

# The Central Asia Fellowship Papers

No. 15, February 2016



## **Religious Extremism in Kazakhstan: From Criminal Networks to Jihad**

***Serik Beissembayev***



**Serik Beissembayev** is a sociologist at the “Strategy” Center for Social and Political Studies (Almaty, Kazakhstan). He received his M.A. in sociology from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. In 2014-2015 he was a fellow of the Bolashak International Scholarship of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and of the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan Public Policy Initiative. He has extensive experience in planning and concept development of sociological investigations. He is an author of several analytical publications on social and political issues in Kazakhstan, and he currently conducts research on Kazakh nationalism.

The risks of religious extremism in Kazakhstan are quite high. This is probably one of the few threats that the Kazakhstani authorities have addressed by rapidly mobilizing huge administrative, financial, and informational resources. The state program to combat religious extremism and terrorism in 2013-17 has a budget of 196 billion tenge<sup>1</sup> (more than \$1 billion dollars under the 2013 exchange rate), and it is planned to reach more than 200,000 people.<sup>2</sup> However, despite this scale, the state policy on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has a weak analytical understanding of the issues and processes behind radicalism. It focuses on bringing the 'correct' understanding of 'good' Islam to Kazakhstani citizens, with the underlined notion that people engage in 'wrong', 'foreign' Islam because of their lack of religious knowledge. However, a USAID publication from 2009 notes that a new generation of jihadists is increasingly including individuals with past involvement in petty crime and illegal activities such as smuggling, drug trafficking, robbery, extortion, or racketeering.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of my research is to identify the roots and key factors of religious radicalism in Kazakhstan. This paper offers an in-depth analysis of the results of a 2013 study conducted by the 'Strategy' Center of Security Programs and the Center for Social and Political Studies with the support of the General Prosecutor's Office of Kazakhstan. In this paper, I argue that the key background to be studied in order to understand ideological radicalization and the movement toward extremist actions is not related to religion but to petty criminal culture and its impact on pauperized youth. This statement has critical implications on the way scholars comprehend the interaction between radical groups and criminal subculture, as well as important repercussions on what can be a calibrated policy answer.

### **Background: Rising Homegrown Terrorism?**

Kazakhstan is a country with a dominant Muslim majority where, according to the last census, more than 70% of the population identify themselves as followers of Islam.<sup>4</sup> But as in many post-Soviet countries, Islam in Kazakhstan manifests itself more at the level of identity and traditions, and less in the form of religious practices. Opinion polls indicate that only one-tenth of Muslims in the country perform *namaz* regularly.<sup>5</sup> Compared to some other countries with Muslim majorities, radical religious ideas have been weakly diffused in Kazakhstan. According to a report from Pew Research Center entitled *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, only 2% of Muslims in Kazakhstan admit that the attacks on people in defense of Islam can often/sometimes be justified (for comparison, this figure is 10% in Kyrgyzstan and 39% in

---

<sup>1</sup> Renat Tashkinbaev, "Okolo 200 milliardov tenge napraviat na bor'bu s religioznym ekstremizmom v Kazakhstane [About 200 billion tenge will direct the struggle against religious extremism in Kazakhstan]," *Tengrinews*, May 24, 2013 ([http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/okolo-200-milliardov-tenge-napravyat-borbu-religioznyim-234772/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/okolo-200-milliardov-tenge-napravyat-borbu-religioznyim-234772/)).

<sup>2</sup> Yeskendir Ruslan, "550 posledovatelei radikalnykh techenii v RK vernuli v lono traditsionnogo islama [550 followers of radical movements in Kazakhstan returned to the fold of traditional Islam]," *Liter*, June 19, 2015 ([http://liter.kz/ru/interview/show/9714\\_550\\_posledovatelei\\_radikalnyh\\_techenii\\_v\\_rk\\_vernuli\\_v\\_lono\\_tradicionnogo\\_islama](http://liter.kz/ru/interview/show/9714_550_posledovatelei_radikalnyh_techenii_v_rk_vernuli_v_lono_tradicionnogo_islama)).

<sup>3</sup> Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, United States Agency for International Development (February 2009), 57.

<sup>4</sup> Agency Of The Republic of Kazakhstan on Statistics, *Itogi Natsional'noi perepisi naseleniia Respubliki Kazahstan 2009 goda* [The results of the National Census of the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2009], <http://www.stat.gov.kz/getImg?id=WC16200032648> (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Strategy Center for Social and Political Studies, *Opinion Polls* (Almaty, Kazakhstan: 2014).

Afghanistan).<sup>6</sup> Another indicator is that 10% of Muslims in Kazakhstan have been identified as more likely to support making Sharia the official law in the country, as opposed to 35% in Kyrgyzstan and 99% in Afghanistan.

Prior to the 2000s, religious radicalism in Kazakhstan was mainly imported: those detained and accused of terrorist activities were primarily citizens of other countries. However, this period did not last long, and in 2003-4 distinct signs of homegrown terrorism emerged.<sup>7</sup> Increasing numbers of Kazakhstani citizens began facing charges with religious extremism and terrorism, and in 2008-9, security forces reported having prevented terrorist attacks in the country. The year 2011 can be considered as a turning point. Several suicide bombings took place in different parts of the country, along with organized attacks on law enforcement officers and a subsequent bloody confrontation between security forces and terrorists. In total in 2011 and 2012, fourteen terrorist attacks were reported, during which seventy people were killed, including 51 alleged terrorists. The other victims were law enforcement officers and ordinary citizens.<sup>8</sup>

These events not only demonstrate the potential vulnerability of the country, but also point to the existence of some domestic preconditions for religious radicalization within Kazakhstani society. According to official data, in 2015 more than 500 people were jailed on charges related to engaging in religious extremist and terrorist activities.<sup>9</sup> Most of those convicted in the period from 2008 to 2014 received their sentences for non-violent crimes: participation in the activities of a terrorist group (56%) or advocacy of terrorism (21%). Only about 20% of the convicts (47 people) were arrested on charges of direct involvement or the organization of a terrorist act (Appendix 1). At least 300 Kazakhs are considered to have joined the war in Syria and Iraq on the side of ISIS.<sup>10</sup>

The biographies of members of extremist groups, as well as of those who went to carry out *jihad* in other countries, show that the majority of them were radicalized at home; they were not members of international terrorist organizations and did not undergo any military training in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Pakistan or Chechnya. Over the last two to three years, the number of cases of violent extremism has been decreasing. According to the Global Terrorism Index, in the period from 2012 to 2015, the direct and indirect impact of terrorism in Kazakhstan fell from 2.8 points (47<sup>th</sup> out of 162 countries) to 1.9 points (83<sup>rd</sup> place).<sup>11</sup> However, this does not mean that the threat has ceased to exist. The situation is especially upsetting in the context of recent developments in Syria and Iraq, as well as with the aggravation of jihadist issues worldwide.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf> (April 30, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of homegrown terrorism became popular after a series of terrorist attacks in Western countries and 9/11. Most often it is used to determine the cases of terrorism committed by its own citizens, primarily second and third generation Muslim migrants living in Europe and the US

<sup>8</sup> Marat Shibusov and Vyacheslav Abramov, *Terrorizm v Kazakhstane - 2011-2012 gg.* (Almaty: Institute for Political Solutions, 2012) ([http://conjuncture.ru/shibusov\\_report\\_27-1-2012/](http://conjuncture.ru/shibusov_report_27-1-2012/)).

<sup>9</sup> "V Kazakhstane sotni chelovek sidiat za ekstremizm i terrorizm [In Kazakhstan, hundreds of people sitting for extremism and terrorism]," *Tengrinews*, February 26, 2013 ([http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/v-kazakhstane-sotni-chelovek-sidyat-za-ekstremizm-i-terrorizm-229238/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/v-kazakhstane-sotni-chelovek-sidyat-za-ekstremizm-i-terrorizm-229238/)).

<sup>10</sup> Ruslan Smykov, Zhandos Ajgozhin, Mirbek Turmaganbetov, "300 grazhdan Kazakhstana voiuut v Sirii i Irake [300 Kazakh citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq]," *Zakon.kz*, November 6, 2014 (<http://www.zakon.kz/4665761-300-grazhdan-kazakhstana-vojujut-v.html>).

<sup>11</sup> The Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index in 2015* (<http://www.visionofhumanity.org/>).

Against the backdrop of frequent cases of violent acts perpetrated by radicals, the causes of religious extremism in Kazakhstan have yet to be studied more deeply. The Kazakhstani authorities have referred to a number of external and internal reasons, including Kazakhstan's proximity to centers of armed conflicts involving radical religious groups, online extremism propaganda from abroad, social and economic problems in the country, as well as a low level of religious literacy.<sup>12</sup> According to Deputy General Prosecutor Johann Merkel, the growing number of followers of "non-traditional" beliefs—a very ambiguous term used to identify all those who do not recognize the legitimacy of the Muftiate or Spiritual Board—would be more likely to commit acts of terrorism, and would play a significant role in the spread of religious extremism.<sup>13</sup> Kazakhstani experts such as Marat Shibutov and Vyacheslav Abramov put a greater focus on internal factors, linking the growth of extremism with the general Islamization of the population, widening social inequality, falling incomes, an ideological vacuum, and the decreasing professionalism of law enforcement bodies.<sup>14</sup>

While the official and expert commentaries are important for a general overview of religious extremism, they are not sufficient to offer a comprehensive picture of radicalization in Kazakhstan. Western studies that look at religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia may take a broader view on the problem of radicalism, taking into account the experience of many other countries,<sup>15</sup> but they remain general in scope and do not give a nuanced picture of each country's unique situation. Their approach can be called "regional determinism," as the problem is analyzed through the prism of the social, political and economic situation in the entire Central Asian region. However, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan have little to share with Kazakhstan, which stands alone from the rest of the region on many aspects.

### **A Unique Primary Source: Prisoners sentenced for extremist and terrorist activities**

To provide grounds for a more sociological analysis of radicalization factors, I based myself on unique primary sources, drawn from semi-structured interviews I conducted with prisoners serving sentences on charges of extremist and terrorist activities, as well as relatives of radicals killed by police during special forces' raids. These interviews were conducted as part of a research project organized by the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Center for Security Programs, a non-governmental organization headed by Erlan Karin.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *O gosudarstvennoi programme po protivodeistviu religioznomu ekstremizmu i terrorizmu v Respublike Kazakhstan na 2013-2017 gody* [The state program on combating religious extremism and terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2013–2017], [http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=31451218#sub\\_id=300](http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=31451218#sub_id=300) (Astana, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Meirembek Baigarin, "V Kazakhstane proiskhodit kriminalizatsiia netraditsionnykh religioznykh grupp, v pervuiu ochered', salafitov – Genprokuratura RK [In Kazakhstan there is the criminalization of non-traditional religious groups, in the first place, the Salafis - Prosecutor General's Office of Kazakhstan]," *Kazinform*, November 22, 2012 (<http://www.inform.kz/rus/article/2512312>).

<sup>14</sup> Shibutov and Abramov, *Terrorizm in Kazakhstan - 2011-2012 gg.*

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Anna Munster "Growing Islamic Extremism in Central Asia and the Caucasus - Situation and Outlook," *World Watch Monitor*, 2013; International Crisis group, "Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia", *Europe and Central Asia Briefing* N ° 72; Noah Tucker, "Central Asian involvement in the conflict in Syria and Iraq: drivers and responses", 2015 Report for USAID, and other works.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to interviews with prisoners, this project analyzed the biographies of individuals who have been convicted in Kazakhstan for extremism and terrorism over the last 15 years. The full report of this study has been submitted to the General Prosecutor's Office and a narrow circle of individual experts.

The ‘Strategy’ Center for Social and Political Studies was involved in helping carry out fieldwork and interpreting the results. The General Prosecutor’s Office provided access to the prisons.<sup>17</sup>

Interviews with the prisoners were carried out in November 2013 in four prisons, located in Aqtobe (Aqtobe region), Atbasar (Akmola region), Arkalyk (Kostanai region) and Aktau (Mangistau region). These prisons were chosen from the available list of convicts who were scheduled to be interviewed, compiled from criminal cases that had public significance, with attempts made to include participants of the most resonant events in Kazakhstan from the period 2011-2012. A total of thirteen interviews were held with the prisoners.<sup>18</sup> Each interview lasted an average of 40-50 minutes. The vast majority of interviews were conducted in the Kazakh language (11 of 13). Interviews were recorded on tape, shorthanded, and then translated into Russian. Due to the sensitivity of some topics, as well as the situation of the respondents, the interview was built more like a conversation about the personal life of the prisoner, his family, childhood, and environment, with no strong emphasis on his criminal case.

Despite attempts to establish trusting contact with the prisoners, one cannot say that we were able to win their trust and absolute sincerity. Some of them, especially those who were accused of serious crimes, were reluctant to share information about their motives and did not wish to disclose the details of their cases. Some denied their involvement in terrorist acts or extremist activities and stated their cases to be fabricated. It is noteworthy that some of the interviewees expressed doubt in the researchers’ status and suspected them to be the staff of the National Security Committee. However, most of the respondents agreed to speak. They had a positive attitude, did not shy away from answers and gave detailed comments on the matters of personal and general topics related to religious and socio-political problems.

During the trip to Aktobe region, we carried out a visit to the villages of Kenkiyak and Shubarshi, where one of the most resonant events in the history of terrorism in Kazakhstan occurred in 2011. A group of radical members of the local community engaged in a fight with a large squad of military special forces, and all of them were killed after a long firefight. During this visit we had meetings with relatives of the deceased members of the group, as well as with the representatives of local authorities and a village imam. It should be noted that not all of the relatives of those killed wanted to talk about the events. We could not reach the families who held orthodox Islam beliefs and whose female members were dressed in *burqas*.

This unique fieldwork allowed us to obtain data about childhood, close environment, religion and other details related to the life and work of fourteen radical groups’ members (all men)—thirteen interviews with prisoners and one interview with the mother of one of the dead extremists. These fourteen stories are associated with eleven episodes of extremism and terrorist activities that took place in the period from 2011 to 2012.

---

<sup>17</sup> Despite the official permission to conduct the study, not all prisons gave free access. In one of the prisons, we had difficulty obtaining permission to interview. After some approvals, a permission was granted, but the prison authorities did not allow the use of audio recording devices during the conversation with the prisoner.

<sup>18</sup> Eight in Aktobe, three in Arkalyk, and one each in Atbasar and Aktau.

Here are the social and demographic profiles of respondents:

Age	Most of the respondents are young—9 out of 14 are aged between 19 and 29 years old. The youngest at the time of the crime was 17 years old and the oldest was 42 years old.
Locality	Only 5 of the 14 convicts were born and raised in the city center (oblast center), all the others are so-called internal migrants who moved from the suburbs (villages or small towns) to the center of the oblast.
Origin and ethnicity	All 14 participants are citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Only one of them is a 'repatriate' (Oralman) who moved from Turkmenistan. By ethnicity, all but one are Kazakh. Only two of the 14 have Russian as their mother tongue.
Level of education	Half of the respondents have secondary education. Only four had higher education. The others received specialized secondary education
Social status	About half of them come from socially disadvantaged families with low incomes. The remaining members can be considered middle class.
Degree of religiosity	All of the interviewed prisoners grew up in secular families where neither parent read <i>namaz</i> . Almost all of the convicts adopted Islam outside of the family through classmates, acquaintances or friends. Only in some cases did the convicts become religious along with other family members.
Degree of involvement in violent extremism	The 14 cases represent different extremist activities. Five of them were convicted of non-violent forms of religious extremism, on the charges of financing of terrorist activities or propaganda of extremism. Seven people to varying degrees were convicted for acts of violence, whether as having committed a terrorist act or attempting to carry it out. Two people are serving sentences for fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In my analysis of the results of this survey, I consider the process of radicalization<sup>19</sup> in two stages: first, as the process of adopting radical ideology,<sup>20</sup> and then as the luring of a person into committing a terrorist or other illegal act driven by radical religious beliefs. This distinction is based on the idea that the adoption of radical ideology is not systematically accompanied by a transition to committing violent acts.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, non-violent extremism must be separated from violent extremism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), radicalization is recognition of the person's extreme ideas and beliefs, with which he justifies the use of violence against others and a tool to achieve certain goals.

<sup>20</sup> In this work, radical ideology refers to the religious and political ideology of the Salafi Jihadism, based on the ideas of violent jihadism and the Salafi movement calling for a return to 'pure' Sunni Islam.

<sup>21</sup> Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011): 7-36.

<sup>22</sup> Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24: 1 (2012): 1-21.

## **“Sharia is better than Communism,” or Factors driving Kazakhstani into Radical Ideology**

In literature, radicalization is often described as a stepwise process, starting with the pre-radicalization stage, which then transforms into indoctrination in radical ideology and may end with a commitment of an act of terrorism.<sup>23</sup> In the case of our study group, it is difficult to define these stages, as each of the 14 convicts went his own way, with different time parameters, and had varying degrees of commitment to the ideas of Salafi Jihadism. Yet, it can be argued that each of the prisoners had a moment during which he became familiar and identified himself with radical ideology. This step may be considered as a phase of non-violent radicalism and includes various structural components.

### ***Identity crisis***

Pre-radicalization begins from the moment when, due to external circumstances or difficulties of life, a person experiences a crisis of identity and becomes vulnerable to radical ideology.<sup>24</sup> This condition may occur as a reaction to a completely different situation, whether personal (loss of a loved one, trauma, abrupt change of environment) or external (war, conflict). In the case of our study group, two storylines determined the social and psychological vulnerability of the future radicals.

In the first case, there are a series of life difficulties that the participants of the study experienced for a long time. The childhood and adolescence of most of the convicts, in the 1990s, came with heavy socio-economic difficulties, and many of them came from single-parent or dysfunctional families. One had an alcoholic father, while others were raised by a single mother or had a large family in severe financial distress. Consequently, these informants characterized their childhoods as very difficult, occasionally with insufficient access to food. In subsequent years, it was difficult to settle and adapt to adult life. Many were unable to improve their financial situation and remained social outsiders. The lack of permanent jobs, low wages and no prospects for improving their lives made this category of people looking for a more meaningful driver. The story of Nurken<sup>25</sup> is illustrative: Thirty-seven years old, he grew up in poverty, had no higher education and lived in Almaty for several years, where he worked in low-paid jobs. He experienced a severe crisis after his wife left him and he lost his job. After a failed suicide attempt, Nurken considered the larger questions of life and came to the mosque. Later he fell under the influence of a local Salafi community.

The second case groups people coming from a more affluent social class—middle-income families where parents provided their children with the opportunities to obtain higher education and further employment. The critical moment came when young men were separated from their usual lives and experienced a sharp change of environment after entering a university or moving to the city in search of work. For example, Darmen, one of the participants in a firefight between a radical group and special forces in the Aktobe region, grew up in an ordinary family and was the only son. His mother describes him as a calm child who was a good student in school. The change in his behavior became noticeable after he went to college in the city and became an active believer. Another example is Bolat, 25 years old, who began to read *namaz* during his first year at university. According to him, he was tired of life and sought to find meaning in the world.

---

<sup>23</sup> Tomas Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization in Europe: From conversion to terrorism* (Copenhagen: Danish Ministry of Defense, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Names have been changed in order to preserve the anonymity of our respondents.

Of course, these two storylines do not fully cover the circumstances that preceded the radicalization of respondents. There were cases that do not fit into these schemes. For example, Askar, 26, lived with his parents and grew up in affluent circumstances. He did not move, and always lived with his family. He attended the mosque alongside his friends in high school, and he began to read *namaz* in university. It was only when he graduated and started working that he joined the activities of the radical community. That said, the vast majority of respondents came from the category of people who, in a certain period of life, were in a situation of identity crisis because of family problems, unsettled, or unadjusted to new conditions. Such crises in life, according to Quintan Wiktorowicz, create a prerequisite for ‘cognitive opening,’ when the person becomes receptive to alternative views that earlier would have seemed totally unacceptable.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Religion as the meaning of life***

A life crisis and a ‘cognitive opening’ may push people to look for some religious answers, but it does not explain the move toward any kind of radicalism. Younger respondents in our study began their religious paths often influenced by their surroundings, mostly close friends and classmates. The emergence of a nearby mosque that became an attractive place for them played an important role. Almost all of our respondents came from secular families, where the role of Islam is minor or limited to folk traditions. Accordingly, engagement in Islam occurred in isolation from their households, with a low or inexistent participation of family members. In some cases, the decision to read *namaz* was confronted with active protest and condemnation from their parents. For example, Bolat secretly read *namaz* for two years in order to avoid confronting his father. Later, when the young man sought to acquire some religious knowledge, his parents ceased to have any authority upon him and were helpless to prevent his religious radicalization.

A decision to live according to the literal norms of Islam has been mentioned by almost all respondents as a turning point in life. By embarking on what they define as the right path, they have changed dramatically—they stopped smoking and drinking alcohol, began treating their parents with respect and felt total relief (“life became easier,” “I found peace of mind”)—a classic element in any ‘born again’ individual story. At the same time, their environment and networks also changed, as new acquaintances and new friends replaced the old. It should be noted that at the beginning of their religious journeys, the informants turned to mosques<sup>27</sup> that preached “traditional” forms of Islam.<sup>28</sup> However, as time passed, many made a conscious choice in favor of a more literal interpretation of religion (“If I previously read the prayer following the Hanafi madhab, then I began to read it by the Sunnah.”<sup>29</sup>). Many of them mentioned that the “official” Islam ceased to be attractive to them because of the low moral character of the imams, who distorted the essence of religion. For example, Zhalgas and Bolat expressed negative attitudes about official imams because they accept payment for performing religious rites, which, they said, is contrary to the norms of Islam (“People come to read the *duga*, so these imams fought for the *duga* to take the money. Imams go to weddings for money. Imams should conduct themselves well, because they are seen and followed by the people.”<sup>30</sup>)

---

<sup>26</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam* (Rhodes College Department of International Studies, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> All mosques in Kazakhstan are part of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the body which represents the traditional and pro-state interpretation of Islam.

<sup>28</sup> In Kazakhstan, traditional Islam is understood in the teachings of Imam Abu Hanifa and Agzam Maturidi.

<sup>29</sup> “Read *namaz* on Sunnah” – a marker that helps to define the representatives of the Salafism. It is noteworthy that they completely avoid using the term ‘Salafism’ in talking about their religious views.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Bolat, 25, convicted of funding extremism.



Some of the respondents then chose a Salafist interpretation of Islam, believing “it is important to adhere to the Prophet's way as much as possible.”<sup>31</sup> For them, the word of God is above everything else and religion is the main value of life, and therefore should impact not only individual life, but the public space and the society as a whole. For example, on the question of how they relate to the establishment of an Islamic state on the territory of Kazakhstan, Zhalgas, 24 years old, responded: “Some people like Communism, but I want to live according to Sharia.” The greatest attachment to the political tenets of Islam is demonstrated, first of all, by those who have committed more serious crimes, i.e. had a higher degree of radicalization. Another portion of the study participants are sympathetic toward extremist ideas, but not committed to radical ideology. Basically, they provided financial and moral support to radical networks, based on personal loyalties, as well as the sense of duty toward their brothers in faith. However, they lacked any specific commitment to change the current political or social order by force. It is revealing that almost all those whose criminal actions were non-violent went back to traditional Islam (the Hanafi school) in prison.

### ***Social and religious marginalization***

Looking at the background characteristics of our respondents, we can identify a set of parameters that could be defined as factors of radicalization: religious illiteracy, unemployment, low living standards, poor education and social exclusion. Experts and government officials in Kazakhstan often mention the significance of these factors. However, their relationship with the process of radicalization is more complex than it initially seems, for several reasons I will briefly discuss here.

First, the Kazakhstani authorities cite the religious illiteracy of young people as one of the main causes of radicalization and, therefore, redirect the efforts of government agencies and the clergy toward improving citizens' religious knowledge.<sup>32</sup> These programs are grounded on the assumptions that Kazakhstan was largely atheistic in its past, and lacked well rooted religious traditions. But it remains an open question whether the increase in general awareness and knowledge among citizens of religion would prevent their radicalization. After all, radicalism is also spreading in countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, where Islam has deeper roots and the population is more knowledgeable on theological issues. Almost all of our respondents come from secular families and thus did not have a deep knowledge of religion. However, it is impossible to know whether official institutions and mosques had provided them with relevant information about ‘correct’ Islam that would have prevented radicalization. The process of engaging in radical ideology does not happen in a closed environment, but in a competing one where people are provided with a variety of alternate interpretations of religion. Being offered a ‘moderate’ reading of Islam does not automatically prevent radicalization.

Second, there is no direct relationship between unemployment and religious radicalism, even though a firmly entrenched image exists in the media of Kazakhstani terrorists as unemployed and low-income youth. This version became popular after the General Prosecutor's Office announced statistics, according to which 95% of those detained under extremism and terrorism

---

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Zhalgas, 24, convicted for attempting to commit a terrorist attack.

<sup>32</sup> Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Sport of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Statement by the Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs Galym Shoykina at the international symposium “*Ekstremizm i takfirizm kak ugroza sovremennomu obshchestvu* [Extremism and Takfiri as a threat to modern society],” [http://www.din.gov.kz/rus/press-sluzhba/doklady\\_i\\_vystupleniya/?cid=0&rid=1934](http://www.din.gov.kz/rus/press-sluzhba/doklady_i_vystupleniya/?cid=0&rid=1934) (April 16, 2015).

articles in Kazakhstan were unemployed.<sup>33</sup> When unemployed, young people have a lot of free time, and as life becomes dreary and monotonous, they may see an opportunity in *jihad* to achieve fame, self-realize, and give meaning to their own existence.<sup>34</sup> This is confirmed by the case of Zharas, who became an active believer and then joined the radical community after he lost his job and lived on irregular earnings. Yet, he did not experience financial problems during unemployment, as he lived with his parents. However, as he admits in an interview, before becoming a religious man he "had a feeling of a meaningless life."

Yet, if unemployment is an important criterion to determine social and economic marginalization, constituting a 'push' factor toward communities outside the mainstream, it is not a cause of radicalization per se, as evidenced by the examples of other countries where jihadists recruit wealthy and educated citizens.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, research has shown that "unemployed" is an extensive category, meaning the lack of an official or legal job. But the vast majority of our respondents had a paid job, often in the "gray" areas of the Kazakhstani economy. Only one of the fourteen inmates had a formal employment prior to imprisonment, while the others had been private, unregistered taxi drivers,<sup>36</sup> traders on a market, or had more sporadic employment performing physical labor or *shabashki* activities (construction, minor repairs, loaders, etc.). Before embracing radical religious views, several of our respondents had moved from permanent to casual jobs and were uncertain about their future careers. Still others were isolated from their familiar environments and were trying to adapt to new conditions. During this period, they got familiar with people who brought them to the Salafi Jihadist ideology. For example, Nurlan, 44, was engaged in different activities for several years. He worked at a market, then at a factory, and then tried to start his own business, but the business failed. He had a loan from the bank which he was unable to reimburse, and then problems began in his family. His belief in Allah, according to him, helped him to overcome difficulties and meet new people in the Salafi community.

The individual trajectory of our respondents shows that the prerequisites for marginalization in Kazakhstan are not limited to socio-economic reasons, but also include transitioning toward a religious way of life. To many of them, a literal reading of Islamic norms hardly seems compatible with the way the contemporary secular Kazakhstani society is articulated. Study participants noted that after they became active believers it was difficult for them to communicate with their former surroundings, including in a work context. For example, after Zhalgas graduated in Almaty (where he was an active believer), he returned to his hometown of Aktobe, where he first tried to get into the civil service and then an oil company. But in both places, he did not last long because of religious reasons.<sup>37</sup> Zhalgas' radicalization occurred precisely at the time when he lost his job and began working as a private taxi driver.

### **Criminal subculture and Salafi Jihadism**

In the backgrounds of all of our respondents, there was one critical element in their past. They were all, in their childhood and teen ages, considered as 'bad guys' or hooligans. Several of them said that as children they had to fight a lot to live by the rules of 'the street' and led dissolute

---

<sup>33</sup> Saul Bapakova and Zhiger Baytelesov, "Protivodeistvie terrorizmu na sovremennom etape: perviaia ezhegodnaia mezhdunarodnaia konferentsiia ["Counter-terrorism at the present stage: the first annual international conference]," *Nomad*, November 23, 2012 (<http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201211230018>).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Denoeux and Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*.

<sup>36</sup> Passenger transportation by car.

<sup>37</sup> On the complexity of finding jobs for people reading the prayers, another study participant—Bolot—said that he was working as unskilled labor in spite of his higher education diploma.

lifestyles (alcohol, heavy smoking, partying). They felt the strong influence of criminal subculture: thieves' concepts such as 'common funds', 'watching out for', membership offerings known as '*grev*', criminal jargon, group stratification (division by districts or schools), and the cult of violence. Rooted in the Soviet past, this social phenomenon of petty criminal subculture spread in modern Kazakhstan, especially in regions that are distant from the big urban centers and have complex social and economic development dynamics such as massive internal migration, wide social inequalities, and late urbanization.

Many analysts have mentioned the ties between the criminal world and religious extremism in Kazakhstan,<sup>38</sup> but so far policies pay little attention to this relationship. In most cases, official comments refer to it in the context of prison radicalization.<sup>39</sup> However, according to statistics, the vast majority of detained extremists were being convicted for the first time and did not have previous experience in prison. Radicalization did not happen in prison during their encounter with criminal culture. On the contrary, they were already in contact with this criminal culture before becoming radical. According to Erlan Karin, many extremist groups in the country are engaged in looting and extortion, i.e. commonplace criminal activity.<sup>40</sup> Therefore it is logical to assume that the criminalization of religious extremism in Kazakhstan is, at least partly, the result of a broader phenomenon known as criminal subculture.

Below are some excerpts from the interviews describing the role of criminal subculture in their lives before they turned into active believers:

Askar, 26, was convicted of aiding extremist activity. Since childhood, he studied sambo (unarmed self-defense), became a master of sports, and participated in tournaments. When asked how often he fought as a child, he replied: "When I moved here, I saw that the population is socially ... poor. Well, there were dorms here ... Well, here "the thief's concepts" ...were highly developed...In principle, I had to fight back, here in a neighborhood we had a school, then university, then a community college plant (educational production plant), a lot of outsiders came from the villages, so we fought the crowd at the crowd, the school at the school .... Several times I was detained by the district police because of participation in fights."

Zharas, 28, was convicted of involvement in terrorist activities. He grew up as a spoiled child and earned low grades in school. He remembers himself as a bully adolescent that was raised by the rules of the street: "I tried to get along like I was supposed to. Older guys would trust me and give me tasks to do, and we shared the same beliefs...I was a street guy." He often got into conflicts with his parents due to "all the time he spent on the street". "My parents scolded me for not coming home for two-three days, for my fighting." He was conditionally sentenced to two years for hooliganism.

Daulet, 22, was convicted of participating in the activities of a terrorist group. One of his close relatives is a member of a radical extremist group who was killed while being captured in Almaty in 2011. According to Daulet, this relative had been racketeering in the past. He was "a cocky guy" who "got along like he was supposed to": "Sometimes on the street or on the road, when

---

<sup>38</sup> For example, in 2012, after a series of major terrorist attacks in the country, Deputy General Prosecutor of RK Johann Merkel stated that "a new dimension is the criminalization of the followers of non-traditional religious groups, in the first place, the Salafis and their splicing to organized crime".

<sup>39</sup> "Protivodeistvie terrorizmu: nuzhny sistemnye mery [Counter-terrorism: We need systematic measures]," *Nomad*, April 12, 2012 (<http://www.nomad.su/?a=5-201212040020>).

<sup>40</sup> "Bolee 70% prichastnykh k terr. deiatel'nosti v Kazakhstane byli bezrabochnymi – issledovanie [More than 70% of the people involved in the terrorist activities in Kazakhstan were unemployed - study]," *Novosti—Kazakhstan*, April 1, 2014 (<http://newskaz.ru/society/20140401/6314301.html>).

someone bumped into his car and he was not at fault and the other driver tried to accuse him, he restrained himself, and sat down. He said, if this had happened before, I would have shot his head off.”

A similar story happened in the case of Salamat, the youngest of our informants. At the time of the offense, he was only 17 years old. Salamat grew up in a small town, 100 kilometers away from the regional center. The place where he lived was a railway hub and station stop, with a high level of youth criminalization. As an only child brought by a single mother, Salamat spent much of his time on the streets, where the criminal subculture had a strong influence on him. Later while studying at college, he became interested in religion and radicalized under the influence of a friend and online videos. Together with two of his friends, he committed an armed assault on a taxi driver, killed a policeman and even tried to rob a folk healer. According to the official version, the young men committed violent acts under the influence of jihadist beliefs. However, Salamat acknowledged that he had committed robbery more because of money. Nothing else in the rest of the interview with him shows any interest in jihadism.

Why yesterday's 'bad guys' become religious extremists is partly explained by a phenomenon mentioned in Vitaly Naumkin's work on religious extremism in Central Asia. He noted how, in the whole post-Soviet space, people from sports and military specialties play an important role in the formation of the active part of radical Islamist movements.<sup>41</sup> He calls it the influence of the “culture of violence” when ex-athletes and the military are more susceptible to embodying the ideas of a militaristic Islam in which violence is one of the main instruments for achieving goals. The author's logic can be extended to criminal activists who, too, symbolize the cult of power and violence in any society.

Criminal subculture is not limited to the influence of the street environment, hooliganism, and so-called deviant behavior. One can also add the involvement in a shadow economy and various illegal operations related to illicit trade, smuggling, and other types of semi-criminal activities. As the analysis of the data shows, involvement in Salafi Jihadist ideology occurred most often in the areas with high concentrations of of gray and illegal activity—in bazaars, suburban areas, and new neighborhoods. In these areas the effect of government agencies is minimal; informal and illegal practices, such as corruption, racketeering, trafficking, etc. dominate, and a specific subculture is formed with its own notions of morality, credibility and attitude toward life.

The presence of gray sectors and criminalized economy may directly or indirectly create opportunities to finance the activities of subversive groups,<sup>42</sup> including radical communities. While there is a close relationship between terrorist groups and drug trafficking in Afghanistan, radical groups in Kazakhstan gain income from the shadow economy. Based on our study, it seems that trade with cell phones on the market is to be one of the main subsistence activities for the Salafi community in Kazakhstan: “We had a good attitude towards Kazakhstan, because there was no harassment here. Everything was allowed: cropped pants, beards, reading prayers and covered dresses for wives. [The authorities] allowed us to work, we opened cell phone shops. There was no harassment. We sold the phones. Those who wanted to left [for Afghanistan].”<sup>43</sup> The market environment creates an additional opportunity to expand networks for Salafi communities that are mainly formed by personal relationships and acquaintances. According to

---

<sup>41</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Olga Oliker et al., *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army*, RAND Corporation, 2003 ([http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1598.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1598.html)).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Bolat, 25, convicted of financing extremist activity.

some of our respondents, after work on the market selling cell phones, young traders spent the evenings together visiting each other's homes and going outside of the city. The informants became familiar with the ideology of Salafi Jihadism and further engaged in the activities of radical community.<sup>44</sup> Thus, inter-community communication was strengthened not only by religious and ideological grounds, but also by common business interests among its members.

### **From Moderate Salafism to Violent Extremism. The 'Frame Alignment' Theory**

In the literature, there is no unequivocal opinion about whether to consider ideological involvement in Salafism as a dangerous phenomenon. Some believe that there is no security risk, since most of the Salafi community refute any violence in the name of religion. According to others, any form of Salafism is a threat because this ideology directly or indirectly contributes to violent extremism.<sup>45</sup> Among our respondents, about half of them can be classified as non-violent radicals. They are being punished for providing financial assistance to extremist activity, or for being part of a radical group, but were passive members of the community and did not take part in the actual commission of violent acts.

However, despite their varying degrees of radicalization, all have been influenced by video clips and internet preaching announcing the forthcoming Apocalypse and describing the world as a place for the final confrontation between Muslims and infidels. Their resentment feelings are strong: they believe that the United States and other *kafir* (infidel) states humiliate and mock Muslims, go to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq to destroy Islamic culture, and that the duty of each Muslim is thus to help their brothers and sisters. "It all depends on the person and his views. I am, for example, a little emotional. There are videos showing that our Muslims are tortured; *ayat* verses from the Quran have lines that we should share our property with those who took the way of Allah ... Videos show Americans that torture Muslims, wound them, aggress them, and we feel sorry for Muslims, so it is effective."<sup>46</sup> Under such vivid influence, some decided to just express sympathy, other agreed to help financially, and some others were willing to take up arms in the name of justice and faith. Several of those convicted for non-violent actions said that each of them at some point had to answer a question about what they could do for their brethren. According to them, the boldest, or those who had a strong 'spirit', left for Afghanistan, and those who were weak took responsibility to help with money.

As noted above, not all of the respondents believed in the need for violence. But for some of them, a second phase begins once they not only share Salafi principles, but also decide to engage in supporting violent solutions in order to, according to them, advance or protect the values of Islam.<sup>47</sup> As previously stated, those who were ready for violent acts were those who had a high degree of exposure to criminal subcultures.

In Kazakhstan, the criminalization of radical religious groups received official recognition a few years ago. In 2012, First Deputy General Prosecutor of Kazakhstan Johann Merkel said that the merger of Salafists with organized crime in the country took on new dimensions.<sup>48</sup> He mentioned three main situations: cases of recruitment, when "members of organized criminal

---

<sup>44</sup> Azamat, 25, convicted of the financing of extremism, said in an interview that he regrets that he got a job at the bazaar where he met with those involved in radical activities.

<sup>45</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, "The Role of non-violent Islamists in Europe," *CTC Sentinel*, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-role-of-non-violent-islamists-in-europe> (November 1, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> From an interview with Aybar, 20 years old.

<sup>47</sup> Precht, *Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization in Europe: From conversion to terrorism*.

<sup>48</sup> "V Kazakhstane proiskhodit kriminalizatsiia netraditsionnykh religioznykh grupp, v pervuiu ochered', salafitov – Genprokuratura".

groups get involved in non-traditional religious movements and find an ideological justification in religion for their committed crimes,” cases where “radicals establish control over criminalized business areas” (he did not specify which ones), and radical groups trying to get access “to the process of public procurement as a source of financing of their activities.”<sup>49</sup> In his book *Soldiers of the Caliphate*, Erlan Karin reports on more trivial cases of criminal activities of radical groups. He describes for instance the story of one of the Kazakhstani cells of Jund al-Khilafah<sup>50</sup> which was engaged in looting and robberies to fund its extremist activities.<sup>51</sup>

To comprehend how individuals join radical groups, I base my analysis on Quintan Wiktorowicz’s theories, who uses the concept of framing, previously developed by other scholars. According to him, “Frames represent interpretative schemata that provide a framework for comprehending the surrounding environment,” and “offer a language and cognitive tools for making sense of events and experiences by interpreting causation, evaluating situations, and offering proscriptive remedies.”<sup>52</sup> Wiktorowicz adds that a successful mobilization and recruitment of supporters may be possible only if there is frame alignment, i.e., when the frame proposed by the movement resonates with a person’s own perception and understanding of the world. Frame alignment depends on the compatibility of cultural narratives, symbols and identities, the reputation of the frame “articulator”, the coherence and credibility of the frame and its personal significance for potential participants.<sup>53</sup>

This frame alignment theory offers a convincing approach, confirmed by our interviews, about the synchronization of values, ideologies, and symbols between the criminal subculture and Salafi Jihadist ideology: around the *us versus them* pattern, a similar anti-law enforcement culture, the same code of honor and cult of obedience, and the same way of collecting funds.

First of all, the idea of the confrontation between the West and the Muslim world resonates with people who are accustomed to thinking in the rigid categories of *us versus them*. “Suffering and humiliated Muslims” and “hostile infidel West” are the main frames used Salafi Jihadist ideologues to explain the current international scene. Among our respondents, this narrative found the greatest success with young people who come from an environment shaped by a clear division into friends and foes, such as children from ‘our’ and others’ districts, ‘our’ and others’ schools, and even playgrounds. Askar, 26 years old, was raised in an area with a strong line of divide between schools and districts. He had to “stand up” for the members of his group and actively participated in fights. He talks about the confrontation between Muslims and Christians:

America, they are enemies in general, and want to destroy all Muslims and all other countries. Well, I understand that they (the Christians) have a goal—to destroy the Muslims, we can say this. Well, they would have destroyed all Muslim countries in a chain. And we stand here for the Muslims, for our faith. Well, I know that there is a duty of a Muslim—to defend religion, honor, life and property of the Muslims, all as a whole.

He believes that to find respect in the world, a country should have a strong state. Kazakhstan, in his opinion, is not a strong state. “It is being used while it has the resources, but when they are gone, it will be thrown out.” Likewise, Askar believes that Muslims should have their own army:

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> A radical extremist group, established in 2011 in Afghanistan with the participation of Kazakh citizens.

<sup>51</sup> Erlan Karin, *Soldiers of the Caliphate: Myth and Reality*, (Almaty: Vlast’, 2014), 118.

<sup>52</sup> Wiktorowicz, *Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam*.

<sup>53</sup> Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 619-622.

“If there are attacks on Muslims, Muslims must be protected from the attack, be able to protect their families.” On the question of why the citizens of Kazakhstan should defend Afghanistan, Askar replied: “Well, anyway, they are believers, and they have been attacked by Americans...” Speaking of himself, he admits that he was offered to come and help by providing technical support, “When I was in a correspondence with them, I was offered not to fight, but to teach them computers and I, in principle, agreed to help.”<sup>54</sup>

### *An anti-Law Enforcement Culture*

Second, yesterday's ‘bad guys’ can replicate this *us versus them* scheme toward law enforcement agencies, said to be discriminating against Muslims, limiting their rights and humiliating them. As the experience of Kazakhstan shows, a vast majority of violent acts perpetrated there were directed against representatives of law enforcement agencies and their buildings. Among all of the participants in our study, five of seven episodes of violent extremism in which they were involved were directed against the security forces. Zhalgas, 24 years old, decided to launch a bomb in the police building after there was a rumor that local police raped the wife of a Muslim. The information was not accurate and Zhalgas did not personally know these people. But the rumors were sufficient for him to plan the attack along with his friends. Several people have learned to make their own explosives. They went outside the city to carry out tests but could not realize their plan and were arrested by law enforcement agencies. Commenting on his actions, Zhalgas says that he was under the influence of emotions and just wanted to avenge his Muslim brother. It should be noted that, as in the case of Askar, Zhalgas was active in school sports and took part in sport competitions, dreaming of becoming a world champion boxer.

### *Honor Code and Obedience*

Third, the Salafi Jihadist argument that a real Muslim must help his brothers resonates with the honor code of street culture, according to which one never leaves his brother in trouble.<sup>55</sup> For example, Zharas, who was a typical hooligan youth, after conversion made new friends among radicals. He could not communicate closely with them, as he lived in the regional center and the radical group was based in a village 200 kilometers away. However, this did not prevent him from helping his brothers, who started collecting donations from all members of the community to carry out *jihad* against the local police. On the question about why he responded to the call and decided to join them, he answered: “Because there are *hadith* that it is necessary to help our people. We're Muslims, we have a duty to take before our brethren, Muslims, as the *Hadith* says, that we should help support them because there is a demand from us, because we are believers.”

### *Collecting funds*

Group solidarity emerges thus as a key factor not only in driving people to join acts of violence, but also in providing material support to the extremists abroad. Several people who were detained for providing financing help for religious extremism explained their actions by saying that helping brothers was their sacred duty. Collecting donations for the sake of suffering Muslims among Salafi Jihadists is very much similar to a system of collecting money for the needs of criminal *obshchak* (joined funds of money in the criminal world). In both systems, the collection of money is carried out from bottom to top: money collected among ordinary members/supporters of community goes to those who are standing at the top of the hierarchy. Also in both cases, an ordinary donor can be deceived about the true purpose of the money

<sup>54</sup> He has a degree in Information Technology.

<sup>55</sup> The word ‘brother’ has roughly the same meaning in the criminal world and among Islamists, which implies members of one community, held together with strong bonds of common interests, and beliefs.

collection. For example, informants reported that they donated money every month, thinking that they were helping needy Muslims in Afghanistan. Some got taken by surprise when they learned the money they were transferring to foreign accounts as a donation for helping their Muslim brothers had been used by more radical groups, or to prepare a suicide attacks.<sup>56</sup> In some other cases the funds raised were used for the personal needs of the leader of the radical group. There are additional similarities in the voluntary-coercive nature of this fundraising, i.e., if the donor for some reason refuses to transfer the money, he may be forced to do so. For example, a radical group in Almaty has long extorted money from businessmen allegedly for the needs of the *jihad*, even though, in reality the funds were spent on entirely different goals.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, criminal groups can easily promote the idea of *takfiri*—disbelief, an accusation that Salafis advance to criticize all the other Muslims who do not share their literal reading of Islam. It allows Muslims to rob “infidels,” in that case everyone who does not read *namaz*, if a share of the profits is directed to support the Islamic cause. This is what the Prosecutor’s office meant when it declared that organized criminal groups found in religion an ideological justification for their crimes. Among our respondents, none of them displayed clear *takfiri* narratives, but judging by the crimes committed, the existence of this ‘norm’ made jihadist ideology attractive to people who were predisposed to criminal behavior. Thus, explanatory diagrams and designs created by the Salafi Jihadist ideologists through sermons, online videos, and special literature to justify the right collect money and steal it ‘on behalf of the cause’ offer ready-made tools, easily understandable to many members of criminal groups.

The issue of ties between criminal groups and jihadist networks would need further specific study. However, based on the available material, signs of deep interaction are already confirmed for Kazakhstan, in particular as both groups need to access the market of illegal weapons. Zhalgas, who planned to set off an explosion in a police building, said that he took the gun from an acquaintance with connections to the bandit world. Another study participant, Zharas, was regarded in his community as a person who helped the radical group to get weapons. The mother of Darmen, one of the killed members of the group, said that she saw her son wearing a big backpack, which turned out to contained ammunition. With these fragments of information, it is possible to assume that radical groups have easy access to the market of illegal weapons.

Tamara Makarenko comes to similar conclusions as she explores the interaction of terrorist organizations and organized crime around the world. In her opinion, the relationship between these groups is particularly evident in weak and transitional states. In such countries, terrorist and criminal groups are united by a common interest in reaping benefits of the existing many gray zones. She believes that in many countries of South America, the Middle East and the former Soviet states, terrorist groups establish close relationships with criminal groups mostly to have access to illegal weapons and other munitions.<sup>58</sup> We can argue that the degree of cooperation between criminal groups and radical communities is determined by the ability of the state to fulfill its functions: the stronger the state, the less likely it is that crime and radical groups will converge in common interest, but this hypothesis should be tested, as many well developed Western European states are facing the same interactions without being typologized as ‘weak’ or ‘transitional’ states.

---

<sup>56</sup> They themselves say that they just got caught under the general ‘inspection’, which the police held after a series of terrorist attacks.

<sup>57</sup> “Likvidirovannyi v Almaty glava OPG vymogal den'gi na dzihad [Head of the Criminal Group Liquidated in Almaty extorted money for jihad],” *Tengrinews*, November 30, 2011 ([http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/likvidirovannyiy-almaty-glava-opg-vyimogal-dengi-djihad-202698/](http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/likvidirovannyiy-almaty-glava-opg-vyimogal-dengi-djihad-202698/)).

<sup>58</sup> Tamara Makarenko, *Criminal and Terrorist Networks: Gauging Interaction and the Resultant Impact on Counter-Terrorism*, Center for Transatlantic Relations (2008).



## Conclusion

Several cases of homegrown terrorism in Kazakhstan in 2011-12 happened as the result of the radicalization of some citizens on the basis of Salafi Jihadist ideology. The latter has found support among young people from economically and socially marginalized sections of society. They shared several common background characteristics such as secular families, formal unemployment, difficulties adapting to socio-economic conditions, and involvement in the criminal subculture. In the context of general growth of interest in Islam, this social group was found the most responsive to the tenets of Salafism and to its radical form of jihadist ideology. Criminal subculture has become part of youth culture in Kazakhstan.

Our study shows that through involvement in delinquent acts from their early years, young people get used to the culture of violence and confrontation with the state institutions, embodied by schools and law enforcement agencies. Other 'push' factors include disappointment in 'traditional' Islam. As a response, Salafi groups offer a narrative of social justice, intragroup solidarity, and common economic interests (trade in cell phones for instance). As a result of these factors, some of Kazakhstan's market places and new residential areas with a great share of internal migrants moving from depressed villages to the local urban centers appear as a fertile ground for spreading Salafi ideology.

At the individual level, radicalization occurs in different ways and at different times. Trigger factors may include personal trauma experienced due to family and financial difficulties, as well as an imaginary resentment toward law enforcement officials. The extent of radicalization is also different. Some eventually took the path of violent extremism or left for war zones, while some limited themselves to passive support for Salafi Jihadists, helping the community with financial and moral assistance. In almost every case, videos and sermons distributed via internet and mobile phones served as an important tool of influence, spreading the mainstream narratives: Muslims around the world are under the heavy yoke of Western infidels (the United States, Israel); after the end of the war in Afghanistan, Muslims will be able to create an Islamic state; the most important duty of a Muslim is to help his brethren.

As I have shown in this paper, the key mechanism of transition of criminalized youth to the ranks of Salafi Jihadist supporters is frame alignment, when the ideology of jihadism resonates with the worldview spread the criminal subculture. Inside a radical community as well as inside a criminal group, people are tied together through personal relationship—family, neighborhood, friendship—that regulate obedience, code of honor, funding mechanisms, and shared enemies. The interaction between radical groups and criminal ones is perceptible at several levels. First, those who confronted law enforcement most violently are those with a past criminal background or were closely involved in street crime groups. Second, extremist groups have close ties with the criminal world through the market of illegal weapons. Third, these groups are engaged in looting and extortion to provide themselves with the necessary resources.

What are the policy implications of this research? The policy of combating religious extremism and terrorism that is carried out in Kazakhstan includes a wide range of educational outreach activities. It is supervised by regional departments of the Committee for Religious Affairs, which create working groups including representatives from state agencies, religious scholars and imams. Their main job is to organize outreach meetings with school and university youths. According to official data, over the past few years, the work of these groups has reached more than one million people all over Kazakhstan.

But one may only wonder if the chosen strategy is rightly calibrated. First, it focuses on teaching the 'right' religion in the naïve hope it will avoid the 'wrong' interpretation of Islam to spread,

while mechanisms of involvement in radical ideology and even more in violence are not originated in a 'mistaken' access to religion. Second, it does not target marginalized youth who live in the suburbs and work in the markets, on construction sites or as private taxi drivers. Outreach through formal institutions (schools, universities, employers) cannot yield good results due to lack of interconnection between these institutions and marginalized youth. A more successful policy would be to develop special programs to work with marginalized and less accessible youth, offering tools for social adaptation and enlightenment. The main driver of state policy should be the decriminalization of youth environments and a real fight against petty criminality, which seems to be the most effective highway toward radicalization and violent extremism.

**Appendix 1. Statistics on people who were charged with criminal responsibility for crimes related to terrorism and extremism (number of persons)**

	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>Total</b>
Terrorism	1	0	2	11	18	15	0	47
Promotion of terrorism or public incitement to commit an act of terrorism	2	3	1	3	9	14	23	55
Establishing, leading a terrorist group and participation in its activities	6	21	5	19	67	20	9	147
Financing of extremism or terrorist activity	0	0	0	0	1	6	2	9
Recruitment or training of any armed personnel in order to organize terrorist or extremist activities	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>263</b>

*Source: The data was obtained from the Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Records of the General Prosecutor of the Republic of Kazakhstan <http://service.pravstat.kz/>*

**Bibliography**

- Bartlett, Jamie and Miller, Carl. "The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24: 1 (2012): 1-21.
- Benford, Robert D., and Snow, David A. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment". *Annual Review of Sociology* 26. Annual Reviews (2000): 611-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/223459>.
- Borum, Randy. "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011): 7-36.
- Denoeux, Guilain and Carter, Lynn. *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*. Washington, DC. United States Agency for International Development, February 2009.
- Karin, Erlan. *Soldiers of the Caliphate: Myth and Reality*. Almaty, Kazakhstan: Vlast', 2014.
- McCauley, Clark and Moskalenko, Sophia. "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20:3 (2008): 415-433.
- Oliker, Olga, Thomas S. Szayna, Tanya Charlick-Paley, Phil Williams, Abraham S. Becker, Sergej Mahnovski and William O'Malley. *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1598.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1598.html). Also available in print form.
- Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam." Analytical paper. Department of International Studies, Rhodes College, 2004.

**The Central Asia Fellowship Program**

Central Asia has a chronic and acute lack of public policy experts and the opportunities for young professionals to hone their analytical skills are few and far between. The lack of a robust pool of public policy experts, compounded by the entrenched ideological divide existing between civil society and academia, has had a detrimental effect on the transparency and vigor of policy debate in Central Asia.

The CAP-SIPRI North America Central Asia Fellowship Program is intended for young professionals—scholars, government officials, policy experts, human rights and democracy activists—who want to enhance their research and analytical skills and seek to become public policy leaders in their respective countries. More generally, the fellowship program seeks to provide a platform for the exchange of ideas and build lasting intellectual networks between the Central Asian and the US scholarly and policy communities.

Fellows spend five months in residence at the GW Elliott School of International Affairs. They are offered a series of tailor-made programs and introduced to US policy and expert communities in both Washington DC and New York. Fellows are required to attend several seminars, workshops and training sessions, write one policy brief on the predetermined theme and present their research at public seminars. Throughout their fellowship Fellows are closely mentored and guided by CAP and SIPRI North America Staff.

**Program Director**

Marlene Laruelle, Director, Central Asia Program, GW Elliott School of International Affairs

**Advisory Committee**

Michael Hall, Program Officer, Central Eurasia Project, Open Society Foundations

Aitolkyn Kourmanova, CAP Program Assistant and Chief Editor of Central Asia Analytical Network (CAAN)

Henry Hale, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, George Washington University

Svetlana Jacquesson, Director, Central Asia Studies Institute, The American University of Central Asia, Bishkek

Emil Juraev, Deputy Director, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Academy, Bishkek

Nargis Kassenova, Director, Central Asian Studies Center, KIMEP, Almaty

Kathleen Kuehnast, Director, Center for Gender and Peacebuilding, USIP

Emil Nasritdinov, Acting Associate Professor, AUCA, Bishkek