



BETWEEN GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND SOCIAL FRAGILITY: EXPLAINING YOUTH RADICALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of geopolitical tensions on youth radicalization in Central Asia, arguing that the phenomenon emerges from the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities and external strategic pressures. It moves beyond causal explanations based solely on socio-economic or religious factors and situates radicalization within the broader context of Eurasian power competition and regional insecurity. Using an interdisciplinary framework that combines political and geopolitical analysis with systemic and institutional approaches, the study identifies key drivers of radicalization, including unemployment, marginalization, labor migration, digital propaganda, prison radicalization, and identity-based tensions, alongside the destabilizing spillover effects of conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The article further demonstrates that intensifying rivalry among major and regional powers reshapes the regional security environment in ways that can indirectly facilitate extremist mobilization. It concludes that addressing youth radicalization in Central Asia requires a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that integrates domestic reform with a clear understanding of the broader geopolitical dynamics influencing regional stability.

Keywords: *Central Asia, youth radicalization, religious extremism, terrorism, geopolitical tensions, regional security, political Islam.*

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Introduction

Contemporary patterns of youth radicalization increasingly reflect the interaction between domestic vulnerabilities and broader geopolitical transformations. While radicalization is often explained through socio-economic or ideological factors, its evolution in recent decades suggests a more complex configuration shaped by transnational dynamics, regional instability, and shifting power relations within the international system. In this context, Central Asia represents a particularly significant case in which internal structural pressures intersect with external geopolitical influences to create conditions conducive to the spread of extremist ideologies.

Rather than being confined to specific territorial or organizational centers, religious extremism today operates through diffuse and adaptive networks that transcend national boundaries. At the same time, the growing involvement of young people in extremist movements has transformed youth into a central target group for recruitment and mobilization. This trend is not limited to a single region. It reflects a broader global pattern, visible in both Western and non-Western contexts, where identity crises, political marginalization, and failures of integration have contributed to new forms of radical engagement.¹

This article advances the argument that youth radicalization in Central Asia cannot be explained through single-factor models; rather, it is produced through the multilevel interaction of geopolitical pressures and domestic structural fragility, requiring an integrated geopolitical–sociological framework of analysis. In this context, the geopolitical dimension assumes particular importance. Historical experience suggests that geopolitical dynamics have long been among the key factors shaping the development of radicalism and terrorism.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan has characterized extremism and terrorism as threats to peace and stability in the country, emphasizing that the main goal is to prevent the spread of extremist ideas and the recruitment of young people by terrorist organizations.² In this regard, Kazakhstan needs to create conditions that strengthen societal resilience to the propaganda of religious extremist organizations. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms and main drivers of youth radicalization. To situate this analysis within the broader

¹ Malise Ruthven, “How Europe Lost Faith in Multiculturalism,” *Financial Times*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd122a8c-8720-11e7-8bb1-5ba57d47eff7>.

² “Tokayev Called on the International Community to Move to a Comprehensive Strategy to Eradicate Terrorism,” *KT.kz*, March 28, 2017, in Russian: [“Токаев призвал международное сообщество перейти к всеобъемлющей стратегии искоренения терроризма,” *KT.kz*, 28 марта 2017 г.], https://www.kt.kz/rus/politics/tokaev_prizval_mezhdunarodnoe_sobshchestvo_perejti_k_vseobyemljushtej_strategii_iskorenenija_terrorizma_1153636779.html.

academic discourse, the article engages with both domestic and international scholarship on radicalism, terrorism, and extremism, which together present a complex historical-philosophical, political, sociological, and legal picture of the problem.

The main focus of Western researchers has been the broader phenomenon of terrorism, its definition, origins, and the factors driving its spread. Jean Baudrillard³ and Ulrike Meinhof⁴ have examined extremism and terrorism as forms of organizing and expressing violence, including political violence. A. Rashid,⁵ B. Lia,⁶ C. Murray,⁷ and Y. Musharbash⁸ explore the definitional problem of international terrorism and extremism, drawing attention to their similarities with concepts such as 'war,' 'aggression,' and 'surrogate war.' The emergence and evolution of threats posed by extremism and terrorism in Central Asia and Afghanistan have been thoroughly studied by R. Magnus,⁹ O. Roy,¹⁰ Q. Wiktorowicz,¹¹ A. Polat,¹² S. Cornell,¹³ S. Guancheng,¹⁴ and others.

Among Russian scholars, there is a substantial body of work dedicated to the causes of the spread of extremism and terrorism; however, these studies generally

³ Jean Baudrillard, "The Mirror of Terrorism," in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 85–91.

⁴ Ulrike Meinhof, "The Urban Guerilla Concept," trans. Anthony Murphy, in *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History*, vol. 1, *Projectiles for the People*, ed. André Moncourt and J. Smith (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 83–104.

⁵ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 140.

⁶ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 262.

⁷ Craig Murray, "The Mysterious Islamic Jihad Union," September 8, 2007, https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2007/09/the_mysterious/.

⁸ Yassin Musharbash and Matthias Gebauer, "Claiming Responsibility for Terror: Islamic Jihad Union Threatens Attacks Outside Germany," *Spiegel Online*, September 12, 2007, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/claiming-responsibility-for-terror-islamic-jihad-union-threatens-attacks-outside-germany-a-505265.html>.

⁹ Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Mirrors and Models," *Asian Survey* 35, no. 7 (July 1995): 614.

¹⁰ Olivier Roy, *Genealogy of Islamism* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), in French: [Olivier Roy, *Généalogie de l'islamisme* (Paris: Fayard, 2011)].

¹¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 209–210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004>.

¹² Abdumannob Polat, "Central Asian Security Forces Against Their Dissidents in Exile," in *Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change*, ed. Roald Z. Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower (Chevy Chase, MD: Center for Post-Soviet Studies Press, 1995), 197–216.

¹³ Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, "Central Asia: More Than Islamic Extremists," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 197.

¹⁴ Xing Guangcheng, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Fight against Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, no. 4 (16) (2002).

address terrorism as a whole and do not focus specifically on the participation of Central Asian youth in terrorist and extremist organizations.¹⁵ The most significant developments have been made in the work of V. Emelyanov,¹⁶ S. Lantsov,¹⁷ E. Kozhushko,¹⁸ and M. Kreshno.¹⁹ Only a limited number of studies examine the threat of religious extremism in Central Asian countries, including the work of I. Zvyagelskaya.²⁰

In Central Asia, most authors analyzing the reasons for youth involvement in extremist movements tend to focus on terrorism and extremism rather than on the causes of radicalization. However, scholarship on the nature of terrorism in Central Asia, together with studies of regional cooperation in counterterrorism and counterextremism, provides a useful basis for examining this issue.²¹ Central Asian scholars such as G. Saidazimova,²² A. Khamidov,²³ and A. Mamaraimov²⁴ have

¹⁵ Mariya A. Antonenko and Oleg V. Shkelya, "Extremism in the Youth Environment," in *Actual Problems of Administrative Activities of the Police*, no. 7 (Krasnodar, 2015): 3, in Russian: [Антоненко М. А. и Шкеля О. В., "Экстремизм в молодежной среде," в *Актуальные проблемы административной деятельности полиции*, № 7 (Краснодар, 2015): 3].

¹⁶ Vyacheslav P. Emelyanov, *Terrorism as an Act and Corpus Delicti* (Kharkov, 1999), 112, in Russian: [Емельянов В. П., *Терроризм как деяние и состав преступления* (Харьков, 1999), 112].

¹⁷ Sergey A. Lantsov, *Terror and Terrorists: A Dictionary* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University Press, 2004), 187 pp., in Russian: [Ланцов С. А., *Террор и террористы: словарь* (СПб.: Изд-во Санкт-Петербургского университета, 2004), 187 с.].

¹⁸ Evgenii P. Kozhushko, *Modern Terrorism: Analysis of the Main Directions* (Minsk: Kharvest, 2000), 448 pp., in Russian: [Кожушко Е. П., *Современный терроризм: анализ основных направлений* (Минск: Харвест, 2000), 448 с.].

¹⁹ Martha Crenshaw, *Terrorism and International Cooperation* (Moscow: INION, 1990), in Russian: [Креншо М., *Терроризм и международное сотрудничество: реферат* (М.: ИНИОН АН СССР, 1990)].

²⁰ Irina D. Zviagelskaya et al., *The Threat of International Terrorism and Religious Extremism to the CSTO Member States in the Central Asian and Afghan Directions* (Moscow: Analytical Association of the CSTO; Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University, 2017), in Russian: [И. Д. Звягельская и др., *Угроза международного терроризма и религиозного экстремизма государствам – членам ОДКБ на центральноазиатском и афганском направлениях* (Москва: Аналитическая ассоциация ОДКБ; Институт международных исследований МГИМО МИД России, 2017)].

²¹ Azizjon S. Rakhmonov, "External and Internal Factors of Youth Involvement in the Ranks of Terrorist Organizations," *Kazan Pedagogical Journal*, no. 6 (2015), in Russian: [Рахмонов А. С., "Внешние и внутренние факторы вовлечения молодежи в ряды террористических организаций," *Казанский педагогический журнал*, № 6 (2015)].

²² Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Central Asia: Is Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Really Back?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 2, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1065364.html>.

²³ Alisher Khamidov, "Hizb-ut-Tahrir Faces Internal Split in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, October 21, 2003.

examined the problems of extremism. The threats of extremism and terrorism, as well as the main areas of cooperation between Kazakhstan and international organizations in combating them, have been analyzed by Kazakhstani scholars B. Sultanov,²⁵ K. Baizakova,²⁶ and F. Kukeyeva²⁷.

The literature review reveals a significant gap in the scholarship: while extremism continues to develop new forms and methods, there is still no sufficiently comprehensive body of research addressing recent trends in the theory and practice of countering religious extremism and terrorism or the causes of youth radicalization in Central Asian countries.

Methodology: The research is grounded in a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that draws on a range of theoretical and methodological frameworks for the study of radicalization, international terrorism, and extremism, including political analysis and a geopolitical perspective. The concept of ‘radicalism’ is ambiguous and requires interpretation, in light of geographic location and other relevant factors. Within this framework, radicalism is conceptualized as primarily concerned with the substantive content of ideas rather than the methods through which they are implemented. Radicalism can be ideological rather than action-based, unlike extremism, which is always action-oriented but not always ideological. However, radicalism tends to use violent methods and practices. In such cases, it can directly merge with extremism and evolve into it, finding its specific, practical political expression in various forms of terrorism.²⁸

²⁴ Abdumomun Mamaraimov, “Jury Out on Kyrgyz Islamists,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 5, 2007.

²⁵ Bulat K. Sultanov, “Threats of Destabilization in Central Asia,” in *Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, no. 1 (2016): 69–84, in Russian: [Булат К. Султанов, “Угрозы дестабилизации в Центральной Азии,” *Россия и новые государства Евразии*, № 1 (2016): 69–84].

²⁶ Kuralay Baizakova, “The Geopolitical Consequences of the Arab Spring for the Countries of Central Asia,” in *Policies and Cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean Space* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 155–65, in French: [Kuralay Baizakova, “Les conséquences géopolitiques du Printemps arabe pour les pays de l’Asie centrale,” dans *Politiques et coopérations dans l’espace euro-méditerranéen* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014), 155–65]; Kuralay Baizakova and Kairat Bekov, “Fighting Terrorism in Central Asia in the Post-2014 Context,” *Contemporary Political Society* 4 (Winter 2016): 33–46.

²⁷ Fatima T. Kukeyeva, “Democracy as a Strategy of Combating Terrorism,” *KazNU Bulletin. International Relations and International Law Series* 2, no. 62 (2013): 50–54, in Russian: [Ф. Т. Кукеева, “Демократия как стратегия антитерроризма,” *Вестник КазНУ. Серия международные отношения и международное право* 2, № 62 (2013): 50–54].

²⁸ Dmitry V. Olshansky, *Psychology of Terrorism* (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2002), 286 pp., in Russian: [Ольшанский Д. В., *Психология терроризма* (СПб.: Питер, 2002), 286 с.].

The ideological foundations of Islamist terrorism and extremism warrant particular attention in the early twenty-first century, a period in which political Islam has often figured prominently in debates on the global spread of terrorism and political extremism. Radical Islam can therefore be approached as a distinct phenomenon shaped by the politicization of religious teachings and their distorted interpretation by extremist groups.

The analysis draws on political analysis, geopolitical theory, and a layered approach to identify the main factors shaping youth radicalization in the region. The globalization theory of terrorism is based on the premise that contradictions, uncertainty, the unpredictability of the development of a structurally divided world, processes of political integration, and the advancement of modern information technologies have contributed to the rapid growth of extremism, terrorism, and terrorist organizations as actors in global politics. Situational analysis facilitated a better understanding of the specifics of youth participation in terrorist and extremist organizations. Alongside the methods discussed above, the study integrates systemic, empirical, and content-analytical methods with structural-functional and institutional approaches to comprehensively examine youth involvement in extremist and terrorist organizations.

Key Factors Driving the Rise of Radical Sentiments Among Youth in Central Asia

Scholarly debate over the causes of rising radicalization remains unresolved. Explanations range from socio-economic deterioration and the structure of political regimes to broader sociocultural change marked by the erosion of established values and moral norms. The growth of youth protest sentiments and, consequently, the emergence of radical political and religious organizations in Central Asia emerge as social responses to the complex and often disruptive processes of social, political, and economic modernization shaping these countries. States facing the problem of youth radicalization develop their own indicators, influenced by geopolitical location, internal political structure, and cultural and religious characteristics. To analyze the situation in Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole, it is necessary to determine how well commonly accepted measures are appropriate for identifying the factors that drive youth involvement in extremist and terrorist groups and movements in the region.

Socio-economic conditions remain central to explanations of youth radicalization. Education shapes employment opportunities for young people, yet higher educational attainment does not eliminate unemployment. In this context, access to social mobility becomes particularly significant. Marginalized groups also remain

vulnerable to the influence of religious extremist preachers. Labor migration from Central Asia should likewise be analyzed as a factor linked to youth radicalization. The socio-economic dimension of youth radicalization reflects more than material hardship alone. It is formed through the interaction of objective conditions and subjective experiences produced by broader processes of societal development. In Central Asia, these pressures often converge with religious influences, allowing religion, including its extremist expressions, to function for some young people as a language of protest against unemployment, marginalization, and wider social exclusion.

The growing role of Internet technologies and social networks in spreading and promoting extremist views is evident, especially among youth. In several countries, including those in the post-Soviet space, recruitment into radical structures primarily relies on the Internet.²⁹ At the same time, efforts to involve young people in radical religious organizations promote a religious way of life that undermines the secular development of the state and society.

A major trend over the past decade has been the growing interaction between organized criminal groups and Islamist radical organizations. In Kazakhstan, for example, the intertwining of crime and radical extremist groups occurs due to prison radicalization, whereby extremists within penitentiary institutions enlist criminals into their ranks.³⁰ An increasingly important factor is the politicization of Islam. The religious renaissance is being exploited by the authorities of several states to address their external and internal political objectives.

Another level of analysis concerns the geopolitical environment of the countries in the region. External conditions contributing to the emergence of terrorism and religious extremism are closely linked to military-political instability in Afghanistan and the Middle East, as well as to external financial support, cross-border drug trafficking, and broader adverse geopolitical circumstances. Alongside other forms of transnational crime, these factors continue to serve as important sources of instability and terrorism financing.

Serious destabilization in Central Asia could occur if extremist and terrorist dynamics originating in the Middle East expand further into Afghanistan, thereby creating a fundamentally new security situation in the neighboring region. An

²⁹ Anastasia Iu. Tolstukhina, “‘Generation Online’ Needs Protection,” *International Affairs* [Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn’], no. 5 (2018): 79, in Russian: [А. Ю. Толстухина, “‘Поколение онлайн’ нуждается в защите,” *Международная жизнь*, № 5 (2018): 79].

³⁰ Serik Beisembaev, *Religious Extremism in Kazakhstan: Between Crime and Jihad* (Almaty: Public Foundation “Strategiya,” 2015), 28 pp., in Russian: [Серик Бейсембаев, *Религиозный экстремизм в Казахстане: между криминалом и джихадом* (Алматы: ОФ “Стратегия,” 2015), 28 с.].

alarming background is emerging in the border zone, but at present, this does not indicate that serious upheavals are imminent in Central Asia. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan appear to have the most developed protective capacities in the region. The situation in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is less straightforward. In Kyrgyzstan, however, continued dialogue with religious movements seems to have limited the risk of serious radicalization among the broader population. Nevertheless, external forces are unlikely to influence internal processes in the region in the near future, as they lack a social base among the local population. Moreover, the distinct cultural and historical characteristics of the region make it unlikely that events here will follow the same pattern. The combination of these factors reduces the likelihood of an immediate security threat in Central Asia.

Two realities turn the hypothetical threat of religious extremism in the Central Asian countries into a current agenda for their governments. The first reality pertains to the internal problems of these countries. The second involves the influence of external forces on Central Asia.

Thus, the causes of youth radicalization in Central Asia are multifaceted. Socio-economic and geopolitical factors, demographic and structural changes in society, religious factors, and an identity crisis all play a role, pushing young people to seek their roots, life, and spiritual values, including within the religious sphere. The threat of religiously motivated extremism is present in nearly all five Central Asian states, but it manifests with varying intensity. Kazakhstan stands out as a case in which terrorism and extremism have not reached an acute level, and the broader threat environment remains relatively low.

Geopolitical Tensions and Youth Radicalization in Central Asia

The development of radicalism and terrorism is shaped not only by domestic conditions but also by foreign policy and wider geopolitical dynamics. This is especially visible across Eurasia, where developments in the Middle East and surrounding regions continue to influence broader patterns of instability and radicalization. The geopolitical environment of Central Asia is changing significantly. The regional balance of power is increasingly influenced by international developments, including events far beyond the region, which Central Asian states closely monitor. This is due to the role of major powers that either border Central Asia or exert considerable political, economic, and cultural influence over the region.

Central Asia can be understood as a weakly institutionalized security region whose dynamics are shaped by both regional and global forces. Its strategic environment reflects the interactions between the Central Asian states and a wider set of external actors. Among the key factors shaping this environment are limited

state capacity, the active involvement of extraregional powers, and the presence of transnational non-state actors.

For Russia and China, maintaining stability in the region aligns with important strategic interests. Amid escalating tensions with the West, Russia views Central Asian countries as a buffer against threats of radicalism and extremism from the south. Accordingly, Russia has actively opposed American initiatives to modernize the Greater Middle East and to politically reshape the extensive Muslim world, including Central Asian states. Given the evolving political landscape in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and the other states of the region would benefit from maintaining a calibrated relationship with Russia, one that preserves the benefits of economic integration without reinforcing asymmetric dependence.

China is an important partner for the Central Asian states, and dialogue with Beijing continues on a wide range of issues. Economic ties between China and the region have expanded steadily. For Kazakhstan, however, this cooperation also carries the risk of reinforcing a raw-material-based economy, since Chinese investment remains focused mainly on oil and gas extraction. In the medium term, China may further strengthen its economic and political influence in the region.

Since Donald Trump's second term, the US administration has adopted a course toward neo-isolationism, protectionism, and an America-centric worldview, placing significant strain on the existing global security architecture. Trump has repeatedly undermined alliance relationships, agreements, partnerships, and, most importantly, long-standing positions established by his predecessors. At the same time, he considers the fight against extremism and terrorism to be one of the most serious threats to the international community. However, effective counterterrorism requires close cooperation with allies within global structures.³¹

The US's position in Central Asia has weakened noticeably. This is reflected, among other things, in the rarity of its summits with Central Asian leaders. Nevertheless, the American regional initiative "C5+1" could serve as a foundation for exploring new opportunities for regional countries to collaborate with the US. The Central Asian states should aim to strengthen their position as Washington's partners, including by developing security partnerships within "C5+1." The foreign ministers of Central Asian states and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed cooperation in counterterrorism during a C5+1 meeting.

New opportunities for cooperation in foreign policy and security are also emerging through the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia. At the same time, the EU

³¹ Richard Haass, "Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade U.S. Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (September/October 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/donald-trump-present-disruption-foreign-policy>.

is experiencing internal challenges related to migration, future security, and budget issues. The US and its European allies also pursue their own interests in the region, which they view as a platform for exerting pressure on both Russia and China.

Meanwhile, the interests of global actors in and around Central Asia are expressed above all through military-political and economic engagement, rather than through the spiritual sphere. In this regard, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of what long-term interests Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole may represent for the US, the EU, Turkey, Iran, China, and Russia.

The main danger is that Central Asian states may become objects of competition among major geopolitical power centers. This is the so-called “New Great Game,” involving leading regional and global states competing for resources and transit potential in Central Asia. Consequently, questions concerning how the situation in the Greater Middle East will develop, what internal and external factors will influence the course of events, and how all of this might affect Kazakhstan's position become of fundamental importance.

Another significant aspect is the intensification of competition among regional powers actively involved in serious geopolitical processes. The regional environment is increasingly shaped by overlapping rivalries among major and regional powers, including those between the US and China, the US and Russia, the US and Iran, Turkey and Iran, and the EU and Russia. These tensions inevitably influence the foreign policies of the states in the region, most visibly in the information sphere.

Amid the deterioration of Russia's relations with Europe, China is expected to become the main market for Russian petroleum products, gradually dictating its own terms. Close political, economic, and geopolitical cooperation between China and Russia serves as a guarantee of stability and security in Central Asia. While Russia covers the region in the field of military-technical cooperation, China plays a leading economic role through investment, trade, and infrastructure engagement. Radical forces frequently exploit these geopolitical contradictions to advance their own agendas. Additional external funding increases the capacity of extremist groups to broaden their social base, diversify channels of material and military support, and conduct more effective propaganda.³²

The rivalry among global and regional powers is driven by competition over trade and transit routes, natural resources, and the ability to shape the regional geopolitical agenda. Considering the main geostrategic and geo-economic interests of

³² Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 73.

various players, it is possible to model potential scenarios for the development of events in the region's geopolitical landscape or in specific areas of it.³³

The Afghanistan factor continues to encompass a range of threats and risks for Central Asian countries, serving as a significant obstacle to the development of regional economic cooperation and the realization of Central Asia's rich transit potential. The main military-political threats from Afghanistan to Central Asian countries and, in particular, to the Republic of Kazakhstan, are primarily associated with the lack of effective central authority, which may leave territories uncontrolled by the state. Such areas could serve as safe havens for radical groups that pursue various interests. In the case of Afghanistan, this mainly concerns border regions with Central Asia that could be used as a launchpad for religious-ideological or military-political expansion.

China has begun to strengthen its military and technical capabilities in Central Asia, specifically in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. China's involvement in strengthening the Tajik–Afghan border and training Afghan forces is interpreted in different ways by other regional actors. Russia, the US, Pakistan, India, and Iran are already accustomed to the traditional balance of power in the region, and China's involvement appears as a new phenomenon within the conventional distribution of forces.³⁴

Contradictions among states and major powers can intensify the activity of radical forces, which are at times instrumentalized as tools of geopolitical competition. Notably, the highest number of attacks worldwide and activities of international terrorist organizations occur in conflict zones in South Asia and the Middle East, where there is an active process of delineating geopolitical influence between global and regional powers.

The future of Central Asia will depend largely on relations among the major powers active in the region, especially the US, China, Russia, the broader West,

³³ Irina D. Zviagelskaya et al., *The Threat of International Terrorism and Religious Extremism to the CSTO Member States in the Central Asian and Afghan Directions* (Moscow: Analytical Association of the CSTO; Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University, 2017), in Russian: [И. Д. Звягельская и др., *Угроза международного терроризма и религиозного экстремизма государствам – членам ОДКБ на центральноазиатском и афганском направлениях* (Москва: Аналитическая ассоциация ОДКБ; Институт международных исследований МГИМО МИД России, 2017)].

³⁴ Sofiya Musofir, "China Is Gradually Displacing Russia from the Tajik Pamir," *EADaily*, December 17, 2019, <https://easily.com/ru/news/2019/12/17/kitay-postepenno-vytesnyaet-rossiyu-s-tadzhikskogo-pamira>, in Russian: [София Мусофир, "Китай постепенно вытесняет Россию с таджикского Памира," *EADaily*, 17 декабря 2019 г., <https://easily.com/ru/news/2019/12/17/kitay-postepenno-vytesnyaet-rossiyu-s-tadzhikskogo-pamira>].

Turkey, and Iran. The military-political situation will remain tied to the strategic interests of leading global and regional actors. It is also important to consider the cost of maintaining regional stability and the interests behind preserving the status quo.

Geopolitical contradictions across Eurasia reveal a landscape shaped by multiple competing interests, while also pointing to a clear relationship between intensifying geostrategic rivalry among global and regional powers and the growing vulnerability of individual states to destabilization. An important role in amplifying destabilization processes is primarily played by a segment of society traditionally associated with youth. As E. Garbuzarova notes, external forces may exploit national, ethnic, and socio-economic factors in Central Asia and the surrounding regions, with direct consequences for Kazakhstan's long-term national and strategic interests.³⁵

Taken together, these trends produce a range of risks that call for targeted policy responses. These include a narrowing of maneuvering space within the framework of a multi-vector policy amid the ongoing geopolitical struggles in Central Asia among global players: China, the US, and Russia. At the current stage, the tasks for Kazakhstan within the multi-vector approach have become significantly more complex, and the risks associated with such a policy are increasing. At the same time, given our circumstances, an alternative approach is unacceptable.

International Experience in Combating Religious Radicalism, Extremism, and Terrorism

The rise of terrorism, extremism, and radicalism as security concerns in Central Asia has increased the importance of international experience in this field. The approaches developed by other states and regional organizations may offer useful lessons for strengthening regional responses.

In Europe and the US, approaches to counterterrorism and counterextremism are more developed. Many of these countries have expressed interest in assisting the Central Asian countries by sharing their expertise and skills in combating terrorism, extremism, and radicalism. Some countries and organizations have gone further and offered financial and material assistance. In Europe, specialized organizations have been established to facilitate cooperation among states in countering

³⁵ Elena G. Garbuzarova, "Foreign Policy of Central Asian Countries: Results of 30 Years of Development," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russian Edition* 24, no. 4 (2021): 52–65, in Russian: [Елена Г. Гарбузарова, "Внешняя политика стран Центральной Азии: итоги 30-летнего развития," *Центральная Азия и Кавказ. Российское издание* 24, № 4 (2021): 52–65].

extremism. Their work is primarily related to analytical activities and to the coordination of actions among government bodies, agencies, and organizations involved in countering extremist activities.

In European countries, there is a clear trend toward strengthening liability for extremist crimes, alongside the use of legal provisions that encourage the cooperation of individuals involved in criminal activity. In Germany, Italy, and France, law enforcement agencies have accumulated extensive experience in combating extremism over many years. The main features of their approach include the existence of counterterrorism legislation and specialized counterterrorism centers, a well-developed justice system, the effective work of agencies engaged in counterextremism measures, dedicated programs aimed at preventing extremism, the active involvement of civil society institutions, and cooperation with the mass media.³⁶

In the US and Israel, approaches to countering extremism prioritize the involvement of civil society in countering terrorism, the development and implementation of programs such as civic education, the encouragement of civic activity, and the engagement of citizens in activities related to public safety and law enforcement.³⁷ Non-governmental organizations actively participate in the fight against extremism and terrorism in these two countries.

Along with positive international experience, it is important to consider negative examples as well. For instance, Iraq's experience clearly demonstrates the connection between ineffective governance and the appeal of Islamism as both a solution and a means of addressing significant socio-economic and political issues. A similar situation has been observed in Algeria, where, amid a worsening financial and economic crisis, an increasing number of citizens have become more susceptible to jihadist propaganda.

Since the activities of extremist and other destructive organizations in Central Asia are predominantly cross-border in nature and actively involve international extremist organizations, cooperation within multilateral frameworks is crucial to address their manifestations. One of the important areas of cooperation with the

³⁶ O. A. Akopyan, "Countering Terrorism: Foreign Experience," *National Institute for the Development of Modern Ideology*, October 7, 2010, in Russian: [Акопян О. А., "Противодействие терроризму. Зарубежный опыт," *Национальный институт развития современной идеологии*, 7 октября 2010 г.].

³⁷ Denis Iu. Kravtsov, "Practice of Countering Extremism in Different Countries," *NB: Administrative Law and Administration Practice*, no. 4 (2019): 22–28, <https://doi.org/10.7256/2306-9945.2019.4.29819>, in Russian: [Кравцов Д. Ю., "Практика противодействия экстремизму в разных странах," *НВ: Административное право и практика администрирования*, № 4 (2019): 22–28].

UN is the sphere of re-education of extremists and terrorists. Collaboration in countering terrorism is a key aspect of the SCO's activities and even a systemic element of this international organization. The SCO's security strategy for developing joint measures to counter terrorism and extremism is focused primarily on information-analytical and coordination tasks. In the near future, it would be advisable for the SCO to address practical issues related to a settlement in Afghanistan.

The fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations is one of the core tasks of the CICA. CICA initiatives against terrorism and religious extremism should also include cooperation between law enforcement agencies and stronger efforts to combat poverty. In addition to its own measures to counter international terrorism, the CSTO has the opportunity to create a shared platform for cooperation with the OSCE.

The experience of foreign countries can provide important practical value for the states of Central Asia in strengthening the administrative and legal mechanisms used to counter extremism. This, in turn, requires deeper interstate cooperation, including the development of international counterextremism institutions, the more systematic incorporation of global experience, and the creation of a common international legal framework to govern such cooperation.

Opportunities for Developing a Common Central Asian Security Agenda

In order to assess the possibility of creating a regional counter-terrorism system, it is necessary to identify the particular and common methods used by Central Asian states to combat religious radicalism, extremism, and terrorism.

The counterterrorism strategy of Kyrgyzstan is focused on containing the spread of violent extremism, preventing the participation of terrorists, including those returning from abroad, in terrorist activities, and controlling the outward movement of potential Islamists. Collaboration is also hindered by factors such as a lack of coordination between the State National Security Committee (SNBC) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), as well as budgetary limitations. The government does not conduct systematic screening of potential terrorists and lacks a comprehensive biometric database at border posts. Information exchange at the regional level is quite limited. At the same time, the country faces a shortage of qualified specialists in Islam, while the overall level of religiosity is increasing, especially in rural areas. A significant share of radicalization cases involving Kyrgyz citizens appears to occur abroad.

Tajikistan, sharing a border with Afghanistan, is at the frontier of influence from various extremist groups. The situation in the country can be characterized as one of the most complex in the post-Soviet space concerning radicalization and

counter-terrorism efforts. At a consultative meeting of Central Asian heads of state in Cholpon-Ata, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon characterized the spread of religious radicalism as the most serious challenge facing the region. In his opinion, recent events in the Central Asian countries indicate that various forces continue to try to destabilize the region.³⁸ Among the negative factors are interagency fragmentation, poor coordination across law enforcement institutions, and widespread corruption. A large share of the male population migrates to Russia for work, and available evidence suggests that processes of radicalization take place there. For many young Tajiks, Russia serves as a point of departure for travel to the Middle East.³⁹

The government of Turkmenistan continues to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies in counterterrorism, border protection, and the detection of terrorism financing, while also cooperating with international organizations and participating in specialized training programs.

Uzbekistan's security policy prioritizes countering radicalism and drug trafficking. Like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is heavily concerned about security developments in Afghanistan. The border control infrastructure in Uzbekistan varies significantly, from highly militarized sections along the Afghan border to poorly controlled zones along borders with neighboring Central Asian states. Uzbek law enforcement agencies maintain their own terrorist watchlists and contribute to INTERPOL databases.

In Kazakhstan, certain Islamist currents are associated with Salafi-Wahhabi interpretations, which are marked by pronounced intolerance and, in some cases, calls for violence. According to the US Department of State, law enforcement agencies in the Republic of Kazakhstan have demonstrated a strong capacity in detecting, detaining, and preventing terrorist acts in the country.⁴⁰ Kazakhstan's counterterrorism and counterextremism legislation is regularly revised and updated. As a result, the country has developed one of the most advanced legal frameworks for combating terrorism in Central Asia. Key priorities include strengthening

³⁸ "The Most Serious Challenge for Central Asian Countries Is the Spread of the Ideology of Religious Radicalism," *Ekho Kyrgyzstana*, July 21, 2022, in Russian: ["Самым серьезным вызовом для стран ЦА является продвижение идеологии религиозного радикализма," *Эхо Кыргызстана*, 21 июля 2022 г.].

³⁹ "Addressing Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Central Asian Perspective," EU Delegation to Tajikistan civil society seminar, Dushanbe, October 11–12, 2016, in Russian: ["Пути решения проблемы радикализации и насильственного экстремизма — центральноазиатский взгляд," семинар гражданского общества Представительства ЕС в Таджикистане, Душанбе, 11–12 октября 2016 г.].

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Kazakhstan," November 30, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/kazakhstan>.

preventive measures against religious extremism and terrorism, limiting the influence of external drivers of radicalization, improving the detection and disruption of extremist activity, and enhancing response mechanisms while minimizing the consequences of such acts.⁴¹

Kazakhstan's security policy has incorporated the most successful examples from other countries in the fight against radicalism and extremist activities. Currently, the potential threats to national security are clearly defined, and each area is being addressed through a systematic approach—prevention, containment, and deterrence. Kazakhstan's domestic policy has consistently emphasized the preservation of interethnic and religious harmony and the prevention of social, religious, and other forms of conflict. The broader aim of this approach is to sustain a tolerant social environment and reduce manifestations of political and religious extremism within the country, across the region, and more broadly.

According to Kazakhstan's leadership, one of the central elements of the soft counterterrorism approach is the deradicalization and reintegration of former extremists. However, developing a comprehensive strategy to prevent large-scale social radicalization through education, religion, and media remains even more challenging. For this reason, achieving a balance between soft and hard approaches often represents the key to success. Thus, preventive work with youth should be based on the understanding that young people are most susceptible to negative influences and perceive social shortcomings very acutely.

The problem of border control remains particularly acute in Central Asia, especially given the persistence of unresolved border disputes. This leads to threats such as illegal arms and drug trafficking, as well as the free movement of terrorists and extremists across poorly guarded border sections.

At the same time, there are grounds for cautious optimism that the situation is beginning to change. The spread of radical actors in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, has not become a mass phenomenon. All five countries cooperate to some extent within international organizations and on a bilateral basis in the fight against terrorism and extremism. One of the most important differences lies in the scale and level of development of anti-terrorism legislation, funding for countering extremism and terrorism, and various border issues, such as unresolved border disputes, poor logistics, and technical support.

⁴¹ "On Approval of the State Program on Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2018–2022," Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 124, March 15, 2018, in Russian: ["Об утверждении Государственной программы по противодействию религиозному экстремизму и терроризму в Республике Казахстан на 2018–2022 годы," Постановление Правительства Республики Казахстан № 124, 15 марта 2018 г.].

Kazakhstan's more successful approaches also include engagement with the international community, the regulation of domestic migration flows, the prevention of infiltration by extremist preachers, and the deepening of regional integration through joint measures with partner states to prevent and combat religious extremism and the recruitment of youth into extremist organizations.

Kazakhstan places particular importance on regional cooperation in countering religious extremism. At the VI Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev remarked that the consultative meetings had raised regional cooperation to an unprecedented level, making it more systematic, comprehensive, and rooted in mutual trust. As he stated, "Thanks to joint efforts, long-standing issues are being resolved, and comprehensive measures are being taken to ensure regional stability and security."⁴²

In April 2025, the first meeting of the heads of intelligence agencies of Central Asian states took place in Tashkent, organized within the framework of Uzbekistan's chairmanship at the VII Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia. Representatives from all five Central Asian states discussed issues related to assessing modern threats and challenges, developing unified approaches to their neutralization, as well as enhancing cooperation in the fight against terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, illegal arms trade, transnational crime, and ensuring information and cybersecurity.⁴³

From a policy perspective, effective regional security requires close international and regional cooperation. Deepening cooperation in information security is especially important, as it can strengthen the capacity of the region's states to respond to complex emerging threats, including international terrorism and religious extremism. Kazakhstan has sought to place this agenda at the center of its engagement with Central Asian partners.

Conclusion

Thus, youth radicalization in Central Asia is not reducible to socio-economic deprivation or ideological influence alone. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between domestic structural fragilities and an increasingly volatile geopolitical envi-

⁴² "Under the Chairmanship of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Sixth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia Was Held," *Akorda*, August 9, 2024, in Russian: ["Под председательством Касым-Жомарта Токаева состоялась VI Консультативная встреча глав государств Центральной Азии," *Акорда*, 9 августа 2024 г.].

⁴³ "Fight against Terrorism and Cybersecurity: The Heads of the Central Asian Intelligence Services Met in Tashkent," *AsiaToday*, April 25, 2025, in Russian: ["Борьба с терроризмом и кибербезопасность: Главы спецслужб ЦА встретились в Ташкенте," *AsiaToday*, 25 апреля 2025 г.].

ronment. External pressures—regional conflicts, transnational networks, and great-power competition—act as force multipliers that reshape local grievances, weaken institutional resilience, and expand recruitment opportunities. This produces a layered causal dynamic linking global transformations to individual pathways of radicalization. Addressing this phenomenon, therefore, requires an integrated analytical and policy framework that combines domestic reform with strategic awareness of geopolitical forces, moving beyond fragmented and mono-causal approaches to security and prevention.

The research shows that threats to national and regional security associated with the rise of religious extremism are shaped by a complex combination of internal and external factors. Youth extremism has several features that distinguish it from adult extremism, including heightened emotionality in conflict situations, a limited capacity for critical reflection on one's own actions, and a relative indifference to their consequences.

The analysis of the causes of radicalization among youth in Kazakhstan and Central Asian countries reveals the presence of several internal and external factors contributing to radicalization. Existing geopolitical contradictions across the vast Eurasian continent directly or indirectly influence youth radicalization. Particularly, the foreign policy interests of various countries can, under certain circumstances, become critically important in addressing youth radicalization.

When formulating medium-term measures to prevent regional security threats posed by radical extremism, it is advisable to primarily focus on identifying and eliminating the causes and conditions that foster the growth of radical sentiments. All available leverage should be employed to proactively influence the situation: political, social, economic, legal, educational, informational, propaganda, and others.

At the same time, the existing literature and policy debate point to serious shortcomings in the development of comprehensive approaches to countering extremism and terrorism. These include the absence of a shared understanding of what radicalization and extremism mean. Another deficiency is the narrow focus of efforts to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.⁴⁴ The system for countering extremism among youth is functioning inadequately: government policies are poorly coordinated among themselves and with external partners, and the information exchange system between strategic partners requires improvement.

⁴⁴ Sanzharbek Alimzhanov, "Reflections on Radicalization and Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding Perceptions and Considering Answers," *Central Asian Analytical Network*, January 4, 2016, in Russian: [Алимжанов Санжарбек, "Размышления о радикализации и экстремизме в Кыргызстане: понимание восприятий и рассмотрение ответов," *Central Asian Analytical Network*, 4 января 2016 г.].

The intensification of geopolitical contradictions has had a serious impact on the regional security environment of Central Asia and on the individual states within it. Shifts in the geopolitical status quo may exacerbate tensions between major powers and regional actors, creating conditions in which hybrid forms of confrontation could emerge, whether directly or indirectly, through the strengthening of extremist and terrorist organizations.

The study also shows that countering religious radicalism in Central Asia requires a genuinely comprehensive approach. Unlike a number of European states, some countries in the region have pursued alternative responses, including amnesty, rehabilitation, and reintegration. In Kazakhstan, this approach was reflected in Operation “Jusan,” which enabled the return of children and widows of militants, as well as other individuals who underwent a process of repatriation and rehabilitation.

At the same time, such approaches also raise serious concerns. Returning militants or ideologically radicalized individuals may retain the capacity to promote extremist views, recruit others, or contribute to the reactivation of radical networks. For that reason, the question of how safe it is to reintegrate individuals who have undergone religious, ideological, and, in many cases, military training remains highly sensitive and requires careful long-term assessment.

Kazakhstan, given its comparatively developed legal framework and its established partnerships with major geopolitical actors, possesses important prerequisites for advancing a common regional security agenda in the fight against radical extremism. More broadly, the countries of Central Asia require a coordinated and unified strategy for countering international terrorism and extremism, one that is grounded in preventive policy, regional cooperation, and a clear understanding of the political, social, and geopolitical dimensions of radicalization.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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