



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 7/2016

# Preventing the “Islamic State” in Central Asia Conditions, risks and peace policy requirements

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**It currently seems unlikely that the "Islamic State" (IS) will spread its military activities to Central Asia in a similar way as in Iraq and Syria. The regional states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization have taken military precautions to prevent this from happening. At the same time, it is likely that IS will attempt to gradually extend its reach to Central Asia, which has traditionally been one of the key regions in the Islamic world. It is also possible that IS could try to compensate potential setbacks in Iraq or Syria by going underground in Central Asia. As a result, the states of Central Asia are now forced to intensively address the religious and political agenda of IS, along with the ideals advocated by other Salafist groups that have been active in the region for years. However, an effective and sustainable political prevention of IS will only be successful if the secular ruling elites in Central Asia allow the moderate majority of the Islamic groups in their countries to participate in the political process.**

## Preventing IS with peace policies or counterinsurgency – what is at stake?

In Central Asia, the IS operates under the name “IS Khorasan” via Afghanistan. It has approximately 6,500 fighters from all of the Central Asian states under its command. The organisation is an offshoot of IS under the leadership of Hafiz Saeed, a Pashtun appointed the Emir of the "Khorasan Caliphate" in Afghanistan by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS. In view of this danger and other risks, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Russia, decided a range of measures in 2015 to secure the external borders of the Central Asia states with Afghanistan, particularly along the 1,300-km border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> There have also been a number of initial joint military exercises. Likewise, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has also already addressed military and security policy measures aimed at preventing IS from entering the region.

The experience gained in the “War on Terror” and with counterinsurgency measures in the Middle East and Afghanistan may only have a limited value in the effort to prevent IS from spreading to the Eurasian OSCE area. The first reason, according to the *Peace Report 2015* published by the German peace research institutes, is that the primacy of military and security policy measures proved to be “fatal” in the fight against IS and other jihadist groups: “The ‘War on Terror’ proclaimed after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 [...] to a large extent produced more of the terrorism that it was supposed to prevent.”<sup>2</sup> The second reason is that this approach only has a limited effect in terms of deradicalisation and, in some respects, can also be counterproductive because it leads to the disintegration of states and produces flows of refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> The alliance currently includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, with Afghanistan and Serbia participating as observers.

<sup>2</sup> Kursawe, Janet et al. (2015): Stellungnahme der Herausgeberinnen und Herausgeber: Aktuelle Entwicklungen und Empfehlungen, in: *ibid.* (eds.), *Friedensgutachten 2015* (Berlin/Münster: Lit Verlag), p. 10 (own translation).

However, the findings regarding the character, objectives and tactics of IS should not be neglected. First, this includes the understanding that IS is not only a brutal terrorist organisation with a Salafist-jihadist orientation, but also an “uprising and a social movement at the same time.”<sup>3</sup> According to statements made at an expert hearing before US Congress, the organisation’s objective is to bring about “revolutionary change of the existing political and social order. Thus, the strategic challenge of our generation isn’t one particular group of insurgents or terrorists, it is the ideology that gives them cause.”<sup>4</sup> Second, IS is characterised by its objective of establishing a Salafist state (caliphate) and abolishing “artificial” international borders, which it claims were drawn with the aim of “dividing the Islamic community”. Third, IS predominantly attacks weak states with a strong potential for internal conflicts, religious polarisation and state failure. These characteristics mean that IS is much more dangerous than a mere terrorist organisation, which could be targeted with countermeasures aimed specifically at the organisation. However, the Eurocentric security initiative of combatting Islamist terrorism to prevent it from spreading to Europe does not focus on preventing conflicts and tackling their causes, and therefore leaves room for Salafist-jihadist groups to operate in the OSCE area.

What is at stake is that IS – as a violent and uncompromisingly Salafist ““revolutionary and social” organisation – would have a sustained influence on and could even forcibly change ongoing developments and the distribution of power in a key region of Eurasia. This particularly applies to the strengthening of governance in uncompleted nation-building processes. Can secular states continue to exist, or will they be replaced by either progressive or radical Islamic states? Which interpretation of Islam will the populations follow when turning to Islam in huge numbers – a modern Islamic or a radical interpretation? And finally: Will the common Eurasian region be divided by a belt of caliphates?

### **Transregional instability as a gateway for IS**

The Central Asian and the Caucasian transition regions are characterised by cross-generational social discontent and insecurity. With respect to the consequences of religious radicalisation and the popularity of IS, a study published in Vladikavkaz, the capital of Russia’s autonomous republic of North Ossetia-Alania, showed that the agenda propagated by IS is particularly attractive for the generations born as of 1991. These generations grew up in a period characterised by the lack of a convincing state ideology, declining levels of education, the breakdown of social ties and families as well as a lack of employment, money and possibilities for social advancement. The causes of these problems are rooted in a complex structure of social issues, religion and inadequate governance, which also largely determines the current sociopolitical developments throughout Central Asia. First, during the last twenty years, this has concerned the *sweeping re-conversion* to Islam as the historically most significant religion. A total of 52.8 million – or 92.6 percent – of Central Asia’s population of 57 million are Muslims. In view of the average population growth of 1.7 percent and with 30 percent of the population under 15 years, this number will continue to increase. Islam has essentially become nationalised, with the effect that its social foundations have outgrown those of the secular political regime.

The second factor is *social exclusion and impoverishment*, which also negatively affects the newly converted Muslims, and particularly the younger generation within this group. The extent of impoverishment is clearly shown in statistics published by the World Bank in 2014. These figures show that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a daily per capita income of less than USD 4.30 has become a permanent phenomenon in

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<sup>3</sup> Hippler, Jochen (2015): Der „Islamische Staat“ – Auseinandersetzungen um den Charakter von Staatlichkeit in der MENA-Region, in: Janet Kursawe et al. (eds.), Friedensgutachten 2015 (Berlin/Münster: Lit Verlag), p. 170 (own translation).

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, Rick (2015): The Growing Strategic Threat of Radical Islamist Ideology, Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on February 12, 2015 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT422.html>.

Central Asia. A total of 20 million of Central Asia's population descended into poverty between 1990 and 1999. In 2011, 70 percent of the population of Kyrgyzstan lived on less than USD 4.30 per day, and in Tajikistan this figure even reached 79 percent. Kazakhstan was the only country that, beginning in 2005, was able to significantly reduce its absolute poverty rate of 50 percent.

The third persistent factor are *the political regimes and their rulers*. The latter cannot be accused of not respecting Islam as the majority religion. However, they failed to realise that a cooperative relationship with the Islamic communities and elites, including their political representatives (provided they are not violent), would promote stability within the state and society. Instead, they confronted these groups with an inadequate and repressive religious policy. In 2012 and 2013, for example, the Pew Research Center listed Uzbekistan and Tajikistan among the 18 states that scored worst in a global comparison of government restrictions on religious freedom. Another serious problem is that the governments refuse to permit a moderate Islamic counterbalance to the extremist Islamic orientations. This kind of counterbalance could lead to the formation of reform-oriented Islamic forces who wish to consolidate their relatively young states in Central Asia. Also taking into consideration the secular political regimes' responsibility for the very difficult social situation, it seems that they will lose the loyalty of the Islamic majority among the population and will therefore eventually be faced with a crisis of legitimacy. Without reforms, they are running the danger of losing their authority and legitimacy.

Kadyr Malikov, a prominent personality in the Islamic community of Kyrgyzstan, was right when he stated: "In many respects, the situation in Central Asia is similar to the situation before the Arab Spring. In the current situation, the state *alone* has no instruments with which to counter the IS virus ideologically, because it only responds with the usual methods of military force, agitation in mosques and expert discussions in the media. If the objective is to counteract radicalisation, the important thing will be to establish a different ideological and moral basis. As a counterbalance to the IS project (which is basically anti-Islamic and goes against the values of civilisation) [...], it will be necessary to offer alternative sociopolitical values and an alternative ideological system. [...] In Islamic societies, secular solutions are not seen as a convincing counterbalance to Salafism, while moderate Islamic solutions are".<sup>5</sup>

It is quite clear which area is most at risk of becoming a gateway for IS: The Fergana Valley (see Figure 1) is a geographical melting pot between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. The valley covers an area of 22,000 square kilometres within "artificial" (according to the interpretation of IS) borders and has a population of eleven million people of different nationalities. With difficulties such as overpopulation, scarcity of land and water, reductions in agricultural subsidies, unemployment, corruption, drug trafficking, juvenile delinquency, border disputes and strong underground Islamist groups, the area is a complex crisis and conflict region from which problems and unrest could easily spread to other regions.

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<sup>5</sup> Akipress, Bischkek, mysly o terrorisme, 16 November 2015.

**FIGURE 1. The Fergana Valley between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>6</sup>**



### **Political factors supporting peace in the region**

The religious and political agenda of IS, which includes the objective of establishing a caliphate, poses a threat to the national, religious and cultural identities of the Central Asian societies. This threat can serve as a basis to derive several important peace policy resources that could prevent IS from spreading to the region:

- *the question of national identity:* For the Central Asian societies, their recently gained independence marked a historic turning point towards nationhood, which would be destroyed by the establishment of an IS-controlled caliphate. The ruling political elites, the clergy and the majority of the population are not interested in such a caliphate. In this respect, the national question and the preservation of a cultural-religious identity can be seen as central unifying factors of social solidarity.
- *tolerance and openness of the Muslim community in Central Asia:* The predominant Sunni Hanafi religious orientation, Sufism, Shiite minorities and the interests of their associated dignitaries and Islamic politicians would collide with those of IS. The politicisation of Islam is also still at an early stage, which means the possibilities for abuse by extremists remain limited for the time being.
- *the stark contrast between Central Asian values and the IS milieu as well as its social agenda:* According to a study published by the Pew Research Center, only 12 percent of Muslims in Central Asia support the introduction of the sharia system as official law, and only 28 percent are in favour of giving religious leaders a political role. A total of 71 percent see no contradiction between Islam and the modern world. 70 percent support granting women the right to file for divorce, and 73 percent support the right of women to choose to wear the veil. Suicide attacks are seen as irresponsible by 82 percent in Kyrgyzstan, by 85 percent in Tajikistan and by 95 percent in Kazakhstan. 92 percent support complete religious freedom. Moreover, IS is faced with a good level of education in Central Asia, with an illiteracy rate of only 2 percent among the population of an age of over 15 years.

<sup>6</sup> Source: Federal Academy for Security Policy.



- *the consolidation of power*: The consolidation of the Central Asian ruling elite's political power should not be underestimated. They were in control of the transformation and nation-building processes in these new states from the very beginning. This enabled them to bring together political, economic, military and normative resources to form an unusually extensive range of powers. They have also been developing an Achilles' heel, however, in the form of a social crisis and loss of trust between themselves and political Islam, which has resulted from their authoritarian and repressive religious policies.

## Conclusions

All in all, the factors with an immunising effect against IS in Central Asia and the entire OSCE area seem to be stronger than in the Middle East, North Africa and Afghanistan. However, the objective must be to seize the opportunities to bring together secular, governmental, religious and other forces within civil society to form a coalition of convenience against IS. The common objective should be to protect the nation states and identities against the establishment of a caliphate, to achieve social cohesion and to work together to create a counterbalance against extremist orientations. This will make it necessary to bridge a number of internal conflicts. The first step should be to establish minimum joint programmes based on shared interests with respect to preventing IS. This particularly applies to establishing contact between the secular governments, Islamic elites and dignitaries from all religious denominations. In the domain of political Islam, the initiative should start with the nationally and democratically oriented segments in this area. In this respect, the prevention of IS can function as a driving force for social cohesion.

Any effort to prevent IS in Central Asia must take into consideration the increased transnational potential for conflicts that exists throughout the entire Muslim region of the former Soviet Union. If secular governments are responsible for supra-regional social discontent, there is a risk that a potential Islamic regime change in one state could lead to a regional conflagration. Preventing IS on the basis of peace policy essentially means helping to resolve social and political deficits that have been a burden on the internal stability of the political regime for a longer period of time. Issues that should be immediately addressed include internal conflict situations for which the government is seen to be responsible from a subjective point of view, for example in the area of religious policy. The same applies to mitigating socio-economic tensions through reform, ending the repression of non-violent Islamic politicians and groups, such as the recently banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, and preparing targeted strategies for the deradicalisation of the respective societies. The objective should be to mobilise all domestic political forces from all the social classes in which IS is trying to gain a foothold.

The regional constellations of partnership should be utilised to achieve close collaboration in terms of implementing peace policy throughout Eurasia. Democratic and national Islamic forces must specifically be integrated into this effort. This requires a discerning transformation of the relations with Islamic politicians and political Islam based on their position regarding the use of violence. In order to prevent IS on the basis of peace policy, it is of major importance that Muslim dignitaries as well as Islamic politicians and intellectuals publically express their support for this cause. Above all, they can provide credible answers to distortions of Islam within the Muslim communities – and thereby establish a counterbalance to Salafism and jihadism. Deradicalisation strategies aimed at preventing IS could be developed by the OSCE under German chairmanship. From a tactical perspective, it will be a challenging task to convince the Central Asian governments as well as Russia and China that these strategies can be useful.

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