

Dissertation Title:

Countering Religious Extremism and Online Radicalization in Uzbekistan

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

From the early days of its independence the Republic of Uzbekistan considered religious extremism and terrorism as the most serious threat to national and regional security.

During the 1990s internationally designated terrorist organizations: “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” (IMU), “The Islamic Jihad Union” (IJU)¹, Central Asian branch of “Hizbut-Tahrir al Islamiya” (HT) and other radical groups emerged in Uzbekistan as opponents to secular political system of the newly independent state – Republic of Uzbekistan. Due to strict counterterrorism policy of Uzbekistan the level of the threat in the country steadily declined, however, religious extremism and radicalism have not disappeared as major radical organizations moved to neighbouring Afghanistan and Tajikistan; some of which still conduct covert activities within the country and abroad.

In addition, the recent emergence of different radical militant groups in Afghanistan such as Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) and Katibat Tavhid wal Jihod (KTJ), which have returned to the region from Syrian civil war, caused concerns for Central Asian countries, especially for Uzbekistan as these radical militant groups are fighting in the north of the Afghanistan, not far from Uzbekistan’s border (Cornell & Zenn, 2018).

Moreover, with the development of information communication technologies (ICT), religious extremist and radical organizations have advanced their capabilities both in real and virtual space. Such organizations, including so called “Islamic State” (IS)², which still seek to radicalize Muslim communities and recruit new members

¹ Also known as The Islamic Jihad Group (IJG).

² Although the IS has been defeated in Syria and Iraq, however it split into small militant groups and still active in cyber space.

through the Internet by targeting Central Asian population as well. Particularly, “IS and its online supporters have proven themselves to be perhaps the most adept and prolific producers and disseminators of digital content” (Walker & Conway, 2015, p.158).

According to A.Matveeva and A. Giustozzi as a result of IS’s mostly online propaganda and recruitment “as of March 2017 about 1,400 Uzbekistani volunteers had joined IS since its inception; of these some 210 had returned to Central Asia, and about 125 had been killed” in Syria (Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018, p.194).

Uzbek authorities’ harsh counter terrorism and extremism policy, especially, under previous president (Islam Karimov, ruled independent Uzbekistan in 1991 - 2016) had been criticized by the international community and human rights organizations for violating religious freedom in political interest of the regime, meanwhile from the year 2017 the new leadership of the Uzbekistan under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev initiated wide range of reforms and liberalization policy in all spheres, including religious sphere. The new authorities of Uzbekistan have released most of religious and political prisoners and the relationship between the state and public has been shifting to positive landscape for the last years. President Mirziyoyev has straightened out Uzbekistan’s religious policy and shifted it from “a defensive to an offensive strategy” by maintaining “the secular nature of the state, its laws, and its education system. But he also put increasing emphasis on promoting the tolerant Islamic tradition indigenous to Central Asia, something he dubbed “Enlightened Islam” (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.8). With President Mirziyoyev’s recent religious policy reforms and initiated national idea of “Enlightened Islam”, “Uzbekistan is laying the foundations of an important and unprecedented new direction and model for the Muslim world as a whole” (Starr, & Cornell , 2018, p.9).

However, some observers are still sceptic concerning the success and future of the reforms. In turn, security experts are worried about opening up policy regarding the religious freedom which might cause spread of radical ideology among Uzbek society as due to provided free access to foreign religious web sites and resources (social media

platforms and messenger applications like “Telegram”) international extremist organizations became more active in information space of the Central Asian region. In this regard, particularly, at the current stage, recent organisational, institutional and legislative reforms in Uzbekistan on countering violent extremism (CVE) and online radicalization have to be evaluated and studied properly.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

Firstly, the main aim of the research is to conduct critical study of counter radicalisation policy of Uzbekistan on the Internet to reduce the influence of foreign radical religious ideology to Uzbek society.

Secondly, to explore and examine recently introduced organisational, institutional and legislative mechanisms of countering online radicalisation in Uzbekistan in the framework of latest liberal reforms.

1.3 Research Questions

Built around research aims and objectives the following research questions will be addressed:

What are the main concerns of (Uzbekistan) Uzbek government on foreign religious web sites, do they really pose security and/or ideological threat to the society, individuals and the state?

What are the main features of recently introduced organisational, institutional and legislative mechanisms of countering online radicalisation in Uzbekistan?

1.4 Literature Review

There is a wide range of existing literature on the causes, conditions and emergence of religious extremism, radicalism and terrorism in Central Asia region and in Uzbekistan, in particular. However, terrorist or extremist use of the Internet and empirical case studies on countering online radicalisation in the countries of the region remain scarce, apart from some research studies on the subject conducted by local and foreign scholars (Laruelle, 2012; Tucker, 2016; Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018; Gussarova, 2018).

Literature review of the research comprises mainly two parts: first part forms general theoretical basis and theoretical framework concerning securitisation and (in)securitisation (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008; Balzacq et al. 2010; Nyman, 2016), radicalisation (Rabasa et al., 2010; Moghaddam, 2005; Baran, 2005; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Neumann, 2013; Schmid, 2013; van Eerten et al, 2017;), online radicalisation (Stevens & Neumann, 2009; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017; Schlegel, 2018), violent extremism, religious extremism (Ilkhamov, 2001; Naumkin, 2005; Olcott, 2007; Karagiannis, 2009; Türker, 2011; Kramer, 2015; Cornell & Zenn, 2018), and countermeasures by state and society against online radicalisation (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Omelicheva, 2010; Walker & Conway, 2015. Aly, Balbi & Jacques, 2015; Lain, 2016; Gussarova, 2018). The extended literature review on theories and theoretical approaches will be examined in the second chapter of the thesis.

The second part of the review focuses on the Central Asian region and includes literature on terrorism, violent and religious extremism, radicalism, radical movements and organisations targeted at Uzbekistan and broader Central Asian region. Most of the literature acknowledge the influence of radical religious ideology to the stability and security of the region and Uzbekistan as well (Naumkin, 2005; Baran, Starr & Cornell, 2006; Olcott, 2007; Omelicheva, 2010; Türker, 2011; Olcott, 2014; Lain, 2016; Cornell & Zenn, 2018).

At the same time, the scholarship could be divided into two main streams; according to first major group of scholars from the early years of independence Central Asian secular leaders' harsh autocratic policies considered as the foremost reason for the emergence of radical Islamic groups in the region. In their opinion Central Asian authorities have been exaggerating the level of threat in their own interest to confront any opposition to the regimes and to justify repression. Scholars support the idea that religious extremism and terrorism highly politicised by the region's authoritarian rulers and even "laws on religion have often gone hand in hand with a counter-terrorism response." (Ilkhamov, 2001; Naumkin, 2005; Karagiannis, 2009; Anceschi, 2012; Kramer, 2015; Lain, 2016; Tucker, 2016).

Second group argue that "the evolution of radical Islam in the years just prior to and immediately following the collapse of Soviet rule has its roots in earlier decades" (Olcott, 2007, p.3). According to works of this group of scholars we can point some internal and external aspects of evolution of radicalism in Central Asian region. Internal aspects are firstly within the religion - historically and widely practiced Islam and within state-religion relations. External factors include foreign influence and instable neighbouring regions. (Baran, Starr, & Cornell, 2006; Olcott, 2007; Omelicheva, 2010; Türker, 2011; Starr, & Cornell, 2018; Cornell, & Zenn, 2018). Meanwhile, structural factors and conditions, such as "poverty, unemployment, relative deprivation, social inequality, the collapse of the welfare system, corruption, and harsh authoritarianism that created fertile ground for radicalisation and recruiting new members to the ranks of Islamic radicals who offer simple solutions to everyday problems" (Naumkin, 2005, p. 262).

Overall, above mentioned factors caused the emergence of internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as IMU, IJU, HT and other radical groups from the early 1990s in Central Asian region. Several scholarly works are also devoted to study of their developments, ideology, actions, capabilities and intentions in the region (Ilkhamov, 2001; Naumkin, 2005; Baran et al., 2006; Karagiannis, 2009).

Recent research on the threats of violent extremism and radicalism in Central Asian region argue that “radicalisation and participation of Central Asians in global jihad is a reality that cannot be ignored, because it does not affect the region only” (Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018, p.190).

At the same time “formation of virtual jihadi communities is a global trend, but offline radicalisation typically proceeds online” (p.197), especially, in case of Central Asian countries. According to experts’ analysis despite all recruited jihadists initially were brain washed through the Internet, however terrorists were directly contacted by recruiters through face to face contact at least before carrying out major attacks (Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018).

Nevertheless, Tucker by analysing counter measures of Uzbekistan to prevent online radicalisation and recruitment of the population by IS mentioned that “the government’s public messaging switched from emphasizing military measures to defend Uzbekistani territory to preventing recruitment” (Tucker, 2016, p.8). In point of Tucker’s view “Uzbekistan’s shift in tactics to use trusted religious figures... to counter IS recruitment reflects one of the most resonant public responses to IS messaging and is likely to be significantly more successful than past strategies” (Tucker, 2016, p.10).

In this regard, in case of Uzbekistan, especially under the current President Mirziyoyev as public support to state’s CVE and counter radicalisation policy is growing, Uzbekistan should have counter-narratives against extremist and radical ideologies. Counter-narratives, alternative narratives and positive approach to counter violent extremism and radicalisation in case of power centred states of Central Asian region could be more effective and constructive than imposing restrictions on the Internet and strengthening information control.

1.5 Research Design and Methodology

The research design of the dissertation adopts mixed methodological approaches, qualitative and quantitative, for their suitability to answer the set research questions.

Qualitatively, it will rely on secondary sources like books, journal articles, previous research works and primary sources like national legislation, speeches, official statements, international and governmental reports and surveys will be used. By examining historical and social contexts the research will employ securitisation theory to explain the state behaviour and its policy choice.

Quantitatively statistical methods will be employed to analyse collected empirical data by using different data analysis software. Moreover, in order to evaluate the general public support to the official CVE and counter radicalisation policy of the government up-to-date social surveys will be utilised.

Chapter 2

2.1 Theoretical framework

This second chapter is extended literature review of the main theoretical approaches to securitisation and radicalisation.

a. Critical security studies: Copenhagen School and securitisation theory

In contemporary, rapidly developing world research on issues of “security” has become one of the hottest topics of academia from International Relations, Strategic Studies, Security Studies and other disciplines. However, the term “security”, its definition, meaning and interpretation still contested, which lead to formation of different “schools of thought” like Welsh, Copenhagen and Paris Schools of the Critical Security Studies (CSS) in the conditions of emerging security challenges to states, societies and individuals. For many decades, especially in the heat of Cold War security was associated only with a military threat, and its study was dominated by “state centric” political Realism which “is usually seen to emphasise the state as the main object of security, and the war as the main threat to it” (Peoples & Vaughn-Williams, 2010, p. 4).

Meanwhile, CSS view on security characterized as critical and non-traditional approach, and the scholars’ of these schools stand for broadening and deepening of theoretical understanding of security and insecurity, which is, in turn, a positive development rather than a source for concern. For the new generation of scholars of CSS (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 1996; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008; Balzacq et al. 2010; Bigo, 2011; Nyman, 2016) concept of security significantly expanded and not only the state, but also various institutions, individuals, groups and even the biosphere became the object of concern. Interconnectedness and transnational practices of security were acknowledged.

For the research design of the thesis the most dominant schools of Critical Security Studies – Copenhagen School’s “securitisation theory” (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde,

1998) has been chosen as more applicable theoretical concept to understand and explain state behaviour and its policy choice.

Leading scholars of Copenhagen School (Barry Busan, Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde) at first defined security in traditional context, arguing that it “is about survival”, meanwhile, extended survival logic beyond military by identifying four other categories, such as political, societal, economic, and environmental security. At the same time, each category of security are determined by securitizing actors (political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists) and referent objects (state-military security, national sovereignty, ideology-political security, national economies-economic security, collective identities-social security, species or habitats-environmental security).

Copenhagen School offers systematic, comparative and coherent analysis of security. School believes that any specific matter can be non-politicized, politicized or securitized. Issue is non-politicized when it is not a matter for state action and is not included in public debate. If issue is managed within political system, requires government decision and resource allocations, then it becomes politicized. When issue requires emergency actions beyond the state’s standard political procedures issue is being securitized. Copenhagen School argues that issue can be moved from the politicized to the securitized end of the spectrum through an act of securitization. The act can be described as security actor (government) arguing that already politicized issue is an existential threat to a referent object (state, groups), therefore, securitizing actor asserts that it has to adopt extraordinary means (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p.24-26). In other words, securitization is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as special kind of politics or as above politics.

Copenhagen school relies on a two stage process of securitization to explain how and when an issue is to be securitized. First stage is presenting certain issues as existential threats to referent objects. Second stage is completed successfully only once

the securitizing actor has succeeded in convincing a relevant audience (e.g public opinion) that a referent object is existentially threatened. Success of act of securitization depends whether audience accepts the discourse.

When it comes to the motives of securitization of certain issues, Copenhagen School argues that politicians can use the language of security towards public matters in order to boost their popularity and enhance their chances of re-election. However, it is crucial to highlight the danger of securitization. The process can be abused to legitimize and empower the role of the military in civilian activities. Curtail of civil liberties, imposing martial law, detaining political opponents, increasing military budgets could be dangerous outcomes of securitization.

By applying securitisation theory's concepts to Uzbekistan's case it is possible to argue that, terrorism and related problems (radicalism and religious extremism) as in many parts of the world have been politicized and securitized by state-government ("security actor") from the early days of independence. Terrorism, radicalism and religious extremism are considered as an "existential threat" to a "referent object" – to state (regime), society and individuals.

It should be also noted that, with the beginning of new millennium in human history, with the rapid development of information and communication technologies and emerging new types of security challenges scholars' attention to study the concept of security remarkably increased. At the same time, it also creates some challenges to academia to reach a consensus concerning the concept. For the last decades, this tendency exaggerated, in this regard, Jonna Nyman asserts that the existing debate around security is "confusing as it is disabled by a vocabulary with conflicting and unclear definitions. The different schools of thought offer different perspectives but there is not enough cohesion between these criticisms. This limited and confusing system for critiquing security is a problem because no clear language is established, making it impossible to develop a clear goal of security" (Nyman, 2016, p.822). Especially, such controversial concepts on security, their definition and interpretation

are obvious in different countries. For instance, one of the most referred security issue – cyber security has very diverse understanding among states, although it has become a tradition that some countries define their understanding of cyber security in their official documents or legislation.

2.2 Theoretical concepts and critiques on radicalisation

a. Radicalisation and online radicalisation

Regarding theoretical frameworks of the research it should be noted that successful “online” and “offline” counter radicalisation policies, measures depend upon appropriate understanding of radicalization, extremism, violent extremism and terrorism (both theoretically and practically) by taking into account local contexts of the issues.

Most of existing literature on radicalisation focuses mainly on “Islamist extremism and jihadist terrorism” along with less attention to right-wing, left-wing, anarchist, nationalist, and other forms of violent and non violent extremism and radicalisation issues, where as “studies on de-radicalisation, disengagement and counter-radicalisation are fewer and of more recent origin” (Schmid, 2013, p.2).

It should be noted that still in academia the terms and concepts of “radicalisation”, “online radicalisation”, “counter-radicalisation” and “de-radicalisation” have not completely defined and properly distinguished therefore make some confusions and difficulties in research. The reasons of this might be on one hand the topics are relatively young and introduced to terrorism studies in the first decades of 21st century, on other hand the concepts mean different things depending on the context, especially misinterpreted or misused by policy makers and therefore “can only be properly assessed in relation to what is mainstream political thought in a given period” (Schmid, 2013). For example, Professor Peter Neumann, Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (King's College London, UK) has also pointed out that the content of the term “varies depending on what is seen as ‘mainstream’ in any given society, section of society or period of time. Different political, cultural and historical

contexts, in other words, produce different notions of ‘radicalism’” (Neumann, 2013, p.876).

At the same time, he argues that “the word ‘radical’ is not always associated with extremism, nor does it necessarily imply a ‘problem’ that needs to be studied and solved” (Neumann, 2013, p.876). According to Prof. Neumann “the trouble with radicalization is even more pronounced, and less easily resolvable, than the difficulties surrounding the definition of terrorism...Radicalization, by contrast, is inherently context-dependent, and its meaning will always be contested” (Neumann, 2013, p.878).

Meanwhile, one of the most explicit definitions of radicalisation, for example, comes from Horgan and Braddock, who defined the radicalisation as: “the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology” (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 279).

Several scholars also define the concept of radicalisation as a “progression which plays out over a period of time and involves different factors and dynamics” (Moghaddam, 2005; Baran, 2005; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; as cited in Neumann, 2013, p.874).

At the same time, it is important to note that one of the main concerns of radicalisation studies is exploring causes and conditions which may lead to greater problem – violent extremism and terrorism. For instance, Dr. Alex P. Schmid, a Visiting Research Fellow of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) and Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), along which micro levels of analyzing causes of radicalisation that can lead to terrorism offers meso- and macro-levels of analysis. Meso-level factors (the wider radical milieu – the supportive or even complicit social surround) and macro-level contextual factors (role of government and society at home and abroad, the radicalisation of public opinion and party politics, tense majority – minority relationships) may play a similar or an even larger role than individual and small group factors in the overall radicalisation processes (Schmid, 2013, p.4).

Neumann has also pointed out “cognitive” and “behavioural” aspects of radicalisation process. According to him, these two types should be distinguished for better understanding of the phenomenon and for framing effective police. By cognitive radicalisation Neumann considers believing in “‘radically’ different ideas about society and governance” and following radical ideologies, whereas behavioural radicalisation is an action which could be labelled as “violent” or “radicals” depending on the context (Neumann, 2013).

In general, scholars’ common view on radicalisation is that the radicalisation is “a process by which people increasingly adopt more extreme attitudes and behaviour that might involve approval of the use of violence by others or displaying this violence themselves to stimulate fear in the general population in an attempt to instigate changes in society” (van Eerten et al, 2017, p.11). And also radicalisation is considered as an initial stage that leads to (violent) extremism and terrorism which are defined the most priority security concern for countries, for Uzbekistan, in particular.

Online radicalisation

In today’s world nearly everything is connected to the Internet, not only our computers and mobile phones, but also our cars, fridges and things of everyday use. Furthermore, the world has become more and more interconnected through cyberspace - the Internet has made communication easier than used to be at any other time of human history. Without doubt, the interactive nature of online communications, the decentralized structure of cyberspace, and the growing accessibility of online technology have boosted our daily life. On the one hand it has created immense opportunities for individuals, business, communication etc., but on the other hand, due to fact that more and more processes are dependent on the interconnectedness of today's digital infrastructure, it has also become a serious “source” of new emerging threats for national and international security. For instance, radicals, extremists and terrorists are also highly integrated with the internet. The use of Internet and other forms of ICTs by

above mentioned individuals or groups in destructive purposes and against peace and stability have been acknowledged by scholars.

In the context of the radicalisation processes, the use of the Internet as a mean of propaganda and recruitment are the most relevant cases. On the Internet, various types and means of dissemination (social media platforms, online media channels and media formats with text, photo, audio, video and other illustrations) are widely used to target audiences.

Although most of researchers are agree that the Internet and other forms of ICTs are often an important factor, but not the only element which initiate or facilitate radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. However, the Internet is considered as “a facilitator and catalyser of an individual’s trajectory towards violent political acts” (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017, p.4).

At the same time it should be noted that, there is no common understanding of online radicalisation among scholars of the field. According to P. Gill, E. Corner, A. Thornton and M. Conway one of the key problems in studying radicalisation “is an abundance of conceptual problems. A wide-range of virtual behaviours is subsumed into the category of online radicalisation” (Gill, Corner, Thornton & Conway, 2015, p.5).

Moreover, some researches confirm that offline interactions and in-person gatherings are still important in radicalisation processes and online communications does not necessarily accelerate the radicalisation of individuals and groups (Baaken & Schlegel, 2017; Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018).

Overall it could be argued that online radicalisation is “a process whereby individuals, through their online interactions and exposure to various types of Internet content, come to view violence as a legitimate method of solving social and political conflicts” (Bermingham et al, 2009). Moreover, it is “both part of the strategy employed by potentially violent extremists and also a by-product of the proliferation of social media among the adherents of these groups” (Schlegel, 2018, p.1).

b. Counter radicalisation and de radicalisation

According to scholars, in general, counter radicalisation encompasses those measures taken to prevent a new generation of radicals and extremists, and are thus less reactive than deradicalization which “is the process of abandoning an extremist worldview and concluding that it is not acceptable to use violence to effect social change” (Rabasa et al., 2010, p.2).

Regarding counter measures it is also very difficult to define “what works and what does not work in general, or what is even counter-productive when it comes to de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation. Local context matters very much. And academics and policy makers alike are increasingly recognising this fact” (Schmid, 2013, p.55).

In general scholars differentiate three types of approaches of countering radicalism, (violent) extremism, and terrorism: which are hard, soft and smart approaches (Aly, Balbi & Jacques, 2015).

Concerning state’s countermeasures to online radicalisation C. Walkera and M.Conway distinguished two types of responses which are “positive” and “negative” measures. By “positive” measures authors defined “those online initiatives that seek to make an impact through digital engagement and education and the provision of counter-narratives” where as “negative” measures stand for hard approaches and “the deletion or restriction of violent extremist online content and/or the legal sanctioning of its online purveyors or users” (Walker & Conway, 2015, p.159).

“Positive measures” as a political strategy against online radicalisation could be also named as “counter narratives” strategy against radical or violent extremist ideology, which are widely used in liberal democracies. In turn, censorship and “negative approaches” include and practice mostly blocking and filtering the online content. However, the design and the nature of the internet and the modern ICTs undermine the effectiveness of such measures.

It should be also mentioned that, in the countries where “negative measures” are common, even cognitive radicalisation process are targeted along with behavioural, as a result not only “radical actions” but also “radical ideas” are criminalized.

At the same time, as C. Walkera and M.Conway suggests, so-called “negative” measures may be contrasted with more “positive” approaches” which is very applicable in case of Uzbekistan. Therefore, current research will also test this argument as public support of country’s CVE and counter radicalisation policy in information space (not only) should have “counter-narratives” against violent extremist and radical ideologies.

Concerning problems of radicalisation in context of Central Asian region, the latest research by “Internews” found that set of structural factors and conditions – lack of knowledge or poor understanding of religion (education, both secular and religious), unemployment, poverty and migration (economic factors), discrimination and mistreatment by law enforcement (political factors) were among the most frequently cited drivers of radicalisation and extremism.

Meanwhile, no single factor or driver can be identified as determinant for radicalisation in case of any country, region or individual. And also there is no single profile of a typical radicalised individuals or supporters of extremist ideology.

Chapter 3

3.1 Radicalisation and religious extremism: presupposed or real security threat to Uzbekistan and broader Central Asian region?

Over the past decades after the independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 for all states of Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, radicalisation and religious extremism have been a matter of serious concern. Especially, in Muslim-majority Uzbekistan which shares borders with the rest of four countries and including Afghanistan, the issues of radicalisation, religious extremism and terrorism had been highly prioritized in internal and foreign policy of the country.

In addition to Central Asian authorities' security concerns, for the last two decades most of local and foreign (especially Russian) scholars, political analysts and commentators have been highlighting the rapid revival of Islam in the region which, consequently, in their opinion, created ground for spread of radical ideology among local population. These so called "the security-focused literature" or "religion as security literature" have remarkably influenced the vast majority and scholarship studying Central Asian region.

Historically, Central Asian nations considered as a part of the Islamic civilization and Islam played crucial role in social, political and economic lives of the population of the region. Most of Central Asians, mainly Muslims belong to more tolerant and liberal Hanafi school – one of Sunnism's four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Even, during the former Soviet Union's oppression of religion and in the time of dominant – monopolistic ideology, Islam remained a matter of national identity and traditions for the majority of Uzbeks. However, the Soviet rule in Central Asia was a particularly difficult period for the Muslim people as "mosques were destroyed, Muslim leaders were unjustly persecuted, and the glorious Islamic past of the region was erased. Yet, Moscow underestimated the capacity of Islam to survive under harsh conditions"

(Karagiannis, 2009, p.2). On other hand, “Islam played a more superficial and varied role in the territories of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, formally inhabited by nomads, than in the regions of the sedentary Uzbek and Tajik Muslims. The policies of the tsarist and Soviet Russia strengthened this pattern” (Omelicheva, 2010, p.175). Meanwhile during soviet period as potential of Uzbekistan’s scholars and Islamic legacy in the country were considerable, in 1943 Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) established in the capital of the Uzbekistan – Tashkent city. SADUM’s branches – kaziyaats were opened in the rest Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with in other newly independent countries, Uzbekistan witnessed “Islamic awakening” – vast increase in Islam and religious teaching. “Hundreds of mosques and medressas (religious schools) were built or restored in Uzbekistan. Also, Korans and other Islamic literature were brought in from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan” (Karagiannis, 2006, p.263). Moreover, “along with the moderate and traditional forms of the Islamic faith, radical Islam reemerged in the Muslim communities of the Central Asian republics” (Omelicheva, 2010, p.167).

At the same time, group of scholars stand for opposite argument that in fact during Soviet period authorities from the Moscow “actively encouraged more orthodox practices imported from the Middle East, including Salafi ideas” by repressing “traditional Central Asian Islam, particularly its Sufi variety” and consequently “these took root in parts of Uzbekistan the Soviet period, and help explain the explosion of extremist jihadism in the Ferghana valley in the late 1980s.” (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.7).

At the same time, basically, the role of religion in political life of the Central Asian societies the relationship between state and religion was very specific and assimilated with local context. According to prominent American expert on Central Asia and the Caspian region – Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Moscow Centre “for more than five centuries, Sunni Islam in Central Asia in general and in Uzbekistan in particular has

been dominated by a formal religious hierarchy appointed or sponsored by a secular ruler. Thus, one potentially useful government approach would be to label any Muslim activist or cleric who rejects the leadership of the official religious establishment in Central Asia as a radical Muslim. Because the state appoints the official religious establishment, to reject the establishment's leadership is to question the authority and the legitimacy of the state" (Olcott, 2007, p.4). At the same time, because of the Soviet authority's atheistic attitude toward religion as a major obstacle for the spread of communist ideology, almost in all Central Asian countries most of religious practice went underground and the role of unofficial clergy grew following the suppressions and repressions of local Islam. Therefore, for many years traditional Hanafi clerks both "the official religious establishment" and non-state affiliated scholars who were loyal or did not want to confront official state religious policy have been criticized by "fundamentalist" (conservative) religious figures and scholars.

M.Olcot and others argue that lattes were influenced by foreign Arab and Middle Eastern scholars with fundamentalist views. According to her point of view "the evolution of radical Islam in the years just prior to and immediately following the collapse of Soviet rule has its roots in earlier decades. Radical Islam represents both a battle between Islam and outside forces that seek to transform Islam's sociopolitical role and doctrinal disputes within Islam that have been characteristic of the practice and teaching of the faith for more than five hundred years" (Olcott, 2007, p.3). More specifically, in Central Asia, the focus of Islamic revival and of radical groups has been the Ferghana valley, a densely populated and ethnically mainly Uzbek territory divided politically between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Ferghana valley has traditionally been a centre of Islamic fervour, and was the area where foreign radicals first established a presence (Baran, Starr, & Cornell, 2006, p.15). In the beginning, four radical Islamist groups were active in the valley: "Adolat" (Justice), "Baraka" (Blessings), "Tauba" (Repentance), and "Islam Lashkarlari" (Warriors of Islam) which existed underground during the most period of Soviets, however intensified their

activity after Gorbachev's reforms. "Over time, other groups also became active in the region, including HT and its splinter groups Akramiya and Hizb un-Nusrat, as well as "Uzun Soqol" (Long Beards), "Tabligh Jamaat", "Lashkar-i-Taiba", "Hizballah", and IMU. Since the operation in Afghanistan following 9/11, the IMU has apparently splintered into additional groups, such as the "East Turkestan Islamic Movement" (ETIM), the "Islamic Movement of Central Asia" (IMCA), and "the Islamic Jihad Group" (IJG). The Turkish "Nurcular" (followers of light), a less radical group working openly, has also established a presence" (Baran, Starr, & Cornell, 2006, p.17).

In addition to these groups and movements, according to Evers, Klötzer, Seifert, and Somfalvy there were also some movements ("Hizb ut-Tahrir", "Salafiyya", "Tablighi Jamaat", "Gülen") which "aim at long-term Islamization, based on grassroots work and gradual change of the societal framework from below... They have been active in Central Asia for a long time, both in the underground as well as legally (such as Tablighi Jamaat that is seen as an extremist movement in Kazakhstan, but has permission to operate in Kyrgyzstan). Meanwhile, "Gülen's activities in Central Asia have been largely forbidden at the urging of the Turkish government (Evers, et al, 2018, p.8).

Martha Ollcot by analyzing historical developments of radical religious ideology in Central Asian region and in Uzbekistan highlighted five major periods:

- 1) 1920s to 1960s - beginning of radicalization of reformist Islam in Uzbekistan;
- 2) 1970s to mid-1980s - radicalization of reformist Islam, namely, the period, when divergence of official clergy and supporters of fundamentalist (conservative) views increased.
- 3) Late 1980s to early 1990s – throughout Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost created favorable conditions and accelerated further confrontation between official clergy and fundamentalism. Moreover, by this time there were some attempts to politicize Islam in the Ferghana Valley, primarily in Andijan and Namangan regions of

Uzbekistan, where even group of radical Islamist captured Administrative building in Namangan city.

4) Mid-1990s. During this period defeated radical Islamists from Ferghana Valley were forced to leave the country and some of them fled to neighbouring Tajikistan, where they joined the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan. These radical Islamists hardened throughout the Tajik civil war (1992-1997) later on were the main drivers and organisers of IMU.

5) Late 1990s to 2001. Radical Islamist and supporters of their ideology were either forced underground or expelled from Uzbekistan. After September 11, 2001, and consequent the Afghanistan War of 2001 Taliban movement and their ally IMU almost defeated and its influence considerably weakened. However, “the retreat of well-established radical groups in the Ferghana Valley created the vacuum in which HT was able to spread” (Olcott, 2007, p.28). Moreover, the impact these changes produced the new trends in development of radical ideology in the country and in the Central Asian region.

Alisher Ilkhamov – Research Associate of the Centre of Contemporary Central Asia and Caucasus at the School of Oriental and African Study, University of London – supports the idea that the foreign influence (Saudi Arabia) caused the emergence of radical Islam in Uzbekistan and in Central Asian region starting from the late 1970s. Meanwhile, he argues that religious radicalism in Uzbekistan is in part imported and homegrown. According to Ilkhamov the activists and leaders of the Islamist organizations, such as the IMU “were coached in the unofficial religious schools, which emerged in response to the repression of believers’ rights by the Soviet regime. But the fact of outside ideological influence cannot be denied” (Ilkhamov, 2001, p.46). Moreover, the ejection of Islamists, mainly, the IMU in late 1990s from Uzbekistan “internationalized” them and Uzbek Islamists abroad were provided with “moral and material support” from different Islamic foundations, including internationally recognized terrorist organizations. “The infusion of funds permitted the Islamists to set

up training camps, purchase arms and bankroll operations within Uzbekistan. Karimov's government also failed to cut off completely the channels - the Internet and other telecommunications - through which Islamist ideology entered the country" (Ilkhamov, 2001, p. 45). At the same time Ilkhamov argued that like other Central Asian countries Uzbekistan has also "a socio-economic environment favourable to the spread of the ideas of Islamism: the decline of living standards resulting from the collapse of the relatively well-functioning state-centred economy and the lingering transition to a market economy" (Ilkhamov, 2001, p 46).

Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences - Vitaly Naumkin evaluates structural factors and conditions, such as "poverty, unemployment, relative deprivation, social inequality, the collapse of the welfare system, corruption, and harsh authoritarianism that created fertile ground for radicalisation and recruiting new members to the ranks of Islamic radicals who offer simple solutions to everyday problems" (Naumkin, 2005, p. 22).

For the most part, above mentioned factors caused the emergence of internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as the IMU, IJU, HT and other radical groups from the early 1990s in Central Asian region and in Uzbekistan, in particular. Moreover, continuing instability in neighbouring Afghanistan and the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997) reinforced the Uzbek government's view on radical Islam and its threat to national security and stability of secular state.

The first occurrence of the IMU violence happened in 16th of February 1999 when a series of bombs exploded in capital city of Uzbekistan – Tashkent city (Türker, 2011, p.65). The bombings were the most significant attacks of the terrorists, who allegedly targeted President Karimov.

Although there are different assumptions, explanations or combinations of the events of February 1999 in Tashkent, but none of them can either be confirmed or rejected by evidence, however, Naumkin's point of view among others the following scenarios are the most convincing: the events were organized by local Islamists (the

IMU) and they were carried out by Islamists but masterminded by some foreign or international networks (Naumkin, 2005, p. 87).

Meanwhile, aftermath of wide range state counter terrorism efforts and actions the IMU and its influence had been remarkably declined. Later on, the IMU and its leadership used Afghanistan as a base of operations to launch cross border incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000 and the organisation had close ties to the al-Qaeda terrorist networks (Karagiannis, 2006, p.263). However, Uzbekistan's joint military operations with other Central Asian states and Russia completely expelled the IMU to the territory of Afghanistan in late January 2001. Soon after, the IMU joined the "Taliban" in Afghan civil war but also did not stop its raids to Uzbekistan. However, U.S.-led international coalition pushed the IMU to the bordering territory of FATA - Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Waziristan (Pakistan). The leaders of the IMU were killed, the organisation lost many controlled territories and influence, and also it split into other militant groups (IJU) during forthcoming periods.

At the same time, despite the loss and decrease of the influence in the countries of Central Asia, the radical terrorist activity in Uzbekistan re-emerged noticeably in early 2004. Between March 28 and 31 Uzbekistan was hit by two terrorist attacks, "including the region's first ever female suicide bombing". The attacks, which caused 47 fatalities in total, were aimed primarily at police and Uzbek private and commercial facilities, later on embassies of the USA and Israel in Tashkent (30 July 2004). The scale and level of preparation for these attacks suggests strongly that they received support from outside Uzbekistan. The country's chief prosecutor alleged that all 85 individuals (including 17 women) arrested had been trained as suicide bombers" (Baran, Starr, & Cornell, 2006, pp. 33). Soon after IJU claimed the responsibility for the terrorist attacks; as a result in May 2005 IJU was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department. "In the State Department's statement, IJU is described as a splinter of the IMU, and is held responsible for the July 30, 2004 bombing attacks in Tashkent

targeting the U.S. and Israeli Embassies, and the office of the Uzbek Prosecutor General” (Baran, Starr, & Cornell, 2006, pp. 34).

However, President Karimov argued that HT must bear primary responsibility for the July 2004 attacks. “He claimed on public television that the terrorists based their ideas on Hizb ut-Tahrir’s teachings and that HT had made the biggest contribution to terrorism” (Karagiannis, 2006, p.265).

Emmanuel Karagiannis in his book “*Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir*” presents one the most complete set of explanations for the rise of political Islam in Central Asia in case of HT. Karagiannis argues that there are multiple reasons for the emergence of political Islam but absence of alternative political channels to address grievances was the main reason for activation of such movements as HT in the territory of the region. Therefore, HT’s ideology had popularity in Central Asia to fill the ideological vacuum which acquired after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Political scientist Eric McGlinchey supports this idea that the absence of legal channels has radicalized Muslim population of the region and as a result some of them fall under the influence of radical ideology of the IMU and the HT. McGlinchey argues that radical and political Islam is a response to autocratic rule. According to him, “the more authoritarian the state, the more pronounced political Islam will be in society” (McGlinchey, 2005, p.559). McGlinchey believes the level of contestation allowed within legal institutions is the reason why political Islam has been on the rise in Uzbekistan. His arguments gained support among scholars and has been further developed.

In turn, senior Lecturer in Central Asian Studies at the University of Glasgow Luca Anceschi has also argued that resurgence of Islam in Central Asia “represents part of the responses that the local populations formulate in response to the dual politico-economic crises that affects the region. In this sense, the politicisation of Central Asian

Islam came from within, as its rationale is deeply rooted in the popular perception of the region's authoritarian politics and of its economic shortcomings" (Aneschi, 2012).

Nevertheless it should be mentioned that taken as a whole "the IMU and the HT are probably the two most influential Islamist groups in Central Asia. Both of them propagate the ideas of creating the Islamic Khalifate based on Shariah law and opposing secular modern state, but differ in their methods: while the IMU has applied military means, the HT relies on the non-violence principle" (Akchurina & Lavorgna, 2014, p.327). Meanwhile, in the recent years, "the social organisation of these movements remains unclear. Today, it is difficult to classify Islamist groups because they penetrate into the routine practices of the indigenous social structures. Whether they are terrorist networks, insurgent organisations, drug traffickers, religious movements, or political parties remain open to theorising" (Akchurina & Lavorgna, 2014, p.327).

At the same time, it should be noted that researcher Noah Tucker – Associate for the Central Asia Program at the Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University and Senior Editor for Central Asia at RFE/RL challenges dominant approach among scholars on Islam in Central Asia. For instance, by testing and expanding McGlinchey's hypothesis that radical Islamist groups appear in Central Asia primarily in places where the population feels driven to adopt radical political solutions rather than those places that are simply "more religious" argues that "the increased level of popularity of parties like Hizb ut-Tahrir among ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan and northern Tajikistan (Ferghana Valley) is explained primarily by their level of political marginalization compared to the titular nations in those republics, rather than the common explanation that they are somehow "more religious" than Kyrgyz or Tajiks" (Tucker, 2013, p.45). Moreover, these religious groups and movements "play a far less important role in the Islamic revival in Central Asia than has been supposed by much of the literature on security and regional stability, and that a wide gap exists between the Islamic revival as described by ethnographic and religious

scholarship and the way it is portrayed in security-focused literature” argues researcher. (Tucker, 2013, p.67).

Most of scholars both local and foreign who support “Islamic revivalism” in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union view it as a source of danger. “A revival - or a reimportation - of “real Islam” in Central Asia in this line of thinking has explicitly political consequences because it will, they believe, lead to increased support for violent Islamist organizations like al-Qaida, the Taliban, or Central Asia’s “own” Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and therefore pose a significant threat to places as far off as Washington and London” (Tucker, 2013, p.47).

Tucker argues that the difference between religious revivalist groups and political Islamist groups is straightforward: the first is religious and the second is political, and although there is sometimes overlap between them on the individual level, there is no necessary link between the two (Tucker, 2013, p.67). Hence, if freedom of believe and rights for religious practice fully provided, there is no ground for recruitment and support of Islamists and other political movements to abuse or misuse Islamic ideology as a mean to achieve their political goal. According to Tucker “the current revival of interest in Islam and its role in shaping society in Central Asia will not automatically become a political or militant mobilization; Islam is only one of many salient identity categories that can be used by social and political actors in the region to mobilize communal responses” (Tucker, 2013, p.75).

Overall according to the literature on radicalisation and social movements, threat of radicalisation and religious extremism are “explained mainly by looking at ideology (radical Islamism), violent behaviour, mobilisation of resources, structural changes and political opportunities that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and socio-economic grievances” (Akchurina & Lavorgna, 2014, p.323). Furthermore, threat conceived in concerns of Central Asia states “as threat of radicalisation, which can be defined as the potential for collective action and the consequent institutionalisation of

alternative forms of social, economic, and political order” (Akchurina & Lavorgna, 2014, p.323).

Regarding current situation with the level of threat posed by radicalisation and religious extremism, participation of Central Asians among foreign fighters of “defeated” “IS”, and their return, and also the emergence of different radical militant groups in Afghanistan and Syria such as KIB and KTJ, which have returned to the region from Syrian civil war, caused serious security concerns for Central Asian countries, especially for Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile contrary to previous president of Uzbekistan - Islam Karimov’s harsh counter terrorism and extremism policy from the year 2017 the new leadership of the Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev initiated wide range of reforms and liberalization policy in all spheres, including religious sphere. The new authorities of Uzbekistan have released most of religious and political prisoners and the relationship between the state and public has been shifting to positive landscape for the last years, which gives hope that countries concern of radicalisation and religious extremism will be more balanced and reasonable.

3.2 Countering online radicalisation and religious extremism in Uzbekistan: Internet as the Problem

With the development of information communication technologies (ICT), radical and extremist organizations have advanced their capabilities both in real and virtual space. Radical, extremist and terrorist groups and individuals were some of the earliest adopters of such technologies, and continue to be the most enthusiastic users. The ability of a group like IS to create a global “brand”, spread its message, and mobilise 30,000 fighters from all over the world would not have been possible without access to the internet” (Neumann, 2017, p.52).

In fact terrorist and extremist movements have long exploited mass communications technology in pursuit of their political ends. The advent of the internet offers new opportunities (Walker & Conway, 2015, p.156). Moreover, currently they are “exploiting the new media and youth culture as powerful recruitment tools to communicate their views and incite violence. Increasingly, there is cross fertilization between the “old media” (television networks and traditional news outlets) and the new media, including YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook. A dialectic between the old and new media is now underway in which consumers increasingly participate, contribute, and modify the content” (Michael, 2013, p.57). However, most scholars are agreeing that “the Internet alone is not a cause of radicalisation, but a facilitator and catalyser of an individual’s trajectory towards violent political acts” (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017, p.4).

Meanwhile, the initial stage of recruiting has almost completely shifted online (Internews, 2019a, p.27). For instance, IS conducts 80% of its recruiting through messaging apps and social networks (Latip, 2016).

According to A.Matveeva and A. Giustozzi as a result of IS’s mostly online propaganda and recruitment “as of March 2017 about 1,400 Uzbekistani volunteers had joined IS since its inception; of these some 210 had returned to Central Asia, and about

125 had been killed” in Syria (Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018, p.194). Actual numbers of these volunteers-fighters from Uzbekistan abroad are not known, however, estimates vary from 200 to over 1500. In any case, the number of Central Asians and Uzbekistanis involved civil war in Syria “appears to be relatively low in international comparison”. If these numbers compared in context: “The largest contingents of foreign fighters appear to come from Tunisia (up to 6,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Turkey (2,000–3,000), and Jordan (2,000). Beyond these Middle Eastern states, European nations are prominently represented: 1,700 French citizens, along with 700 Germans and a similar number of Britons, as well as close to 500 Belgians and 300 Swedes” (Cornell, 2018, p.75-76). In spite of this organizational prominence, the numbers of Central Asian recruits in these theatres pale in comparison to those of more-liberal Middle Eastern countries and to Western European nations. Further, the preponderance of evidence suggests the recruitment of the relatively few Central Asian fighters in Syria occurs not in the region itself, but in Russia” (Cornell, 2018, p.77).

Table 1: Estimates of Central Asians Participating in Conflicts Abroad

Source: The Wilson Center, 2018.

Country	Upper Estimate	Lower Estimate
Tajikistan	1,899 ²⁵	1,141 ²⁶
Kyrgyzstan	863 ²⁷	500 ²⁸
Uzbekistan	1,500²⁹	200³⁰
Kazakhstan	350 ³¹	300 ³²
Turkmenistan	360 ³³	360

Nevertheless, as a result of IS’s recruiting in 2013–15 from different parts of the world, and from Central Asia, in particular, “for a short time ethnic Uzbeks became the most visible Central Asian contingent inside IS and remain the only group from the region to have developed its own sophisticated messaging operations targeted at co-ethnics in their own language” (Tucker, 2016, p.2).

According to Tucker ethnic Uzbeks of IS launched “KhilofatNews” media service along with accounts on “Facebook”, “Twitter”, “Odnoklassniki” and also “YouTube”, “Vimeo”. Afterward their materials and propaganda spread in “jihadist sympathizer networks” in Uzbek language, but, dominantly among labour migrants abroad, these perhaps they had less restricted access to the Internet and other online resources than in Uzbekistan. Tucker admits that “the overwhelming majority of Uzbeks on social media reject ISIS narratives and are appalled by graphic content advertising the group’s violent tactics. But attention on ISIS rather than on multiple other groups in the Syrian conflict that include Uzbeks in their ranks facilitates ISIS claims that they have replaced al Qaida as the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadist movement and are a political embodiment of a transnational Sunni Muslim identity. (Tucker, 2016, p.3).

It should be also noted that “in almost every case, videos and sermons distributed via internet and mobile phones served as an important tool of influence, spreading the mainstream narratives” (Beissembayev, 2016, p.17). For instance, during 2015-2016, “a highly-networked and high-betweenness centrality hardline Salafist figure who identifies himself only as “al-Kosoniy” -on several platforms changed from cautiously supporting jihadist ideas to actively promoting ISIS and advancing theological justification for conflict with Shias and other non-Sunni religious groups on Facebook” (Tucker, 2016, p.3).

In Tucker’s point of view “although the vast majority of Uzbeks online avoid jihadist sympathizer or Salafist networks, they continue to be exposed to IS messaging through coverage in the mainstream media. Even the vast majority of organized Salafist networks online, led by Uzbek emigres living and working primarily in the Middle East, rejects terrorism and ISIS and challenge its supporters and sympathizers online” (Tucker, 2016, p.3).

Therefore, argues kazakh scholar Erlan Karin, former director of Kazakhstan’s Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan “widespread propaganda on the internet through various social media platforms therefore becoming a powerful tool of manipulation and it is more and more difficult to track. Whereas state security services used to be able to block resources containing terrorist or

extremist content, they do not always succeed now in taking countermeasures” (Karin, 2017, p. 24-25).

Consequently, in response to growing concerns of online radicalization and especially Syrian factor, “Central Asian governments have updated legislation relevant to those joining armed conflicts abroad. Uzbekistan signed similar laws which would strip citizenship for crimes “against peace and security”, including terrorism, in August 2015” (Lain, 2016, p.397-398).

Basically, like other countries of Central Asia, Uzbekistan after its independence has also assimilated and implemented extensive counter radicalisation programs and legislation to combat terrorism and religious extremism, criminalized terrorist activity, and terrorism-related acts. The governments of Central Asian states have formed counter-terrorism institutions and bodies “with almost identical functions and authority. The counterterrorism legislation of all Central Asian states reiterates principles of the rule of law and respect for human rights. Yet, all Central Asian governments have gone astray from the proclaimed standards. The extent of violation of human rights, liberties, and prerogatives of law varies across the states of the region (Omelicheva, 2007, p.371).

Most of these legislations on extremism and terrorism in CA countries “were largely borrowed from Russian federal law. This copying of laws from other jurisdictions, without taking account of their shortcomings and compliance with national and international legal and regulatory norms has created problems for the definition of extremism and its application” (Internews, 2019a, p.6). Therefore, “the legal responsibility for extremist activity often preceded the legal definition of the concept of extremism. This resulted in its broad interpretation in law enforcement practice” (Internews, 2019a, p.6).

Table 2. Comparative elements of legislative definitions of extremism in Central Asian countries.

Source: Internews, 2019.

		Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Violent encroachment on constitutional form of government		✓	✓	✓	✓
Armed rebel/seizure of power/creation of illegal armed formations		✓	✓	✓	✓
Forced change of territorial integrity		✓	✓	✓	✓
Undermining security/defence capacity		✓	✓	✓	
Terrorist activities			✓	✓	✓
Incitement of hostility, hatred and discord, humiliation of dignity, propaganda of superiority on the grounds of	Race	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Nationality	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Language		✓		✓
	Ethnicity		✓		✓
	Religion	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Class	✓			
	Patrimony	✓			

According to Sarah Lain - an Associate fellow at Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), leading foreign expert on Central Asia, consideration of the Central Asian state's legal definitions of terrorism and extremism reveals first of all "their concerns revolve mainly around challenges to the state and violence which might destabilise the status quo. The definitions emphasise the use or threat of force to obstruct political decision making and challenge the political order, as well as any intimidation of the population. There are also broad statements about acts that cause any kind of 'threat to national security'. This has led to concerns that such blanket terminology is used to crack down on political, social and economic dissent generally" (Lain, 2016, p.387). Therefore, she raised concerns about the Central Asian governments' general fear of religious extremism as a tool for social control; instead they could address and find solutions for very social problems. "In reality, the Central Asian narrative often uses terrorism and extremism interchangeably. However, these legal definitions set the context for how the Central Asian governments often interpret the threat. It also frames the implementation of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism measures" (Lain, 2016,

p.388). Therefore, according to Lain Central Asian states “tend to view ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ in broad terms, often viewing the former as any threat to the political status quo and at times assuming that the latter is often an expression of the overt practice of conservative religion, namely Islam” (Lain, 2016, p.388).

Subsequently, almost everywhere in the region “the governments have defined the “battle” against extremism as critical to social and state stability. To lose this battle is to put the very integrity of the state at risk. This is a battle against internal and external “enemies,” and to control it, “borders” must be closed. This also means control of access to information on the Internet, restrictions on media, rights of assembly, and on the dissemination of religious materials either printed or verbally conveyed. These restrictions are generally embodied in legislation, but “zealous patriots” often expand the letter of the law to better serve its spirit (Olcott, 2014, p.1).

Internews’s the recent research project on radicalization leading to violent extremism in Central Asia (The research has been produced within the framework of the “Contributing to stability and peace in Central Asia through media literacy, improved reporting and regional cooperation” in 2018 by Internews in collaboration with Search for Common Ground and funded by the European Union) based on “evidence in both qualitative and quantitative field studies”, found several “differences among the countries in degree of control over the information space, or the degree of hegemony over public discourse”. Hence, of the three most fully studied countries, hegemonic discourse was the strongest in Tajikistan, followed by Kazakhstan, and the least in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan, analyzed to a limited extent, would be closer to the extreme of Tajikistan, whereas Turkmenistan was too closed to make reasonably robust observations” (Internews, 2019b, p.2).

Group of scholars who conducted the Internews’s research found that “restricting access to Internet content, or content blocking, has become the main tool for countering extremist ideology online in Central Asia. Those countries with a highly centralised, presidential system of government (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) use extrajudicial (administrative) blocking. Whereas, in Kyrgyzstan, which has a parliamentary system of

government, blocking occurs through judicial decision, while Kazakhstan uses both extrajudicial and judicial blocking” (Internews, 2019a, p.26).

Regarding Uzbekistan’s practice of online content blocking and restrictions scholars point out extrajudicial or administrative measures of the state. According to the Law “On Informatization”, a website can be blocked if it is used for the purposes of propaganda of violence, terrorism or ideas of religious extremism and fundamentalism (Internews, 2019a).

During the first President of the Uzbekistan Islam Karimov’s period the Uzbek authorities used “a range of legal, administrative, and technical measures to undermine the internet’s role as an avenue for open and pluralistic communication, rendering the country’s internet regulation the most restrictive in Central Asia” (Freedom House, 2012). The country had “one of the most tightly controlled online and media environments in the world, with restrictions on any content critical of the government, high levels of surveillance, and lengthy prison sentences for posting controversial content online. The websites of many international news outlets have been blocked for the past decade” (Freedom House, 2016).

However, following the death of President Islam Karimov in September 2016, the new leadership under President Mirziyoyev from 2017 made some improvements with “a slight opening of the online media environment”. Moreover, the government of Uzbekistan “has signalled that it is prioritizing expanding and improving internet access for its citizens. In May 2018, state-owned telecommunications and internet provider Uztelecom shared its “Transformation-2020” project to improve access and connectivity issues. Also in May, some VoIP calls, including services offered by Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber, became available” (Freedom House, 2018).

Sara Lain has also mentioned that “restrictions on the internet and information control have been a key tactic for countering terrorism and extremism (Lain, 2016, p.401). Until October 2018, Internet content in Uzbekistan was blocked without any legal ground and legally approved procedure, mainly in order to restrict access to online

information related to politically or socially sensitive topics (Internews, 2019a, p.29). Along with the Internet, in most Central Asian countries “television, the major medium through which people stay informed, remains controlled almost exclusively by governments, either formally or informally... Aside from government censorship, Central Asia is also largely a self-contained media environment; the only real alternatives to government-controlled media are Russian, and to a lesser degree Turkish, television channels available through satellite” (Cornell, 2018, p.88).

As leading expert on radicalisation Neumann believes that blocking or removing illegal content can be technically difficult given its volume and the number of channels through which it is disseminated. Moreover, not all content that is hateful, offensive, or extremist is necessarily illegal, which means that content removal – or censorship – can only ever be part of the answer. Another approach is to push back against extremist content, for example through so-called counter-narratives or alternative narratives. “From this perspective, the internet is not a threat which needs to be curtailed or censored, but an opportunity to reach people, challenge their views, and prevent them from being sucked into extremism. “Counter-speech”, as it has recently been called, seeks to counter extremist content as well as engage with people who are looking for answers and may be vulnerable to extremist radicalisation and recruitment. This can take many forms: videos and advertisements, comments on Facebook pages, or one-on-one conversations that eventually move from online to offline” (Neumann, 2017, p.52).

At least, “instead of wholesale removals of “terrorist content,” it could be possible if better analysis was available to do quite targeted deletion of content shown to be directly implicated in violent radicalization and terrorism” (Conway, 2017, p.82). In counter-narratives or alternative narratives “The key to producing more and better content is to reverse the top-down approach that many governments instinctively favour, and – instead – empower young people and civil society to take the lead. This may happen through contests, grassroots funds, or projects like Peer to Peer (P2P)

which organises counter-speech competitions among university students” (Neumann, 2017, p.52).

Concerning radicalisation of Central Asian migrants in Russia, Turkey or other places, it should be mentioned that researchers point out isolated from parental and religious authority structures, these migrants are more vulnerable to extremist material propagated online than their counterparts back in Central Asia.

Predominately young men from rural backgrounds who are vulnerable to exploitation and racial discrimination. In such conditions, jihadist organizations like ISIS easily target individuals by promoting narratives of empowerment or social justice” (Tucker, 2017). In contrast, not bad social-economic conditions were causes of recruitment (but radicalisation). Online connections between Central Asians and other Russian-speaking jihadists, such as belonging to the Caucasus Emirate, prove their link and interactions on propaganda of radical ideology and recruitment. (Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018, p.195).

At the same time “formation of virtual jihadi communities is a global trend, but offline radicalisation typically proceeds online” (p.197), especially, in case of Central Asian countries. Consistent with experts analysis despite all recruited jihadists initially were brain washed through the Internet, however, terrorists were directly contacted by recruiters through face to face contact at least before carrying out major attacks (Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2018). Therefore, according to majority experts on radicalisation without a better understanding of the process of radicalisation in Central Asia itself, blanket bans or targeting certain groups alone online or offline will miss the point and increase vulnerability.

3.3 Counter measures of the state to radical ideology on the Internet

Regarding state's countermeasures to online radicalisation C. Walkera and M.Conway distinguished two types of responses which are "positive" and "negative" measures. By "positive" measures authors defined "those online initiatives that seek to make an impact through digital engagement and education and the provision of counter-narratives" where as "negative" measures stand for hard approaches and "the deletion or restriction of violent extremist online content and/or the legal sanctioning of its online purveyors or users" (Walker & Conway, 2015, p.159).

According to "negative" online measures, states seek to abate the use of the internet for violent radicalization and other violent extremist purposes by limiting user and audience access, either by exante or post hoc censorship of content or by controls over internet infrastructure, or by combination of the two measures. Widely practiced filtering is "an index of websites that are blocked. Such filtering of content is carried in countries such as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore" (Walker & Conway, 2015, p.160). By Western countries, amongst the most prominent restrictions were those introduced in the Republic of Ireland (1976–1994) and the UK (1988–1994) arising from the Northern Ireland conflict and banning the broadcasts of Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries (Walker & Conway, 2015, p.157).

Due to historical circumstances, Uzbekistan had a very coherent vision of the relationship between government and religion, which they have been consistently following since the mid-1990s. The vision combines strong state regulation, which also includes information space of the country. The state policy towards religion was getting more restrictive, as the governments seek to address security problems through seemingly proactive state managed social policies rather than by maximizing their efforts to address underlying economic challenges" (Olcott, 2014, p.11).

As a result of growing threats posed by radical movements the government intensified its anti-Islamist propaganda and took steps to interdict Islamist individuals,

literature and financial resources coming into Uzbekistan from abroad, mainly, Pakistan and the Middle Eastern countries. “Hastily, the government designed a counter-fundamentalist ideology based on the ideas of national independence, patriotism and moral and spiritual conservatism in the style of adat (traditional common law)” (Ilkhamov, 2001, p 45).

The state use of counter-measures by restricting online resources and communications with robust practical and legal restraints were a part of reaction in Uzbekistan to online propaganda of radical ideology. “Uzbekistan’s response to the threat of suspected Islamist extremist groups has been consistent for the past decade and a half” (Tucker, 2016, p.4). As Uzbekistan has the largest population in the region, significant natural resources, the strongest military power among the five Central Asian states, and sufficient police force, the Uzbek authorities possess all necessary resources for launching a massive crackdown on Islamic “enemies” of the state. Therefore, the government’s beliefs about the acceptability of the use of force allowed law enforcement officials to put the state’s capabilities in action. First President Islam Karimov was also quoted as saying that strong executive power is necessary during certain periods of a state’s development” (Omelicheva, 2007, p.377).

In the meantime, as Cornell argued “a dispassionate analysis of Central Asian government policies would certainly recognize the often excessive repression that is being exercised; yet it is necessary to recognize that the “repression-radicalization hypothesis” fails to explain the relative paucity of radicalization in the region or the discrepancy among the countries in the region (Cornell, 2018, p.85). According to Cornell, it is difficult to “explain why radicalization appears to have decreased in heavily authoritarian Uzbekistan and especially why the epicenter of Islamic radicalization today - in direct contradiction to the expectations of the hypothesis appears to be in the relatively more open Kyrgyzstan” (Cornell, 2018, p.85-86).

In response to growing online propaganda of radical ideology and factor of IS recruitment through the Internet, Uzbekistan updated its countermeasures and legislation.

Moreover, it should be noted that, all Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, see their cyberspace as a frontier for geopolitical confrontation. By blurring national boundaries, the Internet has become a tool of soft power, through which the foreign policy and economic objectives of large powers, including Islamist players, are asserted, sometimes to the detriment of Central Asian sovereignty” (Internews, 2019a, p.26).

Central Asian state’s practice as described by scholars more relevant to “negative” online measures, as they view control of the Internet as a way to resist, and blocking unwanted Internet content under the pretext of countering extremism as one of the most effective counter-mechanisms. These methods gained importance after the Arab Spring” (Internews, 2019a, p.26).

Nevertheless, Tucker by analysing counter measures of Uzbekistan to prevent online radicalisation and recruitment of the population by IS mentioned that “the government’s public messaging switched from emphasizing military measures to defend Uzbekistani territory to preventing recruitment”. In point of Tucker’s view “Uzbekistan’s shift in tactics to use trusted religious figures... to counter IS recruitment reflects one of the most resonant public responses to IS messaging and is likely to be significantly more successful than past strategies” (Tucker, 2016, p.10).

However, the overwhelming focus on IS in mainstream media coverage is likely also related to the fact that regional states with significant Uzbek populations (including Russia, where Uzbeks make up the largest group of labor migrants) primarily respond to IS messaging by exaggerating the group’s threat to the region. Moreover Russian online media reports stress that Uzbek migrant workers are heavily recruited in Russia and that these groups are tied to organized crime, sometimes offering specific details about alleged recruiting organizations and locations but typically reporting no law

enforcement response (Tucker, 2016, p.4-5). Nonetheless most of the Uzbeks and Tajiks who have joined the Islamic State were radicalized in Russia (Ferris-Rotman, 2017).

However, a potential mark of success for the state's mixed tactic – both promoting and policing expressions of Islamic faith – is that a surprisingly high number of social media users counter these extremist arguments in exactly the way state-controlled Muftiate – religious authority (Tucker, 2016, p.9).

Nonetheless, during the period of its independence Uzbekistan's harsh counter measures to radicalism, religious extremism and terrorism “made possible (1) an effective and productive reaction against terrorist attacks, (2) the minimisation of the negative consequences of terrorist activity, (3) the limitation of the internal social base of terrorists” (Sayfulin, 2005, p.172).

At the same time C. Walkera and M.Conway described “negative” measures could be applied with more “positive” approaches in case of Uzbekistan, as public support of country's counter radicalisation policy in information space is growing remarkably for the last years, country should have “counter-narratives” against violent extremist and radical ideology. After all, As opposed to its effects on radicalisation, the Internet can play a vital role in promoting a counter-narrative and in facilitating counterradicalization and de-radicalization efforts.

Chapter 4

4.1 Uzbekistan's changing counter online radicalisation policy: from offensive to defensive strategy

Uzbek authorities' harsh counter terrorism and extremism policy, especially, under previous president (Islam Karimov) had been criticized by international community and human rights organizations for violating religious freedom in political interest of the regime, meanwhile from the year 2017 the new leadership of the Uzbekistan under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev initiated wide range of reforms and liberalization policy in all spheres, including religious sphere. The new authorities of Uzbekistan have released most of religious and political prisoners and the relationship between the state and public has been shifting to positive landscape for the last years. President Mirziyoyev has straightened out Uzbekistan's religious policy and shifted it from "a defensive to an offensive strategy" by maintaining "the secular nature of the state, its laws, and its education system. But he also put increasing emphasis on promoting the tolerant Islamic tradition indigenous to Central Asia, something he dubbed "Enlightened Islam" (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.8). With President Mirziyoyev's recent religious policy reforms and initiated national idea of "Enlightened Islam", "Uzbekistan is laying the foundations of an important and unprecedented new direction and model for the Muslim world as a whole" (Starr, & Cornell, 2018, p.9).

As it was mentioned in previous chapter, signs of changes in counter radicalisation policy were noticed in 2015s, when IS's recruitment targeted the whole Central Asian region. Uzbekistan's strategy "switched from emphasizing military measures to defend its territory to preventing recruitment which was considered as significantly more successful than past strategies" (Tucker, 2016, p.10).

Cornell and Zenn have also confirm that a liberalization of the religious space had begun prior to the leadership transition in Uzbekistan. For instance, the journalist and soccer commentator Khayrulla Hamidov had been arrested and imprisoned in 2010 after

he began giving religious talks, reciting spiritual poems and raising social and economic issues on his popular radio talk show, “In Pursuit of Impartiality (Xolislik Sari), and in various publications. He was nevertheless released from prison early in February 2015, and has since written poems countering the Islamic State and acquired more than 13,000 followers on Facebook. And also he has recently returned to his previous profession as journalist and commentator. Evidently, amnesties and reconsiderations of possible wrongful convictions had been conducted under Karimov, but appear to have accelerated under Mirziyoyev” (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.37-38).

It should be noted that, due to historical circumstances, during the 1990s “Uzbekistan’s approach was to take a hard and uncompromising line against the extremists but to extend a cordial hand of cooperation to the country’s Hanafi clerics and believers, who had deep roots in the society but had suffered heavily during the Soviet period. Unfortunately, Western voices did not stop at condemning the methods used by Tashkent; they rejected wholesale what Uzbekistan was trying to achieve (Starr, & Cornell, 2018, p.8).

According to Starr and Cornell, basically, Uzbek law insists on secularism in government, law, education, and the military. But it does not claim to be secular in the American sense of full separation of church and state. Instead, it combines a scepticism of the potential political role of organized religion similar to France’s “laïcité” with an effort to restore traditional religious practices (specifically “Hanafi Sunni Islam”) to their dominant position in society” (Starr, & Cornell, 2018, p.8).

In fact, since 2005, Uzbekistan has not faced any terrorist attacks, and Uzbek authorities – who previously used relatively alarmist rhetoric on the problem of extremism – gradually developed more confidence, and considered the problem to be under control. Therefore, Uzbekistan’s record on preventing and countering radicalisation, religious extremism and terrorism shows that it is possible to effectively control extremist groups. (Cornell, Starr, & Tucker, 2018, p54-.57).

From 2015, particularly prominent among a series of Uzbekistan’s measures to counter violent radicalisation has been the use of counter-narratives as a way of challenging IS’s representation of Islam. “The government launched an online magazine – “The ISIS Fitna” – which has been featured in the country’s most prominent online media portal. It also worked with a number of state-sponsored civil society organisations that have published magazines, books, and websites on IS’s understanding of religious concepts and the dangers of religiously motivated extremism” (Neumann, 2017, p.51).

Moreover, since 2015 Uzbekistan has launched a number of public awareness campaigns on official government media- channels – mainly television channels warning of the dangers of joining religious extremist and terrorist organisations. These counter-terrorism campaigns of the state focused on “exposing and debunking extremist ideology, supporting traditional Islam and strengthening support for its values, promoting harmony among members of different faiths” (Lain, 2016, p.401). And also a part of the campaign was for the Ministry of Culture to work with media outlets and Uzbek cinema.

However, the media freedom in coverage of religious topics, based on limited observation, appears to be still mostly in line with government policy, focused on reporting of operations and policies against extremism and terrorism. Besides printed newspapers,... there are several online news media that have been publishing material on preventing radicalisation and religious extremism, such as “Uza.uz”, “Gazeta.uz”,

“Nuz.uz”, “Tribuna.uz”, and more (Internews, 2019b). An addition to this, a private information website specifically dedicated to preventing violent extremism and radicalisation material, “Stopterror.uz”, is an interesting feature not found in the other countries. In the realm of moderate, “traditional” Islamic practice, there have been reportedly growing numbers and variety of publications, public events, and coverage thereof. Websites like “Islom.uz” and “Islomnuri.com” are accessible and provide educational and informational content about Islam (Internews, 2019b, p.26).

Employing these official and private online resources have become a part of Uzbekistan’s counter radicalisation strategy. In addition to above mentioned resources, all of governmental (the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers) and non governmental entities (Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, regional and some local mosques, religious educational institutions), and also some influential religious scholars, imams have been launching websites, pages on social networks such as Facebook and channels on the most used Telegram messenger and others. All this kind of initiatives are aimed at to counter radical ideology and promote religious education among population.

Counter radicalisation and preventing extremism strategies also included a degree of community outreach. The role of the Mahalla - (neighbourhood) in Uzbekistan, local community organisations that are said to be close to the authorities, is part of the rehabilitation and reintegration of released prisoners, and is now part of the process for returning fighters (Lain, 2016, p.400). Local representatives of “Mahalla” and local “imam”s assist conducting outreach and educate population, especially vulnerable young generation about the dangers of radical and extremist ideologies. “Unwritten social codes help maintain order within the mahalla. Traditionally, elders in such close communities would offer guidance and make decisions in cases of disputes. Either ignored or attacked during the Soviet period, this local cultural structure has been heartily embraced by the Uzbek government as a means to maintain order” (Kangas, 2018, p.5).

For a quarter century, “Uzbekistan adopted a defensive approach in the religious realm, which focused on thwarting radicalization and safeguarding its secular governance, however, Uzbekistan’s current leadership is confidently presenting an Uzbek model of Islam to the world: a secular state in which the moderate Hanafi tradition of the region is able to flourish. Feeling perhaps that Uzbekistan no longer faces an existential threat from extremist Islamism, he has focused less on defensive and more on positive steps (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.8-9). Nevertheless, to solve effectively remaining major challenges and tasks Uzbekistan’s model of a secular state with the idea of “Enlightened Islam” should prevent possible radicalisation trends among population with the promotion of religious freedom and protection of civil rights.

4.2 Reform in religious policy of Uzbekistan after 2017

Uzbekistan's opening up policy under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev who took office in September 2016 prioritized new reforms and liberalization policy. These ambitious reforms were outlined in "The Reform Roadmap" – a Strategy of Actions in Five Priority Areas for the Development of Uzbekistan. The Strategy for 2017-2021 "has defined five priority areas of development. They include the improvement of state and nation building, provision for the rule of law and further reformation of the judicial system, promotion and liberalization of the economy, social development, security, interethnic harmony and religious tolerance, implementation of balanced and constructive foreign policy" (MFA, 2017). The action strategy will be implemented in five stages, and each stage provides for approval of a separate annual state program on the strategy's implementation in Uzbekistan (Eurodialogue, 2017).

As Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States Javlon Vakhobov acknowledged "in the past there were restrictive policies in the field of religious affairs, policies that sought to prevent the spread of foreign-based religious extremism that could threaten the survival of Uzbekistan's secular state. The new leadership of Uzbekistan is openly tackling a backlog of challenges, discussing them with people and decisively introducing measures, first in order to eliminate past practices, and second, to enhance the level of protection of civil rights, particularly freedom of religion" (Vakhobov, 2018).

With President Mirziyoyev's recent religious policy reforms and initiated national idea of "Enlightened Islam", "Uzbekistan is laying the foundations of an important and unprecedented new direction and model for the Muslim world as a whole" (Starr, & Cornell, 2018, p.9). Nowadays, Uzbekistan is confidently presenting an Uzbek model of a secular state in which the moderate and enlightened practices and teachings of Islam and many other religions and faiths are able to flourish. (Vakhobov, 2018).

Meanwhile, to keep Uzbekistan on the path of secularism, progress and development was a major challenge faced by President Mirziyoyev (Tayal, 2017).

Uzbekistan's current leaders recognize that forced methods of fighting the increase in terrorist threats throughout the world are not effective, and on the contrary in certain cases aggravate the situation. It is not enough to fight against the consequences of these threat, but rather the focus needs be on their causes. (Vakhabov, 2018).

President Mirziyoyev in September 2017 during his first speech at the UN General Assembly as a head of Uzbekistan, initiated the adoption of the UN Special Resolution "Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance", which "provides universal access to education, eliminating illiteracy and ignorance".

To advance President Miziyoyev's agenda, "Imam Bukhari International Research Centre" in Samarkand and "The Centre for Islamic Civilization" in Tashkent have been established to conduct research aimed at studying the humanistic essence of Islam. "The International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan" was also established by presidential decree in April 2018 and all of which meant to provide the country's religious educational institutions (universities and "madrasas") with highly trained teachers and mentors, improve the research and professional skills of scholars, educate graduate students in the fields of Quran, tafseer, fiqh, science of hadith, and kalam, and will engage in research, teaching and public outreach. (Vakhabov, 2018).

Furthermore, the government has been increasingly responsive in fulfilling its international obligations and commitments.

In October 2017, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed visited Uzbekistan for the first time in 15 years. The Regional Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Central Asia, Richard Comenda, and the international non-governmental organizations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International also paid their first visits to Uzbekistan in many years.

Shaheed took note of Uzbekistan's efforts to promote religious literacy and freedom, and to advance best practices in the area. The special rapporteur recognized

the scope of the ongoing and proposed reforms to address the challenges to full enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief (Vakhabov, 2018).

Aftermath UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed's report results and recommendations have been taken in to account in adapting and revising the main legislations regarding religious sphere.

For instance, Shaheed regarding the legislation had found that there was no clear definition of extremism. Later on, one of the recommendations was reflected Uzbekistan's newly adopted The Law "On Countering Extremism" which came into force on 1st November, 2018.

One of the recommendations was reflected Uzbekistan's newly adopted The Law "On Countering Extremism" which came into force on 1st November, 2018. The law provides for "basic concepts, principles of counteraction to extremism, directions of counteraction to extremism, the circle of bodies carrying out activities in this sphere, and their powers, measures to counter extremism, as well as responsibility for carrying out extremist activities". Adopted Law "On Countering Extremism" prohibits extremist activity on the territory of the country in any of its manifestations. Accordingly, the directions of state policy in the field of countering extremism are defined as measures to prevent extremism, identify and suppress violations of extremism and international cooperation in the field of countering extremism. (Uzdaily.uz, July 31, 2018).

In accordance with the Law "On Countering Extremism" - "extremism is an expression of extreme forms of actions aimed at destabilizing the social and political situation, forcibly changing the constitutional order of the Republic of Uzbekistan, forcibly seizing power and appropriating its powers, inciting national, racial, ethnic or religious hostility" (Article 3, the Law "On Countering Extremism", 2018).

According to the new procedure "the application for recognition of an extremist organization is submitted to "the Supreme Court" of the Republic of Uzbekistan by "the Prosecutor General" of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The list of organizations, which named as extremist organization by the court, will be published on official websites of

the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (Uzdaily.uz, July 31, 2018).

For the first time, on 12th of March 2019, by the decision of “Supreme Court of” the Republic of Uzbekistan in accordance with Article 14 of the Law “On Countering Extremism” a number of organizations and online resources were prohibited and recognized as extremist and terrorist. The decision of “Supreme Court” and the list of prohibited organizations and online resources on the territory of the country were published on official websites of the Ministry of Justice (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019). But the list included only the names of websites, channels and pages on social networks such as Facebook, Youtube and Telegram.

Table 3. The list of online resources that prohibited and recognized as extremist and terrorist in the territory of Uzbekistan by the decision of Supreme Court of the Republic of Uzbekistan on 12th March 2019.

Source: Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019, <http://www.minjust.uz/uz/press-center/news/96731/>

No:	Name of profiles, channels and pages
1.	Abu Saloh darsliklari
2.	Jannat oshiqdari
3.	Shom ovozi
4.	Tavhid va jihod
5.	Islam Abu Khalil
6.	Polvon Novkatlik
7.	Sohib Mahmudov
8.	Farruhbek Abdullaev
9.	Mamarahimov Abdurahim Mirkomilovich
10.	Muhorjir Polvon
11.	Abu Aisha
12.	Turkiston
13.	Hurriyat info
14.	Najot
15.	Al-Va'y
16.	Roya

17.	Usulul fiqh
18.	Mustalahul hadis
19.	Darslardan qisqa lavhalar
20.	Fiqh ahkomlari
21.	Tavhid darsi
22.	Qiyomatdan avvalgi fitnalar
23.	Savol va javoblar
24.	Foida Mp3
25.	Foida va qoidalar
26.	Tafsir darslari
27.	Talbisu iblis darslari
28.	Islomni buzuvchi amallar darslari
29.	Nomoz va benomozga taluqli masalalar
30.	Ayollar darslari silsilasi
31.	Aqiyda darslari
32.	Silsilaviy darslar va ma'ruzalar
33.	Muhim darslar
34.	Aqiydatul vositiya
35.	Mustalahul hadis
36.	Alfatx
37.	Talabalar uchun darslar
38.	Al-Fath TV
39.	DA'VAT UZ
40.	HIDOYAT TV

However, on the Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief on his mission to Uzbekistan were mentioned the list of 22 organizations “as being terrorist organizations and their activities have been prohibited in the territory of Uzbekistan by the decision of the Supreme Court the Republic of Uzbekistan from 26 September 2016” (OHCHR, 2018).

Table 4. The list of terrorist organizations prohibited in the territory of Uzbekistan.

Source: OHCHR, 2018,

https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session37/Documents/A_HRC_37_49_Add_2_EN.docx

No:	Terrorist organizations
1.	Akromiya
2.	The Islamic Movement of Turkestan
3.	The Islamic Jihad Group
4.	Hizbut-Tahrir al Islami
5.	Al-Jihad
6.	Al Qaeda
7.	World Jihad Foundation
8.	The Muslim Brotherhood
9.	Jamiyati Islomi Tablig
10.	Jamaat-e-Islami-i-Pakistan
11.	East Turkistan Liberation Organization
12.	The Islamic Movement of East Turkestan
13.	Boz Gurd
14.	Abu-Saif Group
15.	Jamiat-eUlema-i-Isla
16.	Islamic State
17.	Tahvidva Jihad
18.	Katibatul Imam al-Bukhari
19.	Jamoat Ansarulloh
20.	Dzhebhat al-Nusra
21.	Jihadists
22.	Nurchilar

Regarding Uzbekistan's practice of online content blocking and restrictions until October 2018, Internet content in Uzbekistan was blocked without any legal ground and legally approved procedure, mainly in order to restrict access to online information related to politically or socially sensitive topics. In 2018, along with adopted Law "On Countering Extremism" the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan approved a resolution setting out the procedure for restricting access to websites or webpages. According to the new regulation decisions to blocking access are made by the Monitoring Centre for Mass Communications of the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information. If the Monitoring Centre concludes that a website has prohibited information, the website disseminating prohibited information is entered into a register and blocked within 12 hours. The Monitoring Centre will exclude remove the website from the registry within 24 hours of receiving a written (electronic) request from the owner of the resource confirming that they have removed the prohibited information from the website. The decision of the Monitoring Centre can be appealed or cancelled in court" (Internews, 2019a, p.29).

The Law on Combating terrorism (2000) and the new law "On Countering Extremism" (2018) define that State Security Service of the Republic of Uzbekistan; The General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Uzbekistan; The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan; Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan; State Customs Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan; Department for Combating Economic Crimes at the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Uzbekistan are government entities that responsible for countering radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. The State Security Service of the Republic of Uzbekistan coordinates the activities of state bodies and other entities engaged in and participating in activities to counter extremism and terrorism.

Meanwhile, under current President all of those entities are being reformed facing considerable changes in organizational, institutional and legal bases.

For example, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan was reformed in accordance with Law “On internal affairs bodies” signed on 16 September 2016. “The law sets out the basic objectives, directions and principles of activity of law enforcement bodies. They are entrusted with the protection of the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of citizens, public order and public safety, the property of businesses and individuals. According to the new Law the establishment of specific responsibilities of internal affairs agencies, including the protection of rights, freedoms and lawful interests of citizens, the property of legal entities and individuals, prevention, detection, suppression of crimes and other offenses, ensuring the safety of citizens in public places increases their responsibility in front of the society and state” (Uzdaily.uz, September 17, 2016).

And also, previously named The National Security Service (NSS) has been reformed and become the State Security Service according to the Law On State Security Service of the Republic of Uzbekistan on 05 April 2018. “The important activities of the Service are ensuring state security in the scientific, technical, social and information spheres, protecting the cultural, historical and rich spiritual heritage of the people of the Republic of Uzbekistan, countering corruption in state bodies and other organizations that threaten state interests and security, security and protection of state interests in the field of telecommunications and transport, prevention, detection and the suppression of the preconditions for emergency situations, and others” (Uzdaily.uz, April 06, 2018).

These law enforcement agencies had nothing but standing orders or provisional regulations for the last two decades after independence.

The December 2017 presidential decree “On pardoning for the 25th anniversary of adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan” is the first time in the history of our country when the head of state pardoned 2,700 convicts, including those imprisoned for crimes related to religious and extremist groups, and terrorist organizations (Vakhabov, 2018). Moreover, for the past two years, by the initiative of

President of Uzbekistan more than 20,000 individuals have been taken from government watch lists.

Uzbekistan has considered revising The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998) to ensure religious freedom according to international standards. Recently, “on May 14, the Legislative Chamber of “Oliy Majlis” - Parliament held the regular extended meeting of the working group on monitoring the implementation of the “Roadmap” to ensure freedom of religion or belief” (Kun.uz, May 15, 2019). The new edition of The Law aims to “is to bring the norms of the law in conformity with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of December 16, 1966, simplify the procedure for state registration of a religious organization, identify specific grounds for refusing state registration, determine the powers of the competent state bodies in this area, and terminate activities of religious organization in a judicial procedure, the procedure for informing about the planned activities of religious organizations, the procedure for preparation and distribution of religious literature” (Kun.uz, May 15, 2019). It was mentioned that recommendations of an international expert (UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed who visited Uzbekistan in October 2017 and presented the report aftermath) are being taken in to account to further streamline and simplify the procedure for state registration, re-registration and liquidation of religious organizations in the Republic of Uzbekistan. (Kun.uz, May 15, 2019).

According to this law also the rights of individuals and legal entities to produce, import, and distribute religious materials and textbooks on the territory of Uzbekistan are being secured. The interdepartmental commission is currently working on consistent decriminalization of certain crimes that cause limited public danger as well as the further humanization of criminal legislation (Vakhabov, 2018).

And also a new consultative body — the Council of Faiths under the Religious Affairs Committee — was established, providing an effective platform for addressing

urgent issues. The leaders of all 16 religious faiths, including “Jehovah’s Witnesses”, are the members of the Council (Vakhabov, 2018).

According to Vakhabov – Uzbek ambassador to the USA Uzbekistan is also working closely with its American partners to ensure the freedom of religion and belief. A high-level delegation from Uzbekistan attended the July 2018 Ministerial on advancing religious freedom, the first ever conducted by the U.S. Department of State. At the meeting Uzbekistan was singled out by U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo as an example of a country marching toward greater openness and a freer society, and he expressed hope that this positive development might spread region wide.

In September, we will hold another milestone event “Religious Tolerance: Uzbekistan and the U.S. experience” that will bring together Uzbek and U.S. government officials, experts, and civil society members in Tashkent to exchange of views on the prospects of interactions aimed to achieve the long overdue removal of Uzbekistan from the list of “countries of particular concern” on religious issues.

We consider this as recognition by our partners of the tremendous and landmark changes that are occurring in Uzbekistan on human rights, good governance and the rule of law and the government’s full commitment to continue its efforts to further improve the environment of religious liberty in Uzbekistan.

It is our hope that this will contribute to the elimination of prejudices and negative stereotypes of our country and will allow Uzbekistan to be seen as offering a unique model of ensuring peace and prosperity in a multiethnic society – stressed Vakhabov.

Because of these efforts and positive changes in the state’s approach and policy on religion and religious organizations, on December 11, 2018 (for the first time since 2006), Uzbekistan was not designated by the U.S. State Department as a “Country of Particular Concern” for restrictions on religious freedom (Umarov, 2019). Uzbekistan has become the second country in the world that the U.S Department of State has withdrawn from the “Countries of Particular Concern” list (CPC) over the past 20 years (Kun.uz, 2018). Moving to the Special Watch List represents an improvement in

Uzbekistan's respect for religious freedom (Yeniseyev, 2018). The recent Second Ministerial Conference to Advance Religious Freedom on July 16-23, 2019 in USA by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov (MFA, 2019) is also a part of efforts and signs of commitment of Uzbekistan in to further improve the environment of religious freedom in the country. Overall, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev reforms and liberalization policy in religious sphere despite remaining major challenges and tasks to do, have remarkably improved freedom of religion and its practice in the country.

4.3 Prospects and problems of Uzbekistan’s new “positive approach” to online radicalisation

Almost three years have passed since Mirziyoyev took the presidency and launched comprehensive reforms in Uzbekistan. Along with remarkable positive outcomes and changes, however, concerns and doubts still remain concerning prospects of the liberalization policy. Especially, Uzbekistan’s model of a secular state and its new positive approach in the field of religious affairs face some challenges, although state policy has become “considerably less restrictive” regarding religious matters than before.

According to foreign observers “there are hopeful signs that Uzbekistan could shed its reputation as one of the worst human rights abusers in the world, but it still needs to do more. The Uzbek government remains highly authoritarian, the security services retain huge power, free elections and political pluralism are distant dreams, and there are still thousands of people in prison on politically motivated charges” (Williamson & Swerdlow, 2018).

Several International nongovernmental human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House and others reports for the last years have also mentioned “some positive steps” during Sh.Mirziyoev's presidency.

As the Academic Dean of the Near East South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies Dr. Kangas pointed out, the implemented changes by the new leadership are being received positively by the people, as well as by the strategic community in the region, and also have improved the lives of ordinary citizens, however Uzbekistan is at the very beginning of the long way to democratization and economic liberalization therefore one needs to be ‘cautiously optimistic’ about these reforms (Kangas, 2018b, p.4-6).

Political Scientist from Uzbekistan Sardor Salim is more sceptic about current secular elite’s policy in religious sphere. He argues that, nothing fundamentally changed in the state religious policy even after the President Mirziyoyev came to power. After

the fact, it turns out that the short-term “thaw” since autumn 2016 to summer 2018 in the religious sphere was just a tactical step; the fundamental vector has not changed. Since August 2018, there has been a dramatic rollback and tightening of approaches in religious policy. A law on school uniforms, which explicitly states the prohibition of religious clothing (hijabs) was passed in August, 2018. Although there is no legal prohibition, women and girls are not allowed to wear religious clothes in public places, especially in universities. There are cases when girls in hijabs were excluded from their studies even at the International Islamic University, not to mention other secular educational institutions (Salim, 2019).

Salim concludes that Islam as a reference can play both positive and negative roles in this crucial moment in the evolution of Uzbek society. First of all it depends on the ability of the secular elite to recognize the return of religion to the scene and adapt accordingly. Secondly, it depends on the ability of the reformist-minded representatives of the Muslim intelligentsia and activists to act as mediators between Islam and modernity, and find a way to modernize Uzbek society. The challenge faced by both secular and religious intellectuals, political figures is that it is necessary to formulate a version of modernity that will simultaneously meet the requirements of the modern era and the Uzbek system of values (Salim, 2019).

And also some counter-signs of unfulfilled expectations or backsliding of recent liberalization seen in the case of detention of “at least four” online bloggers who had posted critical opinions regarding religious topics such as banning hijabs” (Internews, 2019b, p.26). Although the Uzbek blogosphere has expanded and greater public become more active in different social media platforms to express their views and criticism aftermath of policy changes, but the detention of the bloggers, showed the change has limits. It also means that the government is still sensitive to challenges to its authority, including in the sphere of religion (Reuters, 2018).

At the same time political scientists of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Cornell and Zenn suggest that for the new leadership of Uzbekistan “reforms in the field of religion should not be construed as simply a response to foreign criticism, or as a rejection of the policies of the past. As in the political and economic fields, changes in Uzbekistan have a more evolutionary character. Moreover, the country’s leadership is taking this new approach from a position of strength: no extremist violence has been recorded in the country for over a decade, in contrast to the growing problems of religious extremism in several other Central Asian states” (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.10). Contrary to the situation in 1991 of unstable regional environment regarding the threats posed by religiously inspired extremists to secular states “today, leaders of Uzbekistan appear satisfied that the state, its institutions, and society itself have matured, and that extremists no longer pose an existential threat warranting extraordinary defensive measures. Instead, the leaders appear confident enough to go on the offensive, to promote the revival of an indigenous religious tradition that can exist in harmony with secular statehood and could prove an example to other nations” (Cornell & Zenn, 2018, p.11).

It should be also noted that despite remaining concerns and doubts regarding prospects of liberal religious policy, public support of current leadership is considerably growing. The latest public poll conducted by The Center for the Study of Public Opinion “Ijtimoy Fikr” (Public Opinion) reveals that more than 90% of the population of Uzbekistan positively assesses the state policy in the field of religion which meets the religious needs of believers in the country (Ijtimoiy fikr, 2018). Moreover, according to the survey more than 76% of respondents believe that the problem of religious extremism and terrorism continues to be the main threat to the stability of the countries of the Central Asian region, including Uzbekistan. The overwhelming majority of respondents (99%) extremely negatively perceive religious extremist movements. And also 31 % of respondents note that online resources, including Internet in general, where

religious information is presented in a distorted form pose security and ideological threats to the population (Ijtimoiy fikr, 2018).

Consequently, as under the current President Mirziyoyev public support to state's policy toward countering religious extremism and radicalisation is growing both in real and online space, Uzbekistan should have counter-narratives against extremist and radical ideologies. Counter-narratives, alternative narratives and positive approach to counter violent extremism and radicalisation in case of power centred states of Central Asian region could be more effective and constructive than imposing restrictions on the Internet and strengthening information control. The success and the prospects of ongoing reforms in religious sphere depends on the degree of impelentation and positive results both in short and long term perspectives.

CONCLUSIONS

The overview of Uzbekistan's current changing religious policy, in general, and positive counter measures to online radicalisation, in particular, driven by the President Mirziyoyev, and also theoretical frameworks of radicalisation and securitization which were applied in the thesis allow to make following conclusions:

According to the literature common definition, conceptual and theoretical approach to "radicalisation" and "online radicalisation", specifically, has not been evaluated yet. However, shared understanding is that radicalisation is social and psychological process that leads to (violent) extremism and terrorism. The principal issue on the debates of radicalisation focuses mostly on "Islamist extremism and jihadist terrorism" along with less attention other forms of extremism such as right-wing, left-wing, anarchist, nationalist and etc.

"Online radicalisation" in turn, is also a process whereby an individual via online interactions and consuming different types of Internet content comes to view that violence as a tool of solving social and political conflicts. The use of the Internet and other forms of ICTs as a means of propaganda, communication and recruitment are the most relevant cases in online radicalisation. However, the Internet is often considered as an important factor, but not the only element which initiates or facilitates radicalisation or extremism.

Meanwhile, due to internationalisation of radical ideologies and their supporters through Internet, growing ideological battlefield and information warfare in the cyber space increases possibilities of radicalisation and self radicalisation of individuals as well.

Causes, conditions and drivers of radicalisation differ depending on the context and, in many cases, on mainstream political thought in a given period. Major causes of radicalisation could be economic, political, ideological factors and contributing ones might be education, labour migration, networks, gender, Internet and etc.

Nevertheless, no single factor or driver can be identified as determinant for radicalisation in case of any country, region or individual. And also there is no single profile of a typical radicalised individuals or supporters of extremist ideology.

At the same time, scholars point out that in Central Asian context social, economic, ideological factors play a role in radicalisation process, however, widely practiced harsh counter measures by local authorities were counterproductive, which at the end fuelled further radicalisation of some individuals who were recruited to Syrian civil war, for example.

Moreover, Islamic revivalism which happened after collapse of Soviet Union in the region can not be described as a main cause or driver of radicalisation because any convincing confirmation both theoretically and empirically has not been found to support this argument. The latest research on problems of radicalisation Central Asian region found that structural factors – “poor knowledge or understanding of religion, economic factors such as unemployment and poverty, and political factors, such as discrimination and unjust treatment by law enforcement organs” were the most frequently cited drivers of radicalisation and extremism by local participants of the survey (Internews, 2019b, p.69). Therefore, safeguarding secular constitutions and rule of law in Central Asian states should include promoting religious freedom and rights for religious practice which prevents misuse of religious ideology as a mean to achieve any political goal.

In case of Central Asian countries and Uzbekistan, in particular, threats of radicalisation and extremism and related discourse are mainly focused on religion, Islam specifically. According to the mainstream literature on security and radicalisation studies threats of radicalisation, religious extremism and terrorism have been highly politicized across Central Asian states at different levels.

Although, there are positive signs of changes in all countries regarding the state policy toward countering security threats, however, “the return of foreign fighters” from conflict zones and the emergence of different radical militant groups in Afghanistan

such as KIB, KTJ and others cause security concerns for Central Asian countries, especially for Uzbekistan. These factors in turn might actualize practiced counter terrorism and extremism experience of Central Asian states.

Contrary to previous president of Uzbekistan - Karimov's harsh counter terrorism and extremism policy the new leadership of the Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev launched wide range of liberal reforms, including in religious sphere. Current Uzbekistan has focused less on defensive and more on positive steps toward the religious realm and achieved remarkable results in relatively short period, which are being positively acknowledged by international community. However, to solve effectively remaining major challenges and tasks Uzbekistan's model of a secular state with the idea of "Enlightened Islam" should prevent possible radicalisation trends among population with the promotion of religious freedom and protection of civil rights. Uzbekistan's positive approach to countering radicalisation in online and offline space should include counter-narratives against radical and extremist ideology. Counter-narratives, alternative narratives and positive approach to radicalisation and religious extremism in case of power centred states of Central Asian region could be more effective and constructive than imposing restrictions on the Internet and strengthening information control.

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