeled as “radicalization”, but socialization in the worldviews and behaviors which we define as “radical”. It would be wrong to believe that radicalization is actualized bypassing an individual’s worldview through ideological indoctrination, the so called “brainwashing”. Radicalization is an active involvement in a new worldview. By now, some people who are qualified as radicalized have socialized in the worldview or ideology that are seen as radical. However, many people who are not believed to be radicalized may share views which are defined as radical and may well see violence as a tool for achieving their goals. Criminal gangs, for instance, resort to violence. However, the today’s use of the term “radicalization” it is normally applied to the paths leading to terrorism. Another problem with this term is in its implied meaning: does it only apply to those who resort to violence or engage in terrorist acts or to a wider base of supporters sharing identical worldviews or to specific terrorist groups? Without a more careful distinction between what these terms mean and how they should be applied, their loose use may lead to a “witch hunt” [12].

The Content of Radical Media and Communities

The content analysis of the English version of the ISIS online magazine *Dabiq* carried out by Dr Shahira Fahmy, Professor in Journalism at the University of Arizona suggests that a significant part – i.e. 86% – of the researched material was related to the narrative on the religious/political power of the “Caliphate”. Contrary to the expectations, it was observed that the social narrative covering the demonstration of brotherhood, ideal life under the Caliphate and prosperity accounted for the smallest share of the content – 14%. However, violent content accounted for just over one –tenth of the depicted visuals [13, p.281-284].

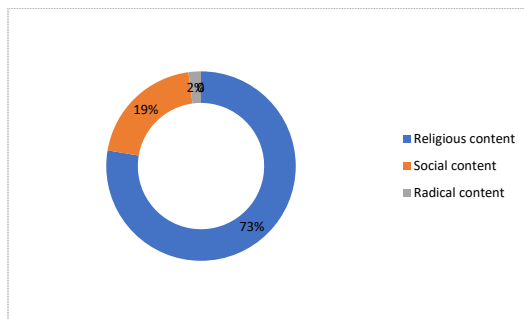


At the same time, the author of this article analyzed the content of the chats between 171 members of a WhatsApp group who are based in different regions of Kazakhstan and share Salafi ideology. The content analysis covered 3000 messages over the period of three months (August, September and October) of 2018. The discussions of the group members mainly focused on religious topics – 73% (2,190 messages). As for social content – 19% (570 messages), - the messages contained information about financial help required for Kazakhstan Muslims who were experiencing difficult circumstances. Such help, *inter alia*, is supposed to be provided to the families whose members are serving terms for extremism-related crimes. The latter demonstrates that certain believers in Kazakhstan perceive criminal prosecution as injustice against Muslims.

The radical narrative accounts for only 2% (60 messages) and represents negative attitudes toward representatives of other religious schools, secular authorities and Kazakhstan's religious legislation which strictly governs the life of believers as well as discriminatory judgments toward those Muslims whose religious beliefs and actions, according to the subjective opinions of the group members, prevent them from being regarded as true Muslims. Group members share the view that contemporary followers of the Hanafi school which is followed by the majority of Kazakhstan's Muslims have departed from the belief system (*aqidah*) developed by the founder of this Madhab Abu Hanifa. Group members define themselves as "*Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jama'a*", which means "those who follow the path of Prophet Muhammad and his companions". The texts of the chats are dominated with messages aiming to create intra-confessional intolerance. For example, those believers whose views are different from the beliefs of the group members are labeled as polytheists, sectarians, hypocrites in religion (*munafiqs*), unbelievers (*kafirs*) and grave worshipers. The group's ideologues warn against innovations or novelties and apostasy which include the failure to observe the five pillars of Islam, mocking the religion and religious attributes (e.g., the beard). The most active communicants promote the ideology of *takfir* (accusation of apostasy). At the same time, group members condemn the extreme views of movements such as Takfir wal-Hijra and al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, terrorist organizations within ISIS and Al-Qaeda and call their followers "Kharijites" (supporters of radical political sentiments).

However, the absence of politics-related discussions can be explained by the group rules which may be due to the fear that the chat is monitored by law enforcement agencies. For example, attempts by a group member to discuss the oppressive and discriminatory practices against Muslims in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China are banned by the group administrator.

Key topics discussed within the chat



The cited empirical studies show that in the cases described, the radical worldview stems from the rejection of the secular way of life, the perceived infringement of religious rights and freedoms, the desire to help Muslims and follow the canons of Islam in a Sharia state.

Notably, there is a good reason to believe that, initially, a significant number of Muslims who went to Syria did not plan to participate in armed activities. An analysis of media publications containing interviews with women who returned from Syria under the Zhusan special operation showed that most of them just followed their husbands, who had convinced them that they should help Muslims. However, once in the war zone, they eventually became involved in the activities of terrorist groups thereby joining combat actions. The propaganda materials of the international terrorist organization Islamic State also contained calls for a humanitarian cause. After their arrival, many became disillusioned with what was taking place within the so-called Islamic State and began to search for ways to return to their homeland. As such, the main motivation for the relocation of Kazakhstan citizens to the Middle East was rather their desire to live in a just *sharia* state and help fellow Muslims who were perceived as being occupied by infidel government and subjected to violence. Such interpretation may be quite different from what we usually understand by the term “radicalization”. But this again suggests that the paths to radicalism are diverse and non-linear.

It is important to understand that radical environment which does not lead to violence is like to remain a complex and even alarming counterculture but not as much of a threat as it is actually commonly perceived. It is clear that, although many may share the “jihadist” worldviews, only a few actually make one step further towards violence.

Conclusion

Radicalization is a process and a deeply individual one which is related to the socialization of an individual. Numerous studies suggest that the adoption of a rad-

ical worldview has nothing to do with imposing ideologemes that are alien to the individual or to changing their way of thinking. On the contrary, it is encouraged by humane messages about helping fellow believers and the desire to create an ideal society. As a rule, radical minorities experience discrimination, miscommunication and alienation from the society. And as the higher is the degree of pressure and control from the state, they are more likely to transform from inactive to active behavior. In other words, radicals may shift from studying and preaching religious knowledge to violence in order to protect their faith. The concept of defensive jihad which is used as an argument in support for contemporary terrorism is logically embedded in the worldview of a follower of a radical religious doctrine.

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Радикализация ислама в Казахстане: видение через «пирамиду Алонсо»

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются этапы зарождения религиозного радикализма в Казахстане, указываются внутренние и внешние факторы, приведшие к террористическим действиям в стране, выезду казахстанцев целыми семьями в зоны вооруженных действий на Ближнем Востоке. В статье также уточняются ключевые вопросы, связанные с понятием радикализации. Этот термин широко используется в научной литературе, в данной работе он используется как сокращенное обозначение многогранных способов, с помощью которых мировоззрение отдельных людей и сообществ может стать экстремистским, воинствующим или насильственным. Кроме того, нет ни общепринятого образа радикала, ни линейного пути к радикализации, это своего рода процесс формирования мировоззрения индивида, а также часть процесса социализации. Примечательно, что эмпирические исследования, на которые ссылаются авторы, свидетельствуют о том, что насильственное отношение не навязывается отдельным лицам.

Ключевые слова: пирамида Алонсо, процесс радикализации, фундаментализм, исламизация радикализма, джихадизм.

Мухатаева Г.И., Antonio Alonso Marcos

Қазақстандағы исламның радикалдануы: «Алонсо пирамидасы» арқылы көрініс

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Қазақстанда діни радикализмнің пайда болу кезеңдері қарастырылады, сонымен қатар, елдегі террорлық әрекеттерге, қазақстандықтардың отбасыларымен Таяу Шығыстағы қарулы іс-қимыл аймақтарына кетуіне себеп болған ішкі және сыртқы факторлар да көрсетіледі. Сондай-ақ, мақалада радикалдану ұғымына қатысты негізгі мәселелер нақтыланады. Бұл термин ғылыми әдебиеттерде кеңінен қолданылады, бұл жұмыста жеке адамдар мен қауымдастықтардың дүниетанымы экстремистік, әскери немесе зорлық-зомбылыққа айналуы мүмкін көп қырлы тәсілдердің қысқартылған атауы ретінде қолданылады. Екіншіден, радикалдың жалпы қабылданған бейнесі де, радикалданудың түзу жолы да жоқ. Радикалдану адамның дүниетанымынан ажыратылған процесс емес екенін байқау маңызды болып табылады. Керісінше, радикалдану жеке тұлғаның әлеуметтенуімен байланысты, жаңа дүниетанымға белсенді қатысуды білдіреді. Сонымен қатар, авторлар келтірген эмпирикалық зерттеулерде зорлық-зомбылық жеке адамдарға жүктелмегенін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Алонсо пирамидасы, радикалдану үрдісі, фундаментализм, радикализмнің исламизациясы, жихадизм.