Comparison of the Kazakhstan and the Uzbekistan counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization strategies

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Abstract: This article compares the measures of two states, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, competing for the position of regional leader. Elimination of radicalization from the lowest levels of the state is a natural concern of authoritarian governments. Mindful of the threat that religious extremism poses to the stability of authoritarian regimes, they condemn terrorism in all its forms and support the international community's efforts to fight (Islamist) terrorism together. To ensure stability and national security, the governments of both countries have adopted comprehensive national strategies and action plans to counter radicalization and terrorism. Their common feature is the focus on preventive measures in local communities. However, while Kazakhstan concentrates on addressing the root causes of extremism, a strong emphasis on repressive measures can be identified within the Uzbek strategies. The article examines the limits of cooperation between the leading Central Asian countries as declared in the current legislative acts, highlights how the positions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan differ and diverge, and the potential to mitigate the risks associated with extremism in Central Asia by strengthening regional cooperation and understanding.

KEYWORDS: TERRORISM, RADICALIZATION, NATIONAL INTEREST, KAZAKHSTAN, UZBEKISTAN, STRATEGY, THREAT

1. Introduction

The terrorist attacks of 11 September and the subsequent military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda have increased the strategic importance of Central Asia. The fight against terrorism and radicalization is considered one of the priority directions in ensuring the national security of the Central Asian states. These states are religiously moderate, but not immune to extremist influences from beyond their borders. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the most advanced countries in the region, support the international community's efforts to combat terrorism, develop multilateral cooperation and employ comprehensive strategies aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by terrorism and radicalization.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan increasingly recognize that the internal issues within their respective countries pose the greatest risk to maintaining security and stability in Central Asia. The implementation of reforms has become the fundamental means of addressing these issues, with key components including economic development (new agreement for a scheme of generalized preferences signed with the EU), poverty alleviation, the fight against corruption, social justice, improvement of the standard of living for the population, and the assurance of national development and social stability.

2. Kazakhstan’s Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Radicalization Strategies

Kazakhstan is dedicated to actively counters the spread of religious fanaticism within state borders. The country has undergone a dynamic evolution in its CT strategies, with notable developments in response to a series of terrorist attacks in 2011 (westernmost provinces). The government initiated a significant overhaul of its counter-terrorism approach, recognizing the imperative for enhanced intelligence capabilities and comprehensive counter-radicalization programs. The country also saw that counter-radicalization policies are necessary to counter Salafism, which deviates from the country's religious traditions and serves as a potential gateway to jihadism.

The legislative landscape witnessed substantial changes, with the introduction of new laws and amendments to existing counter-terrorism legislation. The government delineated the roles and responsibilities of 26 government agencies involved in counter-terrorism efforts, establishing a comprehensive framework for the national counterterrorism program [1]. The creation of national, regional, and local counterterrorism centres highlighted the commitment to a multi-layered and coordinated approach.

Kazakhstan's strategy also reflects a preventive orientation, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as young people and prisoners. State-supported NGOs and local officials engage in educational initiatives, offering lectures that aim to foster 'immunity' to religious extremism [2]. However, concerns persist regarding the restrictive nature of Kazakhstan's legislation on religious beliefs, potentially eliciting resistance from peaceful religious groups subjected to government repression.

The country's counter-terrorism efforts extend beyond its borders, with regional cooperation playing a pivotal role. Collaborative initiatives, such as the automated information exchange system among border control authorities of neighbouring countries, underscore Kazakhstan's commitment to addressing terrorism collectively. Furthermore, Kazakhstan collaborates with the United States and international organizations on various counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism projects, demonstrating a global perspective in its security approach.

As Kazakhstan continues to refine its strategies, ongoing challenges include ensuring the balance between law enforcement measures and efforts to promote officially approved versions of Islam, providing alternatives to extremism through social programs and economic opportunities. The multilayered approach reflects the country's recognition that sustainable security requires addressing the root causes of terrorism and promoting resilience within society.

2.1 Legislative Framework

The legal apparatus is primarily rooted in the National Security Law, which provides a robust foundation for counter-terrorism efforts. The legislation outlines a clear mandate for law enforcement agencies to identify, prevent, and respond to terrorist activities. In July 1999, Kazakhstan implemented the Law on Combating Terrorism, establishing a comprehensive legal and organizational framework for addressing terrorism within the republic. This legislation outlines the roles of government entities and organizations, regardless of ownership, aiming to secure individuals, society, and the state against terrorism while preserving national harmony and civil peace [3]. The law's key principles include prioritizing life protection, upholding the rule of law, proportional counter-terrorism measures, emphasis on prevention, necessity of punishment for terrorist activities, integrated preventive approaches, and unified command in operational management.

Kazakhstan's counter-terrorism strategy focuses on identification, prevention, and suppression of terrorist activities, aiming to minimize and eliminate the consequences of terrorism. The Republic has implemented extensive measures to neutralize risks, enhancing national security and fortifying the system against extremist and terrorist threats. National programs to counter religious extremism and terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for the 2013-2017 (total funding 103 billion 1.76 million tenge (over 1 billion USD at the rate of 2013) and for 2018-2022 (270 billion 148 million tenge (696.389 million USD) illustrate the government's commitment and involve multifaceted actions, including...
explanatory and rehabilitative efforts [4]. The government has intensified security and suppressed a wide range of religious and political freedoms under the pretence of addressing terrorism threats. The priority of state policy on religion is to preserve the secular foundations and principles of government. Presently, registering any organization legally in Kazakhstan is more challenging than in the past, signalling the government's rigorous measures to prevent the proliferation of religious extremism.

3. Uzbekistan's Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Radicalization Strategies

Uzbekistan has evolved its counter-terrorism strategies over the years, marked by a series of legislative and institutional changes. In 2012, the country suspended its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The government was confident that it could control its border with Afghanistan but was less sure about its neighbours’ ability to do so and was particularly concerned about infiltration of extremists through Uzbekistan’s long, rugged border with Tajikistan [5]. The government's approach to counter-terrorism has involved the use of charges related to terrorism and extremism to suppress legitimate political or religious expressions.

Official media campaigns have consistently targeted the male population under 40, considered most susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist groups. Despite the government's emphasis on counter-terrorism, Uzbekistan's effectiveness is hindered by human rights concerns, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and a slow progress in establishing the rule of law. Uzbekistan's approach to counter-terrorism is characterized by a set of stringent measures designed to combat the threat of terrorism swiftly and decisively. Throughout its evolution, Uzbekistan's counter-terrorism policies have faced criticism for their impact on fundamental human rights. The country's legislative approach places significant emphasis on preventive measures, including strict controls on religious organizations and the regulation of religious education. The government emphasizes the critical need to preserve the true essence and principles of the sacred Islamic religion within all aspects of society [6]. Uzbekistan's legal landscape reflects a proactive stance, with a focus on pre-emptive measures to curb radicalization. While this approach has been effective in deterring immediate threats, it also raises concerns about the potential for overreach and limitations on individual freedoms. The Uzbekistan authorities still consider legitimate expression of religious sentiment or belief “extremism.” [7]. The government categorizes Islamist groups that deviate from the state-sponsored version as “extremist,” and uses the terms “terrorism” and “extremism” interchangeably in law enforcement procedures. Repressive measures, such as the banning of media outlets and arrests of individuals on charges related to terrorism, have been notable aspects of Uzbekistan's counter-terrorism efforts.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's tenure, beginning in 2016, marked a period of transition and sought to improve relations with neighbours, including security cooperation. The government actively participated in regional frameworks like C5+1, focusing on countering violent extremism. Despite positive developments, such as the removal of individuals from a security watch list, concerns persist about the government's use of security concerns as grounds for detentions [8].

In recent years, Uzbekistan has remained vigilant against the potential spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan and its neighbours. The government's efforts include active cooperation with international organizations, the development of national strategies, and addressing issues related to radicalization and terrorist use of the internet. The Taliban takeover of Kabul has heightened Uzbekistan’s concerns, emphasizing the ongoing challenges in managing terrorism-related threats.

3.1 Legislative Framework

The Uzbek Law on Combating Terrorism (2000) governs terrorism-related investigations and prosecutions and identifies the State Security Service (DXX) as the lead CT law enforcement agency. Emphasizing legality and prioritizing individual rights and freedoms, the law underscores preventive measures as a priority, necessitates punishment, and advocates a combination of open and covert methods in counter-terrorism efforts [9]. Additionally, the law addresses the conduct of counter-terrorism operations, compensation for damages resulting from terrorist acts, and the social rehabilitation and legal protection of those involved in the fight against terrorism. In 2018 the government adopted the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Countering Extremism that defines (1st official definition) extremism as a manifestation of extreme forms of action aimed at destabilizing the social and political situation, violent change of Uzbekistan’s constitutional order, violent seizure of power and usurpation of its powers, and incitement to national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred [10].

The country's first "National Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2021-26" reflects a continued focus on legislative improvements and international cooperation in the face of evolving security challenges [11]. The strategy aims to ensure the effective and coordinated implementation of state policies against extremism and terrorism. This strategy aligns with the broader vision outlined in the “Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026,” which emphasizes approaching universal issues based on national interests. Uzbekistan's commitment to an uncompromising stance against terrorism involves refining preventive mechanisms, enhancing the socio-spiritual environment, fostering immunity against extremist ideologies, strengthening diplomatic capacities, exchanging information internationally, participating in global and regional anti-terrorism organizations, and coordinating efforts to implement the UN's global counter-terrorism strategy in Central Asia. The strategy reflects Uzbekistan's active role in international initiatives aimed at fostering information exchange and collaboration in the joint effort to combat extremism and terrorism in Central Asia [12].

5. Comparative Analysis

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are active participants in the fight against international terrorism. Both republics have supported the adoption of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and in the first years of their independence ratified 14 (Uzbekistan) or 19 (Kazakhstan) international conventions and protocols on combating terrorism and extremism [13]. Uzbekistan has not yet ratified 5 UN conventions or protocols (Protocol to the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, Protocol to the Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf, Convention on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Relating to International Civil Aviation, Protocol Supplementary to the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft, Protocol to the Convention on Offences and Certain Other Acts Committed on Board Aircraft) and is currently demonstrating no will or action to change the status quo. The same attitude prevails on the issue of Uzbekistan's rejoining the CSTO, emphasizing a focus on effective collective cooperation in security rather than signalling membership, while acknowledging potential threats from terrorist organizations in Afghanistan [14].

| Table 1: Regulation of the relations in the field of counter-terrorism [15-17] |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| International legal instruments against terrorism/Radicalization | Uzbekistan | Kazakhstan |
| Main counter-terrorism law | Law on Combating Terrorism of the Republic of Uzbekistan (December 15, | Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan N 416-1 on action against terrorism |
| 14/19 | 19/19 |
Despite the rejection of tough security measures, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are among the safest countries in the world. In the new Global Terrorism Index for November 2022, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan ranked 93rd among 164 states and once again entered the category of countries with a low level of terrorist danger (-4.513 change 2011-2021 for Kazakhstan and -2.390 for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as outlined in their respective Criminal Codes, exhibit notable differences in the severity of punishments for terrorism-related crimes. Uzbekbek’s counter-terrorism strategy is often considered one of the strongest and most progressive in the Central Asian region. In contrast, Kazakhstan’s Criminal Code, while robust in addressing terrorism, does not exhibit the same level of strictness as Uzbekistan. Punishments for terrorism-related crimes in Kazakhstan are comparatively less severe, reflecting a different approach to counter-terrorism measures.

### Table 2: Terrorism Penalties Comparison [19-20]###

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Uzbekistan</th>
<th>Kazakhstan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act of Terrorism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10-15 years imprisonment / life imprisonment</td>
<td>6-10 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting Terrorism</td>
<td>up to 5 years imprisonment</td>
<td>5-9 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing of terrorist/extremist activities</td>
<td>8-10 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
<td>5-9 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation of terrorist group and its leadership</td>
<td>8-10 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
<td>10-17 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership in terrorist organizations</td>
<td>5-7 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
<td>8-12 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorist recruitment, training and arming</td>
<td>5-7 years imprisonment, corrective labour up to 3 years</td>
<td>8-12 years imprisonment, confiscation of property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorist training</td>
<td>8-10 years</td>
<td>3-7 years imprisonment</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Despite the absence of terrorist attacks in the examined countries in 2022, both nations experienced a period of upheaval marked by a surge in protests and demonstrations, accompanied by an escalating wave of violence. Uzbekistan experienced protests in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan (July 1-3, 2022) following President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s proposed constitutional amendments that sought to eliminate Karakalpakstan’s autonomous status and its right to secede via referendum [23]. The demonstrations prompted constitutional reforms, resulting in the withdrawal of the proposed changes. The Uzbek government reported 21 deaths, 243 injuries, and 516 detentions during the protests. While the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed support for Uzbekistan’s leadership in stabilizing the situation, the EU voiced concerns about the events, urging all parties to exercise restraint and emphasizing the need to uphold human rights and freedom of expression in accordance with Uzbekistan’s international commitments.

The beginning of 2022, known as “Qandy Qantar” or the bloody January, marked a period of significant unrest in Kazakhstan. Triggered by protests against rising gas prices, the situation escalated into widespread anti-government demonstrations, resulting in 238 casualties, 4,353 injuries, and significant political changes, including the resignation of the prime minister and the CSTO deployment in the country. The repercussions led to heightened border control between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, with the latter indefinitely closing its borders and cancelling flights, while Uzbekistan increased security along the shared border, raising concerns about potential protests in the region [24].

6. Conclusion

While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan recognize the importance of regional and international cooperation in addressing terrorism and radicalization, the nuances in their legal frameworks, regional engagement, and perceptions of terrorist threats underline the uniqueness of each nation’s approach. The counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization strategies of the examined countries exhibit similar and diverging characteristics. Both countries have implemented measures to control and monitor religious activities, aiming to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies and emphasize the importance of legality and the necessity of punishment for terrorist activities and preventative measures, including addressing root causes and minimizing the impact of radicalization.
The presidential administration in Uzbekistan monitors religious activities and has taken measures to control the content of religious teachings to prevent the spread of radical ideas. President Mirziyoyev underscores the paramount importance of engaging with the youth demographic in the ongoing struggle against extremism and radicalization. This approach underlines the exacerbated global issues, particularly the growing role of technology and social networks in youth recruitment and radicalization, and increased terrorist financing. The government articulates its apprehensions concerning the "dissemination of radicalization, and increased terrorist financing. The government is also aimed at the reintegration of people (formerly) associated with extremist groups and cannot be restricted. Nowadays, the top politicians of the country’s aspires to be a key regional leader in counterterrorism cooperation. The country’s approach emphasizes the importance of legislative measures and law enforcement actions. The government tries to balance between security measures and the protection of individual rights, reflecting a commitment to upholding the rule of law in its counter-terrorism endeavours. Within the framework of religious freedom, the government's concern is to promote a moderate form of Islam. Additionally, Kazakhstan has established a specialized counter-terrorism center, fostering inter-agency cooperation and intelligence sharing to enhance the effectiveness of preventive measures.

Kazakh and Uzbek politics have begun to place greater emphasis on countering extremism and radicalism. However, the spread of violent extremist ideas leading to radicalization and terrorism has become one of the phenomena accompanying the liberalization processes after state independence and a social cost of promoting the idea that the right to freedom of opinion is absolute and cannot be restricted. Nowadays, the top politicians of the countries realize that the barrier against external threats must be constructed primarily within the countries themselves. Naturally, this will be a lengthy and difficult process, and success will not be achieved overnight.

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