

# Central Asia's Growing Role in the War on Terror



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# Central Asia's Growing Role in the War on Terror

*“The SCO must contribute to the dialogue between the international community members who are ready to fight against violent extremism. It would be correct to put this issue on the agenda of the UN Assembly in order to create a unified global network to combat terrorism.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan  
July 10<sup>th</sup> 2015*

## **Introduction**

Terrorism is said to be the “plague” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. As Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, reported to the audience of the 15<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in July 2015, in the current century “150,000 people have fallen victim of terrorism and over 80% of these cases took place in Asia, Middle East and Africa. Almost 70% of crimes against humanity were committed by four main organizations: Daish<sup>3</sup>, Boko Haram, Taliban and al-Qaeda”<sup>4</sup>.

From the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York to the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, from the bombs in the Madrid and London underground to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the late 1990's, countless examples show that terrorism is a global problem, and one that can only be solved with international responses.

Central Asia is a region affected by both internal and external terrorism, and is surrounded by territories that are deeply impacted by extremist attacks. To the south, the region borders Afghanistan, a breeding ground for the Taliban radical religious militia, and more recently home to an increased presence of terrorist groups affiliated to the Islamic State (IS). To the east, Central Asia flanks the Chinese province of Xinjiang, where Uighur separatist groups are active, and to the West the region faces the Caucasus, where jihadists groups fight to establish a North Caucasian Emirate. Internally, the region has its own local terrorist formations, notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islami.<sup>5</sup>

The Central Asian states are not spectators when it comes to security issues. Even before the events of 9/11 and the US-led War on Terror campaign, Central Asian leaders were warning the West about mounting tensions in neighbouring Afghanistan, while dealing

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<sup>1</sup> Orazgaliyeva M. Nazarbayev Attends SCO, BRICS Summits in Ufa [Internet]. The Astana Times. 2015 [cited 29 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.astanatimes.com/2015/07/nazarbayev-attends-sco-brics-summits-in-ufa/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dunya.com/gen-buyukanit-terrorism-is-the-worst-plague-of-the-21st-century-8828h.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Daish / Daesh are the Arab acronyms used to indicate the terrorist group commonly referred to as Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

<sup>4</sup> Kamalova G. Afghanistan territory used by terrorist from Central Asia, China and Russia: Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. Politics. Tengrinews.kz [Internet]. Tengrinews.kz. 2015 [cited 29 July 2015]. Available from: [http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/Afghanistan-territory-used-by-terrorist-from-Central-Asia-261187/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Afghanistan-territory-used-by-terrorist-from-Central-Asia-261187/)

<sup>5</sup> Popularly known as Hizb ut-Tahrir, the activities of this group are banned in nearly all the Central Asian republics.

internally with the threat of terrorism. In the aftermath of the ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the region is on the alert more than ever before. In the words of a prominent regional expert: "International terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the safe haven of Afghanistan carry far-reaching international security implications, but for a bordering region like Central Asia, these threats become immediate"<sup>6</sup>. Due to geographical proximity, the "Afghan Problem" might rapidly become a Central Asian problem.

This Paper aims to outline the past, present and future efforts of Central Asian states against the common threats of terrorism and radicalism, in cooperation with regional and external actors such as Russia, the US and China, with and within international bodies including the European Union (EU), the SCO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In this common struggle, Central Asian states are not only the recipients of much-needed intelligence and aid, but also proactive participants. The Paper offers an analysis of the internal and external anti-terrorism policies of Kazakhstan, as a case-study of a Central Asian leader advancing the idea of achieving security by integrating "problematic" neighbours such as Afghanistan. Finally, the Paper explores Central Asian responses to present-day threats posed by IS foreign fighters and instability in Afghanistan.

### **Central Asia after 9/11: A Helping Hand to the West**

An overwhelming amount of literature has been produced on how the events of 9/11 instantly transformed US interests in Central Asia, a region which had been "a remote and low-priority area in the 1990s...[and] became the strategic frontline for US military operations in Afghanistan."<sup>7</sup> However, little has been made of the contributions to the international fight against terrorism made by Central Asian states, who became not just beneficiaries of the War on Terror, but active allies.

The countries of Central Asia cooperated with the US as committed partners in the international coalition supporting the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) campaign. But the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had been pressing for some form of international intervention in Afghanistan long before this.

Military cooperation between Uzbekistan and the US increased after the Tashkent bombings in February 1999, in which the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, appeared to have been targeted by religious extremists tied to the IMU<sup>8</sup>, a militant Islamic group that had forged ties to al-Qaeda during the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

Since 1999, US Special Forces helped to train and equip their Uzbek counterparts, and in 2000 Tashkent granted permission to the CIA to covertly launch Predator drone flights into Afghanistan from its airfields. Thus, when in October 2001 the US sought permission to use Uzbek territory for major combat operations against the Taliban, Tashkent responded immediately to the call, although President Karimov restricted the US use of Uzbek territory

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<sup>6</sup> Cummings S. *Understanding Central Asia*. New York: Routledge; 2012, p.147

<sup>7</sup> Cooley A. "Great games, local rules", Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Olcott M. *Central Asia's Second Chance*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; 2005.

<sup>9</sup> ICG. *The IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir: Implications of the Afghanistan Campaign* - International Crisis Group [Internet]. Crisisgroup.org. 2002 [cited 29 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/b011-the-imu-and-the-hizb-ut-tahrir-implications-of-the-afghanistan-campaign.aspx>

to “forces for search and rescue operations,” and called for the sharing of intelligence between the two states.<sup>10</sup>

The resulting agreement granted the US military use of the old Soviet air base near the southern towns of Karshi and Khanabad, just 90 miles from the Afghan border. The US was also given clearance to transit Uzbek airspace and access to auxiliary airfields. In December 2001, the Camp Stronghold Freedom at Karshi-Khanabad was operating as a logistical hub for humanitarian purposes. The new US-Uzbek security partnership was formalised in March 2002, when Presidents Bush and Karimov signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership in Washington, which included the targeting of IMU and intelligence exchange concerning regional militant networks.

The Tajik and Kyrgyz governments also proposed the use of facilities in their territories to the US military - not only for the boost that a US base would provide to the local economy, but for assistance in combatting terrorism and drug trafficking networks, a major source of revenue for terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup> Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan was used by the US and France as a refuelling base during various phases of the military operation in Afghanistan, while the US established a full-fledged base facility in Kyrgyzstan’s major commercial airport near Bishkek. In addition, the US gained limited landing rights at three airfields in Kazakhstan. Only Turkmenistan imposed strict limits on its military cooperation with the US, remaining faithful to its “positive neutrality” foreign policy agenda. However, it did serve as a major transit point for humanitarian assistance directed towards Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup>

US military engagement with Central Asian states peaked in 2008. The opening of a so-called “northern route” for supplies bound for US and NATO forces in Afghanistan had been considered for some time, and it became a priority as the southern route (which ran through Pakistan) became increasingly vulnerable to militant attacks. A series of negotiations with Central Asian governments for the facilitation of the new Northern Distribution Network (NDN) helped to provide a safe passage for non-lethal supplies and materials.<sup>13</sup> In this vast network, Uzbekistan proved to be a critical transit point, since two of the three main routes that constituted the NDN included Uzbekistan as final destination before entering Afghanistan. Currently, the US maintains small shipments on the NDN<sup>14</sup> on the so-called “NDN-South” route, which originates on the Black Sea port of Poti in Georgia, passes through Georgia and Azerbaijan by train, and reaches Aktau, Kazakhstan’s main port on the Caspian Sea, before crossing into Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

The same routes used to ship supplies to Afghanistan were used for the withdrawal of the equipment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces from the region, signalling the official end of the war and the dawn of a new era of “uncertainty” for both Afghanistan and Central Asia.

## **Afghanistan 2015: the Challenge Ahead**

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<sup>10</sup> Cooley A. *Great games, local rules*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2012, p.31

<sup>11</sup> Cummings S. *Understanding Central Asia*. New York: Routledge; 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Olcott M. *Central Asia's second chance*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Cooley A. *Great games, local rules*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Kucera J. *On Afghan Transit, NATO And Russia Part Ways -- This Time, Amicably* [Internet]. EurasiaNet.org. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/73561>

At the time of writing, barely six months have passed since the official withdrawal of ISAF combat forces from Afghanistan. During those months, the situation in the northern Afghan provinces bordering Central Asia has substantially deteriorated, especially in the Badakhshan region.<sup>15</sup> The prominent role reportedly played by Central Asian militants in these assaults on Afghan government forces represents a major concern for the region's leaders.<sup>16</sup>

The replacement of ISAF troops by Afghan National Security Forces has resulted in a partial loss of control by the authorities in Kabul. Taliban insurgency continues in several provinces, and the country is far from secure. At the 68<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly in September 2013, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan officially expressed their concerns, warning against regional security threats associated with the post-2014 scenario in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>



Map 1: The Northern regions of Afghanistan bordering the three Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Source: <http://www.rferl.org/fullinfographics/infographics/27013992.html?nocache=0#4> Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2015

Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan - reducing the risk of instability spilling over compared to other Central Asian countries - so Astana's approach to the

<sup>15</sup> Rferl.org. [Internet]. Rferl.org. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.rferl.org/fullinfographics/infographics/27013992.html?nocache=0#4>

<sup>16</sup> Pannier B. Roundtable: Afghanistan's Central Asian Security Spillover [Internet]. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-northern-taliban-kunduz-central-asia/27120453.html>

<sup>17</sup> Dettoni J. Chian the Grandmaster of Great Game II [Internet]. 1st ed. bne intellinews; 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: [http://bne-static-production.s3.amazonaws.com/dispatch-pdf/bne\\_magazine\\_june\\_2015.pdf](http://bne-static-production.s3.amazonaws.com/dispatch-pdf/bne_magazine_june_2015.pdf)



political and security developments in Afghanistan is arguably less biased than that of its neighbours.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, the drawdown of ISAF forces from a still-fragile Afghanistan is a major concern. The topic has received considerable attention from the Kazakh media and government, while officials have raised Kazakhstan's concerns over Afghanistan with international partners via multilateral and bilateral platforms.

Kazakhstan's diplomats have stressed the risks posed by the spillover of instability beyond Afghanistan's borders at CSTO and SCO<sup>19</sup> summits, as well as during bilateral talks with the US<sup>20</sup> - especially in light of the rise of several formations purportedly linked to IS among insurgent groups fighting in Northern Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Kazakhstan firmly supports the CSTO members' decision to provide military equipment free of charge to Tajikistan, so as to strengthen the defence capabilities of the state which shares a large portion of its border with Afghanistan and faces the highest risk of being infiltrated by radical insurgent groups<sup>22</sup> as well as of internal violence as evidenced by the spate of attacks on September 4, 2015 which resulted in several dozen deaths among police officers<sup>23</sup>.

As a result, 2,000 CSTO troops arrived in Tajikistan to check the combat readiness of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF). Russia alone is committed to providing Tajikistan with military assistance worth around €1.14bn, strengthening its ability to handle border and internal security. The latest example of international assistance to strengthen Tajikistan's border security occurred on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015, when the US donated around 80 all-terrain vehicles to Tajik security forces for use in patrolling remote mountainous areas, adding to over 300 mine-resistant armour-protected vehicles already provided.<sup>24</sup> But this may not be enough.

Terrorism is fought not only through practical security measures, but also by addressing the long-term causes of radicalisation, which are rooted in low socio-economic development. To this end, Central Asian states have contributed to Afghanistan's development via a number of projects. Kazakhstan has allocated US \$50 million towards the education and training of Afghan students, and Astana has offered a further US \$2 million in financial aid to the Afghan Security Forces.<sup>25</sup> Uzbekistan has built a railway line from Hairaton to Mazar-e Sharif in Afghanistan, providing more connectivity options for Kabul and a

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<sup>18</sup> Kassenova N. Relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian states after 2014 Incentives, Constraints and Prospects [Internet]. SIPRI. 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI14wcaNK.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Sputnik News. SCO Discuss Afghan Security as Tensions in Middle East Grow / Sputnik International [Internet]. Sputniknews.com. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://sputniknews.com/politics/20150711/1024483679.html>

<sup>20</sup> Nurbekov A, Buzepzhanova D. FM Idrissov's Visit to Washington Solidifies Kazakhstan-U.S. Partnership - The Astana Times [Internet]. The Astana Times. 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/12/fm-idrissovs-visit-washington-solidifies-kazakhstan-u-s-partnership/>

<sup>21</sup> Latifi A, Bengali S. Afghan officials acknowledge Islamic State presence in their country [Internet].

latimes.com. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-afghanistan-islamic-state-20150317-story.html>

<sup>22</sup> <http://en.tengrinews.kz/military/CSTO-to-supply-weapons-to-Tajikistan-to-protect-Afghan-22829/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34157441>

<sup>24</sup> Pannier B. Tajikistan: The Far Outpost Of Great Powers [Internet]. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-far-outpost-of-great-powers/27141036.html>

<sup>25</sup> US Department of State. Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview [Internet]. U.S. Department of State. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

significant economic boon for the Afghan economy.<sup>26</sup> Turkmenistan is a committed supporter of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline) project, while Ashgabat has also increased the capacity of existing electric transmission lines to Afghanistan, and has begun construction on a railroad connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with the support of the World Bank, promote the CASA-1000 project, allowing the transmission of electricity from these countries to Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

All five Central Asian countries are members of the Istanbul Process, a mechanism of political cooperation between states broadly bordering Afghanistan which aims to implement confidence-building measures in order to secure borders and assist in Afghanistan's development. The Government of Kazakhstan, together with the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has also launched the Almaty Process, a regional consultative initiative addressing the issues of refugees and migrants in Central Asia. The platform's main focus is the potential flow of refugees from Afghanistan to Central Asia.<sup>28</sup>

## **The IS Threat**

The eventuality that Central Asian fighters who have joined the militant ranks in Afghanistan or the IS in Iraq and Syria might attempt to return in the region, trained and possibly tasked with carrying out terrorist attacks, is the source of much apprehension among government officials in the Central Asian republics. According to a recent International Crisis Group report, between 2,000 and 4,000 Central Asian citizens are fighting alongside IS in the Middle East. The report adds that the growth of radical Islam is exacerbated by poor religious education and grievances against the region's secular governments.<sup>29</sup>

In reality, Central Asians who support IS appear to have little knowledge of Islam as a religion, instead embracing it as an identity that offers solidarity, a sense of belonging and an explanation for economic hardship and discrimination that they may have experienced.<sup>30</sup>

Radicalisation is a particular menace in Tajikistan. The many Tajik migrants who have lost their jobs in recession-hit Russia, and returned home to find few opportunities for employment, are increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups such as IS. Extremist recruiters offer unemployed workers large sums of cash to fight in Syria and Iraq and today many, given the lack of options at their disposal, are answering the call.<sup>31</sup> Lately

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<sup>26</sup> 3. Andrewgrantham.co.uk. Hairatan to Mazar-i-Sharif railway | Railways of Afghanistan [Internet]. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.andrewgrantham.co.uk/afghanistan/railways/hairatan-to-mazar-i-sharif/>

<sup>27</sup> EastWest Institute. [Internet]. Ewi.info. 2014 [cited 29 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.ewi.info/idea/afghanistan-reconnected-regional-economic-security-beyond-2014>

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR. Almaty Process [Internet]. Unhcr.kz. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.unhcr.kz/eng/almatyprocess/>

<sup>29</sup> ICG. Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia [Internet]. 1st ed. Bishkek/Brussels: International Crisis Group; 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Heathershaw J, Montgomery D. Exeter Central Asian Studies Network | Why do Central Asians join ISIS? [Internet]. Blogs.exeter.ac.uk. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/excas/2015/07/17/isis/>

<sup>31</sup> Demirjian K. How Russia's labor migration policy is fuelling the Islamic State [Internet]. The Washington Post. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/rweb/world/how-russias->



IS has been using Russian and non-Russian speaking contingents to wield influence in the former Soviet space, via social media propaganda. A Russian-language IS media channel, Furat Media, has recently been launched to increase the scope of IS propaganda across the Russian-speaking world.<sup>32</sup>

Central Asian authorities have reacted strongly to these developments, establishing blocks on the use of extremist social media and revoking the citizenship of fighters who have joined IS' ranks. But it is Kazakhstan which has launched the most elaborate response to IS's efforts, as part of the country's new counter-terrorism strategy.

### **Kazakhstan: Reshaping the Approach to Counter-Terrorism**

Kazakhstan's counter-terrorism strategy could serve as a model for Central Asia as a whole, demonstrating the importance of updating counter-terrorism policies in the face of new threats and challenges. Following a series of violent episodes in 2011 - 2012, Kazakhstan reacted cohesively, avoiding widespread panic, and the government promptly took measures to enhance the country's defences against the threat of terrorism, by reforming law enforcement agencies engaged in anti-terrorism operations.

Kazakhstan's new approach, which entails civil society engagement and the modernisation of anti-terrorism tactics according to international best practices, is in constant evolution and has proved to be highly successful - no terrorist attack has been registered in the country since 2013, when the country reformed its counter-terrorism strategy. According to analysts, the shift in strategy leaves Kazakhstan "well placed to deal with the risk of future radical returnees from Syria or Iraq".<sup>33</sup>

Kazakhstan, a highly multi-ethnic country home to more than 100 ethnic groups, has adopted a successful model of inter-faith dialogue, promoting tolerance and non-discrimination. As part of its message of tolerance, the country organises the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, an international summit attended by representatives of worldwide religious organisations, every three years in Astana.

The peaceful nature of inter-religious relations in Kazakhstan was threatened by a series of incidents between 2011 and 2012. A series of attacks hit the cities of Aktobe, Atyrau, Astana, Taraz and Almaty, killing 21 people<sup>34</sup>. Kazakhstan's law enforcement agencies were criticised in the wake of the incidents, as was the country's approach to counter-terrorism – not least by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who called for immediate reforms, arguing that the nation's security forces were "acting post-factum all the time".<sup>35</sup>

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[labor-migration-policy-is-fueling-the-islamic-state/2015/07/10/15b9300e-1141-11e5-a0fe-dccfea4653ee\\_story.html?tid=kindle-app](http://www.rferl.org/content/labor-migration-policy-is-fueling-the-islamic-state/2015/07/10/15b9300e-1141-11e5-a0fe-dccfea4653ee_story.html?tid=kindle-app)

<sup>32</sup> Paraszczuk J. How To Recruit Militants & Influence People: IS's First-Ever Kyrgyz Recruitment Video [Internet]. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kyrgyz-recruitment-video/27155247.html>

<sup>33</sup> McDermott R. Kazakhstan's Evolving CounterTerrorist Strategy: Domestic Roots [Internet]. 1st ed. Central Asia Program; 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

[http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/oeffentlich/Kasachstan/20\\_geschichte-staat/Policy\\_Brief\\_18\\_December\\_2014\\_1.pdf](http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/oeffentlich/Kasachstan/20_geschichte-staat/Policy_Brief_18_December_2014_1.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Kosolapova E. Special services prevent 9 terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan in 2013-2014 [Internet]. Trend. 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://en.trend.az/casia/kazakhstan/2315746.html>

<sup>35</sup> McDermott R. Kazakhstan Introduces New Counter-Terrorism Strategy [Internet]. The Jamestown Foundation. 2013 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

In 2013, the government adopted the bill ‘*On amendments and additions to legislative acts on combating terrorism*’, which showed “clear efforts to modernize the country’s approach to defining and combating terrorism”.<sup>36</sup> Amendments were developed taking into account international best practices and agreements signed by Kazakhstan within the framework of regional security organisations, such as the SCO Convention on Fighting Terrorism, adopted in 2009. Regional anti-terrorist centres were founded under the authority of the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan (KNB).<sup>37</sup>

Kazakhstan’s approach, which views civil society as a fundamental partner in the fight against terrorism, makes the country’s counter-terrorism measures “unique within Central Asia”.<sup>38</sup> The 2013 law aims to reach out to regular citizens, raise awareness of the problems posed by radical interpretations of Islam, and create an “axis of cooperation” between civil society and security forces in order to prevent radicalisation and fight terrorism.

In accordance with this new approach a dedicated website, counter-terror.kz<sup>39</sup>, was launched<sup>40</sup> and a four-year programme to fight internal terrorism was approved by President Nazarbayev in October 2013.

In 2014, the Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Counter-terrorism,<sup>41</sup> prohibiting entry into the country by foreign nationals who may have been involved in terrorist activities and authorising stricter monitoring of former convicts detained under terrorism-related charges. The new Criminal Codes, in force since January 2015, were amended to introduce a provision that criminalised fighting abroad<sup>42</sup>, alongside stronger punishments expected to have a preventative effect and curtail the ability of Islamic extremists to recruit Kazakh citizens. Since the adoption of the new Criminal Codes, two Kazakh citizens have been sentenced to 11 and 8 years in jail for fighting alongside terrorist groups in Syria.<sup>43</sup>

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[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=40708&cHash=4f21a07a96c15e61d2ff9c24abf386aa#.VbpJmPntmkp](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40708&cHash=4f21a07a96c15e61d2ff9c24abf386aa#.VbpJmPntmkp)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> McDermott R. Kazakhstan’s Evolving CounterTerrorist Strategy: Domestic Roots [Internet]. 1st ed. Central Asia Program; 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

[http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/oeffentlich/Kasachstan/20\\_geschichte-staat/Policy\\_Brief\\_18\\_December\\_2014\\_1\\_.pdf](http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/oeffentlich/Kasachstan/20_geschichte-staat/Policy_Brief_18_December_2014_1_.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> McDermott R. Kazakhstan Introduces New Counter-Terrorism Strategy [Internet]. The Jamestown Foundation. 2013 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=40708&cHash=4f21a07a96c15e61d2ff9c24abf386aa#.VbpJmPntmkp](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40708&cHash=4f21a07a96c15e61d2ff9c24abf386aa#.VbpJmPntmkp)

<sup>39</sup> Counter-terror.kz. Анти террор [Internet]. Counter-terror.kz. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.counter-terror.kz/>

<sup>40</sup> McDermott R. Kazakhstan’s Evolving CounterTerrorist Strategy: Domestic Roots [Internet]. 1st ed. Central Asia Program; 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

[http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/oeffentlich/Kasachstan/20\\_geschichte-staat/Policy\\_Brief\\_18\\_December\\_2014\\_1\\_.pdf](http://liportal.giz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/oeffentlich/Kasachstan/20_geschichte-staat/Policy_Brief_18_December_2014_1_.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> US Department of State. Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview [Internet]. U.S. Department of State. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

<sup>42</sup> Normativ.kz. Уголовный кодекс от 3 июля 2014 года № 226-V (вводится в действие с 01.01.2015 года) с изменениями на [Internet]. Normativ.kz. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

<http://normativ.kz/view/109751/>

<sup>43</sup> RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Kazakhstan Jails Two Radical Islamists For Terrorism [Internet]. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhs-jail-two-radical-islamists-for-terrorism/26860302.html>

Currently, 19 terrorist and extremist organisations are outlawed in Kazakhstan.<sup>44</sup> The international organisation “*Al-Takfir wal-Hijra*” was the latest addition to the list, judged as extremist by an Astana court in October 2014.<sup>45</sup>

Four special counterterrorism divisions operate under the Kazakh Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as one under the KNB<sup>46</sup>, with the KNB anti-terrorist centre coordinating all state activities against terrorism and extremism<sup>47</sup>. Official statistics note 65 terrorism-related court cases in 2013 and 52 in 2014, during which time 29 people were convicted of extremist and terrorist crimes.<sup>48</sup> While no terrorist attacks were carried out in the territory of Kazakhstan in 2014, the Prosecutor General Office claims that nine terrorist plots have been averted by Kazakh security services in this period.<sup>49</sup>

The Kazakh government is taking serious steps to curb the ability of terrorist organisations to use internet to spread extremist ideas and recruit followers. New amendments to the Law on Counter-terrorism authorise the closure of websites publishing extremist propaganda.<sup>50</sup>

Astana is constantly organising and hosting seminars and conferences, often with the support of international partners, to discuss new counter-terrorism approaches and new techniques to fight radicalisation. Such gatherings, attended by a wide variety of international experts on counter-terrorism, provide Kazakhstan with the know-how and momentum to further enhance its counter-terrorism strategy.

In June 2015, Astana hosted a conference entitled “Countering Violent Extremism”, attended by regional governments, as well as representatives from the EU, US, OSCE, SCO and CSTO.<sup>51</sup> Participants at the conference - aimed at promoting cooperation and common initiatives in the region to combat the spread of religious radicalism - proposed to adopt a global database of internet websites publishing extremist content online, and to foster the development of preventive mechanisms to halt recruitment by terrorist groups, particularly via social media. The conference speakers also stressed that enhancing religious education is a crucial factor in the fight against terrorism.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Knb.kz. Сайт Комитета национальной безопасности Республики Казахстан [Internet]. Knb.kz. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://knb.kz/ru/antiterror/atc/article.htm?id=10321708@cmsArticle>

<sup>45</sup> 21. Inform.kz. Al-Takfir wal-Hijra organization recognized as extremist in Kazakhstan [Internet]. Inform.kz. 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.inform.kz/eng/article/2706531>

<sup>46</sup> US Department of State. Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview [Internet]. U.S. Department of State. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Knb.kz. Сайт Комитета национальной безопасности Республики Казахстан [Internet]. Knb.kz. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://knb.kz/ru/antiterror/atc/article.htm?id=10321708@cmsArticle>

<sup>48</sup> US Department of State. Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview [Internet]. U.S. Department of State. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Kosolapova E. Special services prevent 9 terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan in 2013-2014 [Internet]. Trend. 2014 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://en.trend.az/casia/kazakhstan/2315746.html>

<sup>50</sup> US Department of State. Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview [Internet]. U.S. Department of State. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

<sup>51</sup> Fox News Latino. South, Central Asia tackle extremism at Astana CVE conference [Internet]. Fox News Latino. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2015/06/29/south-central-asia-tackle-extremism-at-astana-cve-conference/>

<sup>52</sup> Witte M. Regional Conference Against Violent Extremism Opens With Calls for Broader Cooperation [Internet]. The Astana Times. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from:

The Committee for Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Culture and Sport is the main state body dealing with this issue, coordinating its activities with the main Islamic authority of the country, the Spiritual Directorate of Kazakhstan Muslims (SDKM). The Committee has opened several websites, including E-Islam.kz<sup>53</sup>, to increase religious literacy and counter the diffusion of radical ideas. The CRA also seeks to monitor Kazakh students who studied overseas in religious institutions<sup>54</sup>, while the SDKM has started a campaign to defend traditional Islam against the rise of radical interpretations, and has instituted monitoring groups of theologians to supervise the religious landscape in Kazakhstan.<sup>55</sup>

The groups targeted by extremists for recruitment are various and non-homogeneous. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan's government is aware that radicalisation is likelier wherever social inequalities are more prominent and opportunities less available, and is therefore working to address the deeper causes of radicalisation, by investing in the development of disadvantaged regions and creating new opportunities for employment.

Kazakhstan's new approach focuses not only on the repression of terrorism, but also on effective preventative actions to halt radicalisation, and rehabilitation programs for people who have been involved in terrorist activities. Open discussions about IS and Islamic extremism are regularly held in Kazakh mosques between Imams and believers.<sup>56</sup> Preventative and rehabilitative measures have also been applied to Kazakhstan's prisons, and a rehabilitation programme for people charged with terrorist acts and extremist propaganda has been launched. In 2014 Kazakhstan inaugurated a Republican Centre for the rehabilitation of convicts, where SDKM members meet prisoners to discuss religious issues. The Centre operates in collaboration with 28 regional branches.<sup>57</sup>

## **The International Community and Central Asia: A United Front Against Terrorism?**

The states of Central Asia continue to demonstrate their commitment to the War on Terror by pursuing their membership in various international bodies to combat terrorism, holding high-profile bilateral and multilateral summits on the issue with leading world powers, and participating in military drills by different regional security organisations. Moreover, by signing the Ashgabat Declaration<sup>58</sup>, Central Asian states have reaffirmed their commitment to the UN Joint Plan of Action for the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia.<sup>59</sup>

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<http://www.astanatimes.com/2015/06/regional-conference-against-violent-extremism-opens-with-calls-for-broader-cooperation/>

<sup>53</sup> 23. E-islam.kz. Главная - E-ISLAM [Internet]. E-islam.kz. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://e-islam.kz/ru/>

<sup>54</sup> US Department of State. Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview [Internet]. U.S. Department of State. 2015 [cited 30 July 2015]. Available from: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

<sup>55</sup> J. Nichols (2014). *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interest*. Congressional Research Service. [Available at] <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> J. Paraszczuk (2015), *Innovative Or Soviet? Central Asian Countries Shift Attitudes To Reporting On IS*. RFERL. [Available at] <http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-shifting-attitudes-reporting-on-islamic-state/27128919.html>

<sup>57</sup> US State Department (2015). *Terrorism Country Report 2014 South and Central Asia*

<sup>58</sup> [http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/ashgabad\\_final\\_declaration\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/ashgabad_final_declaration_en.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> [http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/final\\_joint\\_action\\_plan\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/final_joint_action_plan_en.pdf)

International cooperation in the fight against terrorism is a priority for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states. Astana, in accordance with its multi-vector foreign policy, is seeking to mobilize all relevant regional actors, bilaterally and multilaterally, to protect national and regional security from the threats posed by terrorism and religious extremism, as well as drug trafficking.<sup>60</sup> As Professor Dubovtsev - lecturer at Kazakhstan's National Defence University - has argued, in order to fight terrorism and extremism effectively, countries need to establish new forms of coordination in the military-political sphere, and develop an inter-state counter-terrorism system.<sup>61</sup>

As well as multilateral frameworks, bilateral agreements are also being adopted by states in the region. In 2003, Russia and Kyrgyzstan concluded an agreement to open a Russian air base under CSTO auspices in Kant, while in 2004, Moscow and Dushanbe legally formalised the presence of the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Division in Tajikistan, to counter possible instability arising from Afghanistan. The Russian division has been authorised to stay in the country for another 49 years, following an agreement signed in 2011.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan's termination of arrangements with the United States regarding a support center at Manas airport, which became effective in August 2015 and which was largely seen as a result of "great game" politics of Russia seeking to restore influence in its traditional "sphere of influence", shows a dire need for a more open, transparent and robust dialogue and cooperation among all actors concerned with the threat of extremism and future of Central Asia, especially as it relates to challenges emanating from Afghanistan.

As for the EU's role in the region, the main policy instruments used are the recently reviewed EU-Central Asia Strategy, and the High Level Security Dialogue (HLSD) format. Following the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the HLSD, which took place in Dushanbe in March 2015, the Latvian Presidency in the European Commission scheduled a practical follow-up to the meeting in the form of seminar, held in Brussels, during which counter-terrorism legislation and the fight against religious radicalisation were discussed in depth.<sup>62</sup>

The EU also funds the development of national counter-terrorism strategies in line with regional programmes<sup>63</sup> such as Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP). Finally, the European Council supports the coordination of EU efforts for regional security with regional partners involved in conflict prevention and security activities such as the OSCE and the UN, in particular the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA).

## **Conclusion: A Region on Guard**

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<sup>60</sup> G. Kirbassov (2014). *Counter-terrorism in Central Asia Requires International Cooperation*. The Washington Post. [Available at]

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/26/counter-terrorism-in-central-asia-requires-international-cooperation/>

<sup>61</sup> G. Dubovtsev (2012). *On the Improvement of Military-Political Activity for Regional Security from the Threat of Terrorism*. [Available at] <http://counter-terror.kz/ru/article/view?id=195>

<sup>62</sup> <https://eu2015.lv/news/media-releases/1120-latvian-presidency-organises-first-eu-central-asia-seminar-on-counter-terrorism>

<sup>63</sup> EC, Joint Staff Working Document, 2015. *Progress Report on the Implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy*, p.31. [Available at]

[http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/EU/XXV/EU/05/32/EU\\_53204/imfname\\_10524558.pdf](http://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/EU/XXV/EU/05/32/EU_53204/imfname_10524558.pdf)

Growing instability in Afghanistan and the Islamic State's powerful recruitment strategies represent threats to the entire world population. Tackling such issues requires enhanced and fully-fledged international cooperation. We have seen how Central Asian states effectively cooperate with regional security organisations such as the CSTO and SCO and global powers such as the US against terrorism. However, the law enforcement agencies of Central Asian states are still reluctant to work together and share intelligence. This mutual distrust should be overcome.

Countries in the region should constantly be calling into question and upgrading their internal counter-terrorism measures, in order to adapt to new challenges in a region on the frontline of the war on terror. In this regard, Kazakhstan's counter-terrorism strategy could represent a useful example for Central Asia, and perhaps beyond.

Kazakhstan is currently bidding for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2017 - 2018. If successful in its bid, Kazakhstan will have a prominent opportunity to speak out for a pivotal region from within the leading global body for international security, and in doing so further enhance international cooperation in Central Asia in the fight against terrorism.



## ABOUT THE ECFA

Central Asia is a region larger than Western Europe and contains five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Blessed with some of the richest and most diverse resources anywhere in the world, over the last twenty years the region has shown its commitment to become a reliable, long-term partner of the West.

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's engine for economic growth, and the Government of Kazakhstan has taken the lead in developing relations with the European Union. In its commitment to the process of deepening political and economic relations with the European Union, Kazakhstan is participating in the establishment of the **Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (ECFA)**, which is a new and dynamic think tank working at the heart of the European Union.

The first Honorary President of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs is H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs has been modeled on the Council on Foreign Relations in the US, the United Kingdom's Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House and the EU's own European Council on Foreign Relations. It is envisaged that over time, the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs will become a valuable and independent source of high-quality research, publications and information that will keep Europe fully abreast of the fast-changing development of the Central Asian region. This is a work-in-progress, and it will require dedication and commitment from the ECFA's team of researchers and writers.

The grant for the establishment costs of the ECFA has been provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The ECFA and its staff are grateful for this generous donation and thank the MFA. It is envisaged that, as with similar institutions in other countries, governments in the region as well as corporate sponsors and private individuals will over the longer-term join the funding base of the ECFA.

A list of upcoming publications can be [found here](#). The formal launch of the ECFA took place in November 2014, attended by distinguished members of its [Advisory Council](#). The ECFA's first Director, Rauan Kenzhekhanuly, provided regular news updates on the region in his [Blog](#), while the new Director, Zhanbolat Ussenov, has come on board in early 2015 to continue steer the new organization and he has begun providing his views too. You can [subscribe here](#) to receive all news updates as well as the ECFA's regular newsletters and bulletins.

*Important Disclaimer: Please note that the views expressed in our Occasional Papers series do not represent the views of its Honorary President H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, or the views of any of the members of the Advisory Council of the ECFA. The purpose of the Papers is to create debate and discussion on the important developments occurring in Central Asia. They are designed to encourage further open discussion and debate, in which the views of all parties are to be encouraged.*