ABSTRACT

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 through the Internet by targeting Central Asian population as well. Particularly, "IS and its online supporters have proven

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[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.

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.