MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: CASES OF KAZAKHSTAN, TAJIKISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>Agency of Information and Communications of the Republic of Uzbekistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>HII</td>
<td>Higher Islamic Institute under the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GONGO</td>
<td>Government-Organized (or Operated) Non-Governmental Organizations</td>
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<td>SAMK</td>
<td>Spiritual Administration of Muslims Kazakhstan</td>
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<td>CRO</td>
<td>Committee for Religious Organizations under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRP</td>
<td>Islamic Renaissance Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRPT</td>
<td>Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>PVE</td>
<td>Prevention/Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<tr>
<td>RT</td>
<td>Republic of Tajikistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>RK</td>
<td>Republic of Kazakhstan</td>
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<tr>
<td>RF</td>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMU</td>
<td>Department of Muslims of Uzbekistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>IWPR</td>
<td>Institute for War and Peace Reporting</td>
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<td>RFE / RL</td>
<td>Radio Free Europe</td>
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ABSTRACT

This report analyzes the content of traditional media and social networks on religious freedom and violent extremism in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, the study seeks to examine hate speech against certain religious groups and how pre-labeling affects those officially accused of extremism.

For the most part, the policies and legal frameworks of the three Central Asian states focused on CVE (counteracting violent extremism) are structurally repressive and do not always protect religious freedom. State information resources are informative, poorly represented in the online environment and do not have a high level of citizen confidence due to their policies.

The securitization and politicization of religion resulted in repressive state practices in respect to religious freedom, which is one of the driving factors in the radicalization of people. The need for alternative ways of expressing opinions and finding answers to religious questions has resulted in the emergence of alternative (parallel to the state information resources) media channels mainly on social media: YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, Odnoklassniki and online websites with a large number of young subscribers.

The report consists of three sections and annexes containing the research methodology, case study and examples from three Central Asian states.
INTRODUCTION

Since the subject of religion is “sensitive” for the authorities of Kazakhstan, its coverage in the media is strictly regulated by the state authorities. At the same time, its importance in public discussions is significantly lower compared to politics and social issues, because of the lower interest of the audience and the fear of being subjected to criminal charges for “inciting” discord or extremist “propaganda”. Also, in general, the population of Kazakhstan perceives religious affiliation as a part of ethnicity, and tries to be restrained in their assessments and judgments regarding the main religion of other ethnic groups.

The majority of publications and posts devoted to religion (See Annex 1 Research Methodology) are positive (21.4%) or neutral (40.7%). At the same time, the majority of publications and posts relate to Islam (87%). “Non-traditional” branches or certain traditions in Kazakhstan fall under major criticism, both from the state, indirectly through private media, and from society. While other religions, mainly Orthodox and Protestantism, share the remaining 13% of media coverage almost equally. In this case, Orthodoxy is presented either in positive or neutral tones, as a peaceful traditional religion of the second largest ethnic group, while Protestantism, as well as neo-Christianity, is presented in a negative way, as a threat to society and traditions.

Only with respect to Kazakhstan’s two traditional religions - Sunni Islam and Orthodoxy - a positive or restrained background is formed in the information field. Topics and tonality form friendly relations between the two religions with respect to these religions based on mutual respect. Such conclusions are typical for both Kazakh and Russian-speaking segments. Other Christian and Islamic movements are covered either neutrally or with negative tonality and the use of evaluative, emotional vocabulary. The balance of opinions is often broken upon covering conflict situations, and events are mainly presented only by the accusing party (See Annex 2 Case study).

Against this background, misconceptions may arise that non-traditional movements of Islam are a priori associated with religious extremism and terrorism, and that Christian movements, besides Orthodoxy, are undesirable and do not fit the values of Kazakhstan society. Such conclusions are correlated with the state’s position, which does not hide concerns that non-traditional for Kazakhstan Islam carries potential risks for stability and interfaith harmony.

As for presentation of materials, the Kazakh-language and Russian-language media and social networks are not very different in principle. At the same time, the Kazakh-language media traditionally pay more attention to religious subjects. In Russian-language media the publications on this topic are more of an event nature, while in Kazakh media discussions or reflections on this topic often take place without any information reason and often use evaluation vocabulary. Often such publications contain elements of propaganda, not necessarily from the state authorities or the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK), but also from bloggers or individual journalists. Usually such publications advocate traditional Islam.

In terms of media, the number of publications in Russian language is 20% higher than the number of Kazakh-language publications (213 and 141 respectively). On the contrary, social media posts in Russian-speaking communities (or in Russian language) are two times less than the number of posts and publications in Kazakh-speaking communities (or in Kazakh language) with 44 and 93 posts/publications, respectively. The number of neutral tone posts in the Kazakh-language segment of social networks is greater than the Russian-language segment because of the greater number of Muslims among the Kazakh-speaking part of Kazakh society. Discussion of religions other than
Islam in social networks has been kept to a minimum. For the most part, opinion leaders, with few exceptions, have avoided participating in discussions or statements about religions.

The state is seriously concerned about manifestations of religious extremism and terrorism, and this intolerant attitude is reflected in media materials. At the same time, Kazakhstani mass media follows the state’s position in this respect without making attempts to analyze and present their own conclusions. There are only a few media resources that try to provide objective information and show different viewpoints. However, religious extremism and terrorism is practically absent from public discussions and social networks.

INFORMATION CHANNELS

Religious issues are not a priority for Kazakhstan’s social and political media and nearly all media presents either an official position or a position that is in agreement with the authorities through government order or tacit censorship. Self-censorship is also strongly present in Kazakhstani media. Since religion is a sensitive subject and the country actively uses Article 174 of the Criminal Code “Excitation of discord” (including religious one), editors try to minimize the independent submission of information or submits it in doses, taking into account the position of the state.

There is also a lack of independent analytical information related to manifestations of religious extremism and terrorism. In this case, Kazakhstani media, with rare exceptions, represents the state’s point of view by retransmitting reports from law enforcement or judicial bodies.

In general, Kazakhstani media most often use the following channels of information when covering religious issues:

- The Religious Affairs Committee of the Ministry of Information and Public Development through press releases, reports and events.
- State or quasi-state research and analytical structures such as the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies, Center for Religious Expertise RSI, Research and Analytical Center on Religion, and others through their experts, analysts, religious scholars, political scientists, as well as through ongoing research and activities.
- Congresses of world and traditional religions through events, issued documents, interviews, etc.
- Law enforcement agencies such as the National Security Committee, the Ministry of the Internal Affairs and its structural units, judicial authorities or the supervisory authorities including the General Prosecutor’s office and its structural units through press releases and press reports. In this case, media representatives may also be present at trials, but court decisions are not questioned.
- The Non-governmental sector, including GONGO (Association of centers for religious research, Centers for Consultation and Rehabilitation from Destructive Ideology in the Departments of Social Development of City Administrations, the “Perspective” Information and advisory group, and a number of others through their experts, analysts, religious scholars, political scientists and ongoing research and events.
- The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) and religious figures (mainly representatives of Sunni Islam, members of the SAMK, or the Russian Orthodox Church) through interviews, comments, and assessments.

The state’s main position, represented in the Kazakhstani media, is that Kazakhstan is a tolerant country where different religions coexist peacefully. In general, the media approves of
this position, while providing balanced information about religious organizations. At the same
time, materials appear in the context of the government’s fight against religious extremism and
terrorism, as well as against “non-traditional” religions. In these cases, the media make various
negative comments with respect to both adherents of religious movements banned in Kazakhstan
and followers of “non-traditional” religious movements and associations.

Fearing criminal responsibility in social networks, society is often afraid to openly demonstrate
its critical attitude towards religious issues. As already noted religion in social networks is not the
main topic of discussion and is of lower importance compared to discussion of political, social and
ethnic issues. Despite this, a preliminary evaluation of the media and social networks shows that
statements of a discriminatory nature emerge with respect to certain religions and their followers,
as well as a negative attitude towards “non-traditional” religious movements for Kazakhstan, often
defined here as sects.

Experts have repeatedly noted that xenophobia in relation to religious minorities is
transmitted in the media, including pro-state media. The media, in general, often make factual and
semantic mistakes, which are the result of insufficient knowledge of the material. For example, in
this episode of the private television channel KTK “News - complaints about “Jehovah’s Witnesses”
are studied in the relevant ministry”, the followers of “Jehovah’s Witnesses” are often called
“Jehovists” in other media.¹ In the TV plot of the state television channel Khabar, non-traditional
religions are called “sects” and urge to avoid them².

TONALITY OF PUBLICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGION COVERAGE

A positive and neutral tone towards the subject of religion is largely supported by two factors.
First, Kazakhstan positions itself as a secular state and religious matters, especially from a critical
point of view, are considered a sensitive topic. A lot of media outlets prefer to address the subject
of religion cautiously, only reporting factual information and events. Secondly, this tone is largely
formed under the influence of state orders regarding information policy. Subjects promoting
religious tolerance and respect for each other appear in state order competitive biddings and
are covered by both state and private media. This is more frequent when covering “traditional”
religions of Kazakhstan such as Sunni Islam (Hanafi madhab) and Orthodoxy.

Example 1.

“Unity in religious diversity” - the publication in the “Kazhstanskaya pravda” state
newspaper dated November, 7, 2019 (www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/edinstvo-v-religioznom-
mnogoobrazii)

Quote: “Freedom of conscience, freedom of religion as a natural right to form own beliefs
are enshrined in the Constitution for every citizen of our country, – said Dauren Abayev (Minister of
Information and Public Development - author’s note). For three decades, Kazakhstan has had a lot of
confessions and religious associations. We cannot fail to note their role in the process of modernizing
Kazakhstan society, strengthening unity, peace and harmony in our multi-ethnic state”.

At the same time, state orders to the media to a certain extent generate a negative
assessment, primarily targeting certain religious minorities and criticizing “non-traditional” religious
associations. This is especially true for private media publications. There are specific occasions
where the media mentions religious issues in both neutral-positive and negative perspectives:
religious holidays, public or state events, conflict or criminal situations. A positive or neutral tone

¹www.ktk.kz/ru/programs/novosti/77980
in both languages is present when covering state-supported religious holidays (Kurban-bairam, Christmas, and Easter) and official events involving government officials and religious figures.

In Kazakh-language media, the opening of new mosques or Islamic educational and cultural centers supported by the SAMK is always presented in a positive tone. At the same time, the media sometimes presents a negative attitude towards any religious movement through the description of domestic conflicts and private stories with reference to the religious affiliation of their actors. Among the discrediting key messages in the media are those of religious organizations destroying families, opposing social rules, attracting people with promises of material benefits, harming society and people’s health, etc.

**Example 2.**
“Salafi left his wife and five children without means of living in Ekibastuz” - the publication dated November, 27, 2019, on the Nur.kz website
Quote: “According to experts, the number of victims of the pseudo-religious trend of Salafism is growing every year. Many Salafi men leave their families and children in order to change their wives”.

**Example 3.**
“Jehovah's Witnesses are suspected of pedophilia in Almaty” - the publication in the “Caravan” private newspaper dated October, 11, 2019 (www.caravan.kz/news/v-almaty-svidetelej-iegovy-podozrevayut-v-pedofilii-577569/)
Quote: “The Almaty Police Department, with the court’s approval, conducted investigative activities in the offices of the “Jehovah's Witnesses” religious organization and at the places of residence of individual participants... the Investigation is checking the version of the suspects committing a number of crimes against sexual integrity of persons who knowingly have not reached the age of 16”.

In general, in the Kazakh-language segment of the analyzed materials with a negative tone, the dominant informational occasions are subjects related to religious extremism and terrorism, and non-traditional Islamic trends for Kazakhstan (Salafism, Wahhabism). Some discussions taking place in the Kazakh-language segment of media and social networks do not have an equivalent for the Russian-speaking audience. This is explained by the fact that some subjects are much less popular among Kazakhstan’s non-indigenous populations and Russian-speaking Kazakhs as well. For example, disputes between theologians of Salafi and traditional orientation, or statements that Kazakhs have more connections to Tengrianism than Islam. In addition, the genre of public discussions with the use of social networks and mass media is typical for Kazakh-language media and does not arouse interest among Russian-speaking content consumers. In contrast to publications in Russian, some materials in Kazakh are characterized by aggressive, subjective assessment in relation to particular religious movements and specific individuals.

Therefore, in general, despite the sufficient level of coverage on religious issues, the media do not always allow a loyal or even biased assessment of their materials. Moreover, when covering conflict situations, the media does not always observe the principles of journalistic ethics or professionalism in providing the audience balanced opinions and they form sympathies with one of the conflict parties.

As for types of content, materials in the media are mostly presented by informational messages. News dominates both the Russian-language segment (92% of the total number of
articles) and the Kazakh-language segment (89%). Only a small number of publications offer more detailed information with analytical elements. Both the Kazakh-language and Russian-language segments use similar sources of information such as press services and news agencies reports, author’s original information, and reprints of materials from other publications.

The dominant role of information messages in our field of research has several factors. First, the general trend of the information market shows the audience needs up-to-date information from a credible source. As previously mentioned, the subject of religion is not a priority for the media which relies on information provided by the state in a neutral way. Due to the sensitive character of the subject, publishers avoid escalating this sensitive topic in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state.

A slightly higher number of negative content in Russian is due to the fact that Kazakh-language media and social media communities are less likely to criticize some aspects of Islam (such as polygamy, women’s face closings, religious marriages without registration), since the Kazakh-language audience is generally more conservative and has more true believers. Non-traditional branches of Islam for Kazakhstan, such as Salafism and Wahhabism, are also more common in the more conservative segment of the Kazakh-speaking audience.

The agenda for religious media formed in social networks, particularly Facebook, is significantly different from traditional media. The topic of extremism and terrorism is not represented by independent content at all, but only retransmits media materials in a very restrained volume. Russian-language materials are not independent posts written by users, but are links to materials posted in traditional mass media. Other materials in Russian with negative tone are either devoted to Islam (24 materials) or religion in general.

In the Kazakh language section, a number of posts with a negative tone which use evaluative, categorical vocabulary are focused on the denial of Salafism and its followers. In addition to the rejection of Salafism and Wahhabism, there are posts criticizing the “imposition of arabization” on the Kazakh society through the Middle Eastern religions, religious traditions, and elements of clothing.

Other materials with a negative tone towards Islam discuss topics like the need for Kazakhs to return to Tengrianism, family problems regarding the issue of wearing/not wearing the hijab, and conflicts with religious servants and Imams.

**Example 4.**

“How can Islam, divided into 100 trends, unite Kazakhs? The nobility of our ancestors was influenced not by Islam, but Tengrianism” (www.facebook.com/338669169840118/posts/1071980106509017) - the post by Begaly Saparaly in the group - “I must say”.

Quote. “The nobility of our ancestors was not influenced by Islam, it was influenced by the Tengri worldview. There are states that adhere to Islam much more strongly than we do. Why are they on the fringes of civilization today? In Islam, there is no respect for the ancestors, their spirits And if we continue to build mosques at such a pace, we will have the same situation as in Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt... It became clear to me that the future belongs to nationalists, and a real nationalist must be an atheist or a tengrian...»

Both language segments of the social network contain critical materials concerning China’s policy towards Muslim minorities. However, it should be noted that in most cases users extrapolate religious affiliation to ethnic affiliations as ethnic Kazakhs are subjected to repression in the PRC. This is also considered to be an occasion to express dissatisfaction with the Kazakh authorities, which are considered to comply with Beijing.
Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is considered an established and “passive” religion that does not practice proselytism and is focused on the Slavic population, the number of which is decreasing every year due to natural decrease and emigration. The clergy of the Orthodox Church openly demonstrates their loyalty to the Kazakh authorities and the willingness to cooperate in any sphere. Finally, Russia is Kazakhstan’s main political partner, and for this reason, a positive attitude to the dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan is a signal to its partners in the Kremlin that Kazakhstan intends to adhere to agreements in this area. Due to this reason, a limited number of materials on Orthodoxy are primarily aimed at representatives of Slavic ethnic groups and implies that the authorities are loyal to Orthodoxy and the Slavic ethnic group in general. With rare exceptions, materials concerning Orthodoxy in both public and private media are positive.

Protestantism and Neo-Christianity. Some topics about Protestantism or neo-Christianity, despite their relatively small share of the total number of believers, are receiving criticism because of their activities and attempts to recruit new followers from the ethnic majority – the Kazakhs. In addition, the independence of such religious associations and the unwillingness to cooperate closely with the authorities (or be under their control) causes wariness on the part of the latter, which is reflected both in legal and media spheres. Almost every circumstantial mention of such religions in the media has a negative connotation, particularly the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and the “New Life” Church.

Example 5.

Quote: “They gave their children dollars, then children carried and gave dollars away. We looked at them and thought if children brought dollars, therefore, we had to give more. If we didn’t make donations, we would become strangers to God, not a member of the “New Life” church. And once again, we try to bring everything we had.”

Quote: “Kazakhstan has caused great harm to our lives and our lives are being deliberately destroyed, but Thank God that there are international courts that can easily justify us, since there is no crime at all,” church pastor Maxim Maximov, who lives in the U.S. responded to the verdict on his Facebook page (more than 20 thousand subscribers).
(www.facebook.com/maximcnl/posts/2710922402293857)

Islam. The situation with the coverage of Islam and its traditions in the Kazakh media and social networks is very ambiguous, despite the fact that the majority of the country’s population officially considers themselves Muslims. The period of “Islamic Renaissance”, when the Kazakh authorities tried to replace the Soviet ideology with Islam in exchange for economic assistance from the Arab world and Turkey, gave way to fears of religious radicalism in Kazakhstan. In this regard, the state declares its strict position of secularization and is wary of excessive religious manifestations.

In Kazakhstan, there are the “Assyl-Arna” (asylarna.kz) Kazakh-language Muslim TV channel and about a dozen Internet websites associated with the Religious Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan. They promote moderate Sunni Islam of the Hanafi madhhab and express, criticism towards Salafism, Wahhabism while sharply rejecting religious extremism and terrorism. Another direction of state propaganda is that of a return to the origins. According to official interpretations, moderate Islam existed in the Kazakh steppe, intertwined with traditional nomadic beliefs (Tengrianism or Tengriism)³. There are also official attempts to present “the steppe Islam” as a more tolerant version of Islam, respectful to women and treating them equally, implying that hijabs and niqabs represent traditions alien to the Kazakhs.

³See https://ethnicskazakhstan.wordpress.com/ тенгрианство—древняя-религия-тюрко/
Example 6.

Quote: “It turned out that Abu Yahya, according to the so-called “instructions of the Salafi doctrine”, got a new wife in secret from his wife and again became a happy newlywed,” the correspondent writes.

Since Islam is perceived differently in power structures and is generally ambiguously in society, the coverage of Islam in the press and in social networks has appeared to be most diverse. In recent years, negative information feedback has accompanied the Islamic movements of “Salafism” and “Wahhabism”, although they are not banned in Kazakhstan, their followers are under close scrutiny by the authorities. Meanwhile, the attitude towards Sufis at the official level is rather negative and in 2011 a group of followers of Sufism was sentenced to 5 to 14 years of imprisonment.  

Example 7.
“Now it is clear why Shal and his authorities have been promoting and nurturing the Salafist infection comprehensively entangling them with the network of all Kazakh society, including the media, sports, pop music, and other spheres, and even the government itself” - a user, Abram Paperu in the “For a just Kazakhstan. Nationalization of mineral resources” Facebook group responded to the lecture for the police, held by the Director of the “Assyl Arna” TV channel (www.facebook.com/1040275999449364/posts/1713798045430486).

COVERAGE OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

The subject of religious extremism and terrorism is constantly raised by almost every socio-political media. At the same time, Kazakh media tries to avoid using such terms as “Islamic extremism”, “Islamic radicals”, and “Islamic state”. Although, some publications cover what is happening in Iraq and Syria, since hundreds of Kazakhstanis and their family members are fighting as a part of radical groups. When talking about “religious extremism and terrorism”, it is implied that this refers to Islamic radicals, which should not, but does affect the general attitude towards Islam.

Media materials are based on press releases and reports from law enforcement agencies, state structures and courts, as well as on ongoing trials on charges of extremism and terrorism. The media generally does not bother checking the accuracy of information provided by state bodies and does not question court verdicts. State and pro-state media produce this type of material more often than a few independent and relatively independent media, given that the first mentioned category of media depends significantly on the state’s agenda, in which such publications fit.

Apart from this, the Kazakh service, RFE/RL (the “Azattyk Radio” website and “Nastoyascheye vremya” (“Present”) satellite channel) is practically the only media source that tries to cover all trials on charges of extremism and terrorism. The service often shows that the defendants are either falsely accused, that their guilt has not been proven or that their actions have not led to any negative consequences. For example, participants in theological discussions on the Internet,  

4They were accused of creating an organized criminal group, of extremism, illegal imprisonment, of harming people’s health through illegal medical practice, and of inciting religious hatred because of their critical statements about Salafism and its followers. One of the main versions of this trial was an attempt by influential Salafist followers to get rid of their main rivals (in the context of the dominant position of Sunni Islam of the Hanafi mazhab). Moreover, there are obvious followers among Kazakhstani politicians (such as Kairat Satybaldiuly, nephew of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, Bekbolat Tleukhan, parliament deputy, Mukhamedjan Tazabek, director-general of Asyl Arna TV channel) and, obviously, hidden followers of branches of Islam close to Salafism, who are trying to promote their ideas and could inspire the persecution of Sufi.

5In Kazakh language “the old man” (as former president Nursultan Nazarbayev is often called by his critics).
members of religious organizations banned in the country, or those who have posted controversial lectures on Islam can also be accused to be participants in combat activities.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

A neutral and positive tone is typical for traditional religions in Kazakhstan, Sunni Islam and Orthodoxy, associated with the two main ethnic groups of the country (Kazakhs and Russians). All topics and tones reflect a peaceful and friendly relationship between the two religions. Some discussions on religious subjects remain unknown to the Russian-speaking audience while they are more present in the Kazakh-language media and social networks. Due to the linguistic division of society, some discussions on religion take place without the participation of Russian-speaking Kazakhs and ethnic minorities.

Most media outlets create their content from official sources without stating their position or attempting to conduct independent analysis. Moreover, the topic of religious extremism and terrorism is practically excluded from public discussions on social networks. Kazakhstani media do not focus on the religious affiliation of individuals involved in publications related to religious extremism and terrorism. At the same time, media content consumers and users of social networks understand that for Kazakhstan, religious extremism and terrorism is associated with followers of other branches of Islam.

The state is expressing fear that non-traditional Islam may threaten stability, and as a result involves itself excessively in the sphere of religion (mostly indirectly, through private media). At the same time, there is competition within Islam in Kazakhstan and the followers of branches in Islam through Salafism and Wahhabism which are trying to convey their ideas or find new supporters through some influential figures or public discussions. The state also expresses its concern about “non-traditional” Christian movements. These communities are rejected due to their proselytism and their refusal to be controlled by the state.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- It is necessary to create a permanent dialogue platform to discuss the tone of the information space in relation to religious topics and respect for the rights of representatives of all confessions.
- To regularly monitor and analyze the publications on religious issues in state-owned Kazakh-language and Russian-language media to understand the participation of the state in the shaping of general tone in the mass media.
- To facilitate media coverage of the activities of religious minorities that do not have their own media platforms, as part of the State order.
- To develop initiatives and activities aimed at understanding the strategic importance of tolerant attitude towards religious confessions. For example, optional training courses (online and offline) on inter-religious tolerance in mass media in Kazakh and Russian languages.
- To develop conflict sensitive journalism guidelines for the mass media to cover the subject of religion, taking into account international standards and journalistic ethics.
- To develop an early warning system to understand the possible consequences of publications for the public, not to provoke new conflicts nor aggravate previous ones.
INTRODUCTION

Propaganda against extremism through mass media is the key part of state bodies’ activities responsible for official work in countering violent extremism (CVE) according to the objectives of the National Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan on counteraction to extremism and terrorism for 2016-2020. Thus, Tajikistan recognizes the need to cooperate with mass media in promoting anti-extremist, moderate views, as well as in raising awareness about the dangers, misinformation, and difficulties associated with joining extremist groups.

The process of forming a public discourse on Islam and radicalization and the freedom of conscience and religion in the state is an element of a wider process of political stabilization and remains within the acceptable political language: submission to state policy and an emphasis on threats and dangers that hide uncontrolled practices of Islam.

Independent and neutral publications on the subjects of religion and radicalism are more frequently published by non-state online media, whose printed versions are usually more cautious. More state-controlled or affiliated resources stick to the official script. Shortcomings in coverage of CVE-related issues persist in these media as a result of journalists’ lack of awareness of the subtleties of the subject matter, as well as restrictions on freedom in publications on these issues.

There is an excessive focus on online media and a lack of attention to print and television media, where improvements can affect a wider audience. There is also a need for closer cooperation between the media and experts, especially when covering issues related to religion and CVE.

A significant part of articles on terrorism and extremism published in the studied print and electronic media are informative or preventive and cover events of a social and cultural-educational nature. In recent years, representatives of local authorities, teachers of secondary educational institutions, employees of the prosecutor’s office, law enforcement agencies and the judicial system, along with experts and religious figures, began to publish materials on this issue in the republican media. It should be noted that the content of articles and headlines has a serious discrepancy as the content does not correspond to the title.

The results of the analysis showed that the largest amount of media content dealing with terrorism and extremism is produced or, more likely, is distributed by non-leading media outlets. The leaders in the number of publications are the non-state media outlet “Faraj” and the state media outlet “Chavononi Tochikiston” (Youth of Tajikistan).

Interestingly, in 2018-2019, a common thread running through the main mass data related to terrorism was the subject of the IRP involvement in all terrorist acts and crimes both during the civil war of 1992-1997 and after that until the present day. Moreover, a lot of materials position the IRPT as an organization affiliated with the IS. It should be noted that in 2019 the direction of publications gradually changed from “anti-IRPT” to “anti-ISIS”.

Content analysis of media and social networks showed that all materials related to religion, including religious groups and confessions, are perceived in the context of the state’s anti-terrorist policy, as well as the interests and needs of a certain group of media users. These reports are based on both positive (anti-extremist vaccination) and negative (activity of a religious party, which, despite the high trust of the population and the top leadership of the state, turned out to be almost the main enemy of the state, encroaching not only on culture but also on national self-identification).
Regarding terminology used by the mass media when discussing subjects related to religion, we can note the antinomy, when on the one hand there is a clear connection between religion and crimes of terrorist and extremist orientation, and on the other hand there is a call to follow positive norms and principles of the same religion and the alienity of such crimes to these norms and principles.

There are satellite TV channels, such as “Wisoli Hak” (Meeting the Truth), “Kalima” (Word), “Nur” (Light) and others, which spread the ideas of Sunnism. Religious practices in satellite television channel “Ahli Bayt” (The Prophet’s Family) and others are based upon the postulates of Shiism. Since the information environment about religion is filled with such satellite television channels as “Wisoli hak”, “Kalima”, “Nur”, “Ahli Bayt”, and others, there is a risk of conflict between one branch of Islam in and another as a result from feelings of dislike.

**COVERAGE OF RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS IN THE INFORMATION SPACE OF TAJIKISTAN**

Coverage of religion by social networks and special religious resources is represented by internal (national) and external sources:

- **Internal sources.** Nationally, such a resource is the website of the Ulema Council of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan (http://shuroiulamo.tj), which covers the canonical tenets of Islam, an active “questions and answers” section, and downloadable books on Islamic topics.

  Previously, the website of the family of religious figures, Turajonzoda, was functional and some citizens of Tajikistan living in the country and abroad sent them their questions and received answers. The previously functional news agencies “Tojnews”6 And “Ozodagon”7 actively covered religious topics. The range of questions was diverse and touched upon many aspects of life that worried practitioners, or those who faced difficulty and wanted to know the position or to receive an answer from the Islamic Ulema to this question. The media outlets operating in Tajikistan today do not cover religious topics, except for issues related to the coverage of religious holidays or rites. Thus, there is an opinion among the population and experts that there is no resource in the national media that could meet the needs of citizens.

- **External sources.** There are many Internet resources that publish their material in Cyrillic in Tajik (Persian) language, and most of them are based upon Shia or Salafi doctrine and ideology. Both of these Islamic branches are active on social media and they disseminate their beliefs through quality audiovisual products disguised as Hanafism which is traditional in the region.

**SPECIFICS OF ARTICLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR MESSAGE**

If you summarize the results of the content analysis (See Annex 4), you can present them as follows:

- **“Talking” headings.** In the analyzed publications, the headings of almost all materials on the subject of activities of religious movements and groups, religious parties, activities of the Islamic Renaissance Party widely used use epithets include threat, enemy, murder, blood, and traitors. The terms “terrorism” and “extremism” are also used to further dramatize the topic and tune readers to a more negative perception.

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6By the decision of the founder she suspended her activity in 2016.
7The Tajik page was suspended by the founder’s decision in 2017.
• **High emotional background** of materials that have a great impact on behavioral motives. Examples of such materials focused on terrorist acts, issues related to crimes of a terrorist nature, and those describing the activities of parties and religious movements (Salafism, Wahhabism, IRP, etc.) that influenced the fate of “specific” people.

• **Testimonies of witnesses and participants of events.** Most publications use the voices of eyewitnesses. Such materials are mainly presented in the form of a conversation with the participant of events, or the witnesses’ memories. This category may include those materials that are prepared to cover the events of the Civil War period—especially, terrorist acts against intellectuals, political and public figures. As for more recent issues related to terrorism, the voices of relatives of persons who left for areas of terrorist activity are given.

• **“The genre of reasoning”**. They represent the sharpest materials ensuring the effect of “the latter’s involvement in the conclusions proposed by the article author”. Such materials are mainly prepared by more experienced journalists and analysts. This category may include those materials prepared to cover the events of the Civil War period—especially, terrorist acts against intellectuals, politicians and public figures. The list of such materials may include articles by Rahim Karimov (Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Philology at the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan), Sh. Musoev, and others, who mainly produce materials on moral topics.

**POLITICAL CONTEXT AND OPPOSITION**

The Ulema Council of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan represents the official clergy. On their website, answers to questions sent by citizens are voiced. When the religiously prominent Turajon family operated their website, people asked questions about religion and received answers. Sermons were distributed on behalf of another religious figure, Khoja Mirzo through the “Odnoklassniki” social network, but he repeatedly noted that he himself had nothing to do with this page and that his followers distributed his statements themselves.

Due to the fact that domestic religious figures are poorly represented in the information space and social networks, their place is filled by others. Media resources close to the non-systemic opposition, the Islamic Renaissance Party whose activities have been banned since 2015 by the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tajikistan's decision, prepare and distribute products on religious topics. However, their activities are more political, although at times there is an appeal to religion in their content. There are also individuals, such as Sayidyunus Istravshani, who publish their views on political and religious issues. Generally, their reactions to speeches by government agencies and figures are usually critical and involve granting absolute freedom of religion to believers.

One famous journalist from the Matchinsky district, Dilovar Safarov, makes short educational videos. He hosts radio Avis in Istaravshan, Sughd region. His video clips are distributed via YouTube, Instagram and Facebook.

Today, there are media resources, namely websites of religious organizations and figures, which contain political and religious information. These resources mutually influence and intermingle with each other. Satellite television channels such as “Visoli hak”, “Kalima”, “Nur”, “Ahli Bayt” and others which spread Salafism or Shiism can act as a clear example. The process of politicization of religion and religious information is occurring at a great pace.

Along with specialized information, there are a lot of materials about politics which are mostly about the harm of politicization of Islam and the political situation in Muslim countries on official Internet resources covering religious topics such as http://shuroiulamo.tj (Ulema Council
of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan), http://din.tj (Committee on Religious Affairs, Normalization of Traditions, Celebrations and Rites under the Government of the RT), http://mit.tj (Center of Islamic Studies under the President of the RT) and http://jomea.tj (Journal “Din va chomea (Religion and Society)” of the Committee on Religious Affairs, Normalization of Traditions, Celebrations and Rites under the Government of the RT).

Noting the improvements in the state-controlled media, experts say that there are still shortcomings in the coverage of CVE-related issues in Tajik media because of insufficient knowledge of this topic and the lack of freedom in publications on such topics. There is an excessive focus on online media and a lack of attention to print and television media, where improvements can affect a wider audience. There is also a need for closer cooperation between the media and experts, especially when covering issues related to religion and CVE.

Many resources covering religious issues are one-sided and aggressive in nature. They find a defect in Tajik society or information that meets their interests, and start speculating on the basis of this. These resources are more subjective in nature. Regarding their reaction to state and non-state actors’ speeches about religious freedom, it should be noted that these reactions are immediate and argumentative from their point of view. The example of “Visoli hak” shows that this channel analyzed the religious situation in the country, actively imposing its vision on viewers from Tajikistan. Another example is the educational website “Kimiyoi Saodat”, where religious topics are considered from the standpoint of Shiism, and political topics - through the prism of interests of Iran or close to the interpretation of this country.

Representatives of the non-systemic opposition write and talk about politics and religion more and more in social networks on Facebook and Zello radio. An example of speculations is the activity of the non-systemic opposition, which is increasingly using this hosting. Their program “Sadoi Mardum” on YouTube also covers religious issues and is subsequently distributed on Facebook.

Since there is no internal resource in media that covers the issues of Islam at the professional level which answers all questions, citizens of Tajikistan watch religious programs on the Afghanistan television channel “Tulu” in Persian, YouTube channels of Caucasian religious figures, especially from Chechnya (this applies mostly to migrant workers).

In general, when it comes to religion, the official clergy and structures note mainly positive aspects of the increase in the number of mosques and Hajj pilgrims compared to the Soviet period, while the non-systemic opposition notes mainly negative aspects such as restrictions and violations of religious rights and freedoms. In resources writing about religion, there is a polarization of opinions and approaches on the interpretation of policies and other issues related to public processes. Besides, reports and articles in media and social networks do not reflect the problems of narrow groups of religious voters in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Regarding the freedom of religion and its coverage in the media and public discussions, it should be noted that in general there is virtually little connection. This is due to the fact that domestic religious figures are not present in social media networks. Moreover, the use of hate speech and the demonization of beards and the wearing of the hijab are observed in the statements of some officials.
The situation in Tajikistan is as follows: the official clergy fully speaks only positive things and the non-systemic opposition only negative things. Media and social network materials are diagonally opposite. Articles in the print media are more biased or contain little information. Religious topics in Tajikistan’s media are insufficiency covered. Analysis of social networks content showed that due to unlimited access and the lack of censorship, there are open forms of intolerance towards political opponents.

Tajik users tend to look for a famous or familiar religious figure like their Imams to anonymously ask questions that concern them personally. This is especially important in the context of labor migration. Due to the fact that religious figures are not online, many simply google the answers, which results in a noticeable increase in exposure to extremist organizations.

At the same time, mainly urban and experienced media consumers of Tajikistan trust several independent media, such as “Asia Plus” and “Faraj”, as well as non-state media like “Radio Ozodi”; respondents who are mainly from rural areas express more confidence in state media and newspapers. With respect to information about religion, people in Tajikistan rarely refer to any specific source that is trustworthy; instead, books, well-informed people, and the Internet are usually mentioned.

“HATE SPEECH” AND “CONDEMNATION” IN COVERAGE OF EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM PROBLEMS

The vast majority of publications have a negative emotional sentiment and judgmental tone. This applies equally to headlines and text content. Special attention should be paid to the headings, emotional stress and presentation style, which today may seem bold and overly sharp.

Example 1.
“Sari balandro shamsi vahshat burid” (“Highly raised head cut off by sword of horror”), author: Murtazo Ahmad Zaranchi (Toronto) // Faraj, № 1 (579), dated January 3, 2018; “HNTI marg ba tu!” (“Death to the IRPI!”), by Husravi Sherzod // Faraj, No. 6 (584), dated February 7, 2018; “Nahzotiko terrororostandu digar nameshavand” (“Nahzatovites (representatives of the Islamic Renaissance Party) are terrorists and will not change”), by Ehsoni Ilhom // Sadoi Mardum, dated April 14, 2018.

COVERAGE OF PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH RETURNING FROM COMBAT ZONES

Issues related to returnees in selected media in the Republic of Tajikistan have appeared since January 2018. During the first stages, this issue concerned persons detained within Turkish territory who intended to cross the border to join ISIS and were extradited to the Republic of Tajikistan. This was in addition to persons who voluntarily returned from Syria and Iraq. On 30 April 2019, 84 children from terrorist zones in Iraq and Syria were returned. Next, materials related to the rehabilitation and resocialization of mainly children began to appear (See Annex 5). At the same time, currently a pool of journalists, experts, and institutions covering extremism and terrorism and religious freedom has developed in Tajikistan (See Annex 6).

There are very few materials directly relating to the religious freedom and activities of different confessions in Tajikistan. Of all publications, only “Faraj” and “Chumhuriyat” wrote about other confessions.

Example 2.

Nodiri Kodir. “Kushtori vakhshiyona yo katli ravshanfikre bo dasti nahzat” (“Cruel murder or murder of the intellectual by hands of the nakhzat terrorists”). Chumhuriayt, dated September 26, 2018.

“Zindagi adventisthoi ruzi haftum dar Tochikiston” (“Life of Seventh-day Adventists in Tajikistan”) (Faraj No. 21 (651), dated May 22 2019).

Particularly noteworthy is the work of the Institute of Peace and War Reporting (IWPR) in Tajikistan. During 2018 and 2019, they carried out work as part of the programs, “Free Dialogue for Development of Stability in Central Asia” and “Empowering the community to combat extremism in Tajikistan” in cooperation with the non-governmental publication “Faraj”.

Example 3.
“HNIT sarchashmai terrorism va extremism” (“IRPT is a source of terrorism and extremism”) Author: Muslihiddin Akbar/Faraj, No.3 (581), dated January 17, 2018;
“Al-Ahrom”-i Mir: TET HNIT dar Hovari Miyona” (“Egyptian “Al-Ahram”: IRPT in the Middle East”)// Faraj, No. 7 (585), dated February 14, 2018;
“Kushtori 29 July: TET HNIT yo DOISH?” (“Murder on July 29: IRPT or ISIS?”). Author: Farzonai Umarali // Faraj, No. 30 (609), dated August 1, 2018.


CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of issues related to the coverage of religious freedom and countering extremism in Tajikistan’s media landscape has a number of specific features. There is a serious demand for religious topics in the country, but there are no universally recognized resources. A significant part of the population meets their needs through external sources through video hosting, social networks, satellite TV channels, and Google inquires.

Despite the efforts of the state and civil society in Tajikistan and its undeniable achievements, there are a number of problematic issues related to the coverage of freedom of conscience and religion and counter extremism. At the same time, there are some issues related to the media space itself.

The main problematic issues that arise in the work of journalists and media experts regarding religion and the prevention of violent radicalization include:

• A weak level of knowledge of the definitions and connotations of terms and definitions, particularly regarding specific terms which are religiously and politically loaded in relation to the prevention of violent radicalism.
• The use of false information, hate speech, and the disclosure of personal data in their publications and shows.
• Ineffective mechanisms for communicating with government law enforcement agencies, experts, analytical community, religious organizations, and international organizations upon preparing materials on the subject.
The absence or lack of specialized training courses, teaching aids and guidelines for journalists and media experts covering religious topics and the prevention of radicalization leading to extremism and terrorism. Media and journalists need training on conflict sensitive coverage of topics on religion and radicalization.

The country lacks a strategy for mass media activity related to religious freedom and countering religious extremism and terrorism. Often, this is done at the direction in the mass media, both state and non-state, is dictated by the requirement or prescription of state authorities and the funding of individual programs (for example, IWPR) for state and non-state media.

It seems extremely important to improve the political, religious and terminological literacy of journalists to reduce the politicization of Islam, which affects religious sentiments, “hate speech” which can incite aggression, weightiness, ethical correctness of journalists’ position in relation to the publications’ character and the media outlets’ audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• A deeper study of religious discourse is required, as well as upon the factors, institutions, and channels of communication that shape public ideas, perceptions, and attitudes toward religious issues.
• The media can play an important role in covering issues related to religious freedom, religion, and extremism. Media communities need to develop a deeper understanding of religion and undergo training in covering religious issues to avoid biased tones by presenting incorrect information about religion. The media need training on thorough fact-checking and the critical evaluation of available information. Very often, the random notes by officials or experts are seen behind the loud article’s headline.
• Expert analysis of criminal cases against members of illegal armed organizations as a basis for the preparation of materials-publications in electronic and print media.
• There should be direct access to official religious figures through social networks. Today the existing gap is filled with external and more extremist resources. It is necessary to eliminate barriers and create a channel for accessing the domestic ulema. This step will could reduce the influence of radical organizations. Activation of the website of the Ulema Council of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan as an important resource covering religious topics and meeting the existing needs of the population may be the first step.
• Activation of religious figures in the media and social networks. Today, a lot of information is spread on the network by Salafits and other non-traditional movements. Citizens, due to the use of their resources, unconsciously become Salafists and experience threats from the state law enforcement agencies.
• It is necessary to provide religious information based upon the interests and needs of the target audience. Thus, for the older generation, television and print media are the most optimal sources of information; while for young people, the Internet and social networks are frequently used. Additionally, there is some demand for print media. The diversification of information transmission channels is also necessary. Media should include alternative content platforms, especially video hosting sites like YouTube, which is often blocked in the country. Surveys show that YouTube is the most popular site in Tajikistan for watching videos related to religious issues.
UZBEKISTAN
INTRODUCTION

In Uzbekistan, religious freedoms are actively discussed and the Uzbek-language media are very diverse. Conditionally, they can be divided into three main blocks (See Annex 7):

1. State-owned mass media and the printing organs of the Administration of Muslims of Uzbekistan which is close to them.
2. Channels (in the domain “UZ” or in WEB-applications) of the liberal Islamic opposition;
3. Channels (also posted on the Internet or in WEB applications) of radical religious opposition that uses foreign hosting.

Understanding the religious freedoms of the first group is quite similar to international norms, at least close to them. However, in reality there are a number of restrictions. For example, there is the compulsory registration of religious institutions, state control over their activities, and restrictions on the activities of Christian missionaries, etc. Government officials justify this citing the complexity of local conditions, particularly the opinion of the majority of the population, consisting of Muslims, which have become accustomed to various forms of state guardianship and control over the years.

The liberal Islamic opposition insists on the interpretation of religious freedoms and forms of confessional tolerance mainly from the point of view of Islamic norms and prescriptions. They see the construction of an Islamic state as a peace process, by expanding Islamic propaganda and the subsequent electoral superiority of Muslims. The main agents and ideologists of this group (mainly represented by bloggers and respected theologians) recognize the right of the state to control religious organizations, provided that the state recognizes the right of those who wish to live according to Sharia. In their opinion, the existing democratic form of the state is acceptable for Muslims, since it creates the conditions for asserting their rights.

At the same time they propose introducing certain Islamic norms into the existing laws. For example, regarding marriage or family relationships they want to legitimize legal polygamy, reduce the age of marriage for girls and boys to 14 and 16 years old respectively, the rejection of the current legislation which proclaims “equal rights of women and men”, the division of property according to Islamic jurisprudence, etc. However, the state and most Muslims do not accept such proposals of the liberal Islamic opposition and insist on maintaining the existing political and religious status quo (existing Laws, open temples for prayers, free religious education, and other preferences for believers).

And finally, the third group of Muslim media bloggers prefers to post content in the Uzbek language is represented by the radical opposition, which emigrated from Central Asian countries to Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, Sweden, etc. Their ideology is based on radical versions and interpretations of Islam. They consider the existing Central Asian governments illegitimate in terms of Islamic norms. On this basis, the territory of the region is declared by them as “Dar al-Kharb” (Territory of the War with Muslims). Accordingly, they consider any armed action against these governments as a duty or “prescribed” (Fardu-l-‘ayn).

Such radical interpretations are disputed by liberal Islamic opposition ideologists. As for religious freedoms, the radical Islamic opposition imposes their understanding exclusively from the point of view of an extremely intolerant interpretation of Islamic law, with open hatred of “Gentiles” and secular regimes. In their interpretation, religious freedoms in countries with a
majority Muslim population can only be only under the conditions of “Islamic rule” or “Caliphate”, or the dominance of Muslims over “Zimmi” (that is, representatives of other faiths). Supporters and sympathizers for this content can be found among the Uzbek-speaking population of Central Asia.

Thus, the interpretation of the forms and sources of religious freedoms in Uzbekistan is diverse. The major revival of Islam in the post-Soviet era, along with the obvious improvement in the issue of religious freedom, revealed other difficulties. These difficulties are connected with the fact that different groups of believers (primarily Muslims, as the dominant confession in the country) offer their own and largely selfish currents of religious freedoms, imposing them on the part of believers and the state.

**MEDIA CONTROLLED BY STATE INSTITUTIONS**

The most circulated newspaper in this section is the newspaper of the Parliament “Xalq so‘zi/ The Word of People” in Russian and Uzbek languages and “The Truth of East / Sharq Haqiqati,” whose main financial sponsor is the “Milliy tiklanish/National Revival party”. The newspapers’ target audience is the political elite, secondary and college teachers, university professors, scientists, and some portions of retirees in the country.

The theme of freedom of religion is rarely discussed in these newspapers, although both newspapers are the first to publish Government decrees and legislation amendments, including those related to religion. Editorial messages or articles are usually published in connection to official events related to religion, mainly Islam. And the promotion of a new religious policy announced by the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev at the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2019. Another group of articles on religious topics are associated with the official anniversaries of historically famous theologians. For example, the anniversary of the 11th century theologian Abu Mu’in an–Nasafi in Karshi on December 27th, 2019 was covered in both newspapers and reprinted in other publications.

Interfaith and interethnic tolerance continues to be a compulsory topic in official media. In addition to being protected by the law, related information is constantly intertwined into various articles in the official press, television, and radio programs. As a rule, information regarding the peaceful coexistence of more than a hundred nationalities in Uzbekistan and the freedom for representatives of 16 churches and mission groups to carry out their activities is widely disseminated.

The highest interest was observed in June-July 2019, when reports on repatriates from the Middle East were published and all newspapers were immediately sold out. The religious, ethical, legal, social and political aspects of these repatriation programs were widely discussed in the TV show “Hidoyat sari/Path to Salvation,” which was broadcasted on the Yoshlar/Youth TV channel on June 12th and 17th. According to the presenter Sherali Kambarov, more than 20 thousand questions about the existing laws were received by the studio.

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1 It is issued 5 times a week, more than 60 thousand copies in each language, up to 100 thousand copies – on holidays. Official site: xs.uz
2 It was founded in 1917 (it is issued 5 times a week, more than 30 thousand copies in each language, up to 100 thousand copies - on holidays. Official website: pv.uz. Number of Instagram followers is 32,700 (as of February 20, 2020): https://www. instagram. com/pravda_vostoka_
3 See [http://xs.uz/uzkr/search?q=%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BC&page](http://xs.uz/uzkr/search?q=%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BC&page)
4 In 2019, 6 other missionary groups (Catholic) received permission to operate. As of March 19, 12 more missionary groups (information of the Committee on Religious Affairs employee) had received permission.
At the same time, the aforementioned official media entities ignore topics actively discussed on the Internet. These are topics related to the ban on wearing headscarves (hijabs) at universities and schools, Muslim uniforms, two cases of forced shaving of beards of young men and similar issues, which the majority of the population considers to be relevant.

Thus, in the official media we primarily deal with public and official forms of a declaration of religious freedom, which often refer to the articles of the Constitution and laws, which the Government proposes to consider as a human rights guarantee. The official media of Uzbekistan reflects the position of the state and almost completely repeat the provisions of the law through the declaration of propaganda clichés as they discuss freedom of religion and countering extremism.

ADMINISTRATION OF MUSLIMS OF UZBEKISTAN (AMU) AND ITS UNITS

The state turns to AMU for theological legitimacy as it develops its religious policy (in the form of fatwas) and for the moral support of the muftis almost every time when it comes to state initiatives in religious politics. Often, the AMU becomes an electoral tool during the presidential election, as an institution loyal to the state. The same support is expected from AMU in other areas of the state’s religious policy, particularly in promoting interfaith tolerance, counter-propaganda against religiously motivated terrorism.

AMU articles on religious freedom and countering the ideology of extremism can be divided into two groups:

- Articles devoted to official events (meetings, conferences, forums, visits, etc.) in which AMU representatives participated. The issues of opposing the ideology of extremism are also discussed in the same group of articles. Their content is quite similar to the articles in the official media, with the only difference that the arguments published both in printed and electronic publications appeal to Islamic arguments only (sources: Quran, hadith, works on Islamic law). In this section the most commonly used stylistic clichés are: “Islam is the religion of the world”, “There is no violence and terror in Islam”.

- Articles by the AMU employees, Imams of mosques, HII teachers, and madrasah students. Topics include ethics of interfaith tolerance in Islam, religious freedoms from the point of view of Islamic dogma, the legitimacy of terrorism, the rights of Muslim women, and the appearance of Muslims. Rhetoric in these magazine articles, newspapers and websites of AMU and its branches (HII, Tashkent casiats and some mosques) are changing and do not comply with official press publications. However, their objectives mainly comply with the purposes of the Government in current religious policy and, more importantly, they preserve the style of political conformity.

The most frequent topic in this group is discussion of the problems of public ethics of Muslims and the right of believers in terms of dogmas of Islam and the right of women to Muslim dress code (including in public places).

Example 1.

A series of articles by Muslim women appeared in the AMU newspaper and magazine under the common heading “Hidoyat sari/ Way to Salvation”, which softly but persistently defended their

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13Judging by the comments and questions in newspapers and magazines, the target audience of this group of articles are middle-aged and elderly people (30 and 60 years old), women (including housewives from 40 and 60 years old), workers, market traders, and drivers. Newspapers with these articles are popular and sold at bazaars, special kiosks and mosques.
rights to appearance, according to the prescriptions of Islam, to observe Muslim ethics (Hidoyat sari newspaper, 316, 318-322 dated 27 November, 1-7 December, etc.).

The AMU elite hardly participated in discussions about hijabs in their publications, as well as in social media. However, some imams of the AMU mosques, madrasah and Institute actively participated in discussions on social media, including their personal pages, or Islamic portals. They clearly supported the admission of hijab for those girls and women who want to wear them in educational institutions or government institutions. This position was in solidarity with independent bloggers, who also defended the right to wear hijab for believing women. At the same time, Imams and bloggers did not insist on the type of hijab: so called “deaf hijab” covering the entire head, with the exception of the face, or its “national” (Uzbek, Turkic) form, which is a headscarf tightened at the back of the head. Currently, wearing hijabs is not prohibited in universities and schools of Uzbekistan. Moreover, the girls choose the form of hijabs themselves (see photo).

Recently, newspapers and magazines of AMU have begun to reprint articles about the events in Xinjiang Province in China or India. In comments on such articles, the facts of oppression of Muslims in China and India are assessed as a direct violation of the rights of Muslims around the world. At the same time, commentators refer to some verses of the Quran or Hadith in which Muslims are ordered to cast their votes in defense of other Muslims if their rights are violated. However, the discussion of international events and global politics in general is rarely seen on the pages of magazines and newspapers of AMU.

Independent (non-governmental) portals, sites and bloggers in the “.UZ” domain

Media resources of this block can be divided into two groups: Islamic portals and sites in the “.UZ” domain and the personal pages, channels, and bots mainly on YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp of independent bloggers.

The first group includes the largest and most popular (in terms of views) independent religious portals and websites. Most of them were launched by independent theologian Sheikh Muhammad-Sodik Muhammad-Yusuf (died in 2016). His goal was the “deep Islamization” of a majority of the population in Uzbekistan. Currently, his disciples are managing these resources. These are the following portals: islam/islom.uz, azon.uz; and websites shosh.uz, muxlis.uz, and others. They are among the most popular sources in Uzbekistan and neighboring countries including the Russian Federation.

The headings of the articles and their electronic versions are available at: https://hidoyat.uz/islom-nuri, under “maqolalar” header.

For example see the articles on hijab: https://www.azon.uz/content/views/maktab-formasi-rumol-va-amerikalik-dusti; https://aniq.uz/yangiliklar/liboslarning-eng-yaxshi; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= hUCVXGmBpq0; https://aniq.uz/yangiliklar/uozlingizqa-qayting-uzbegoyimlar (article on the admissibility of national headgear forms instead of the hijab), etc. (in total, we have viewed about a hundred articles on this topic).

“Hindlar nega Islomga qarshu isyon k’tarmoqda?” (Why Indians stand against Islam?): https://hidoyat.uz/31609. This article is a translation of the publication in Russian language in Sputnik information agency. Also see: https://aniq.uz/

For example, the number of visitors of portals islam/islom.uz (in Uzbek, Russian, English and Arabic) reach one million (subscribers, including channels and bots in I phone applications, more than 700 thousand at the beginning of February 2020). The main audience is Uzbek-speaking visitors and subscribers (up to 80%). These are mainly people between 20 and 55 years old, of which 64.4% are labor migrants. At the same time, Uzbek-speaking subscribers and visitors are mainly (up to 62%) interested in ritual-dogmatic issues (“Ibadat), family relations and social ethics (Odob; up to 20%), economic issues (for example, the legitimacy of state loans; up to 12%) the rules of inheritance distribution as prescribed by Islam (up to 10%), etc.
Example 2.
About 33-34% of all questions on the portals and websites are sent by labor migrants from the Russian Federation. Up to 14% of their questions are related to them being stigmatized by citizens of the Russian Federation, being deceived by employers (unpaid or underestimated salaries, rude treatment of employers towards workers, etc.), being permitted to marry Russian women, etc. Several dozens of questions (the exact number has not been quantified) were associated with prescriptions for jihad. According to the admins of the mentioned sites, these questions are usually asked by young men aged between 18 to 25 who became involved to jihadist networks (da’wat), or entered the sites of terrorist organizations on their own and tried to evaluate the materials they have read. People usually want to know under what conditions jihad for Muslims is legitimate, and if those who call for jihad to Syria and Iraq are right, and also can Mujahideen hope for paradise? The answers contain some evidence that jihad declared by Daesh is illegitimate, with reference to the decision of a number of Sunni theologians of the Arab world and similar arguments.

Information and analytical portals «azon.uz» and «aniq.uz» occupy a special place among independent Islamic resources of Uzbekistan. They are the first to respond to all problems within the country, especially regarding the rights of Muslims of Uzbekistan, particularly, the admissibility of hijab wearing. The site editor and article authors appealed to Muslim women, especially students to assert their rights by listing those articles of the Constitution and laws under which no one has the right to infringe on their rights.

Both portals rarely deal with the problem of tolerance towards representatives of other religions. Even information on official forums on the topic of tolerance is addressed in a very neutral way, without any evident positive or negative attitudes. However, the emerging activity of Christian missionaries in Uzbekistan over the past two years is usually evaluated extremely negatively by article authors and commentators. Missionary activity is assessed as the worst form of moral decline as it negatively perceived as “selling one’s own religion for nothing” and other familiar clichés of modern religious moralizing.

Comments on articles of this kind turned out to be extremely aggressive and sometimes directly threatening and calling for reprisals against missionaries. Some articles call for being softer and more tolerant of “infidels,” but only if they do not try to convert Muslims in their faith, while maintaining the region’s historical parity, or in cases where it is necessary to involve Gentiles in Islam.

18People usually ask: “How to respond if you are offended, not paid for work? Is it possible to respond with retaliatory insult or violence?” One of the authors of the question admitted that he burned the employer’s car for the fact that the employer did not pay him the promised and also insulted him, calling him “a damned Muslim terrorist” (https://www.azon.uz/content/savol-javob; question dated 08/12/2019). The answer calls for tolerance, with the reference that Allah will punish the guilty.

20Information from portal managers islam.uz и azon.uz.
21Registered: 30.08.2017. Founder, administrator and chief editor Mubashir Ahmad. Facebook address: https://fb.me/azonuz; on Twitter: https://twitter.com/azonuz. Visitors for paid traffic in February from 13, 7 and up to 22.5 thousand; on free traffic (TAS-IX): from 6.1 to 16.2 thousand. The difference in visits depends on the relevance of the published material.
22Registered on 25.09. 2017. The founder, administrator and editor-in-chief is the same Mubashir Ahmad
23See, for example: “Hijob kimga yoqmiyapti? / Who doesn’t like hijab?” (Ahmad Muhammad. 02/13/2018. Https://www.azon.uz/content/views/hijob-kimlarga-yoqmayapti); “Ahli Jannat ayollari sifati/ Qualities of women worthy of paradise” (Salim K., April 02, 2018,); “Muslima ayollarning libosi/Clothing for Muslim women” (Ahmad Fozil, April 29, 2019; http://hidoyat.uz/6375).
25Alloh hatto kofirga ham muloyim bo’lishni buyurgan/ Allah tells us to be softer even to infidels (https://aniq.uz/yangiliklar/alloh-hatto-kofirga-ham-muloyim-bulishni-buyurgan.)
Both portals describe the events in the Middle East over the past few years as a drama for Islam and Muslims. They use dogmatic arguments\(^{27}\) to prove the flawed ideology of extremism and international terrorism\(^{28}\). The Uzbeks (men and women) who went to Syria and Iraq are called “lost Muslims” in some articles\(^{29}\).

**Example 3.**

“Dinda terror yoq - Islom qo’poruvchi din emos!” (“There is no terror in religion - Islam is not a religion of destruction] written by Ibrohimjon Inomov.\(^{30}\)

In addition to publishing materials on “conflict zones” in Muslim countries, azon.uz also publishes letters of those young people\(^{31}\) who are unreasonably put on the wanted list by state law enforcement agencies because they ended up in Turkey as illegal labor migrants, or participated in shuttle trade, but never participated in the war in Syria or Iraq. The portal invites readers to pay attention to these young people, helps to raise funds, and hire lawyers for them. A special rubric on azon.uz is devoted to the letters of young people convicted of illegal distribution of materials related to the ideology of religious extremism (article 244\(^{3}\) of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan).

**Example 4.**

One such letter was published by azon.uz, written by Akrom Malikov and sent to the President Sh. Mirziyoyev\(^{32}\). In his letter, he congratulates the President on the upcoming Independence Day (September 1) and expresses gratitude for the fact that, thanks to his reforms, the conditions in the prisons and prison camps have become much better. Small mosques were built for believers, churches for Christians. There were created conditions for Muslims so that they could fast, pray and practice other rituals. Convicts who write to the editors of “azon.uz”, do not ask for clemency. However, there is no doubt that such letters contain a meaningful incentive that supports reforms in the field of observing the rights of believers in prisons. A. Malikov concludes his letter with praise, which looks like an expression of political loyalty: “The fact that the proper conditions have been created for convicts in prisons and the prisoners themselves were able to restore their rights is an important and serious outcome of Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s reform policy!”

**The second group** of independent Islamic media resources includes individual bloggers, personal pages, channels and bots mainly on YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp accounts of independent bloggers. (See Annex 8). Their main feature is that they lead their blogs and disseminate information through monologues (ma’veza, ma’ruza) or online discussions, which then remain posted as videos on their personal pages and are actively discussed in the comments.

According to the information of AIMC of the Republic of Uzbekistan as of December 2019, about 500 bloggers were registered in Uzbekistan. All of them one way or another deal with issues of religion, mainly Islam. Of these, about three dozen are active believers who firmly position themselves as leaders in the Islamic community.

\(^{27}\)In addition to theological arguments (based on the Qur’an, Sunna and writings on Muslim jurisprudence/fiqh), the authors resort to rhetorical speech and well-established clichés common for such articles, such as “Islam is the religion of peace and prosperity”, “war in Sham (Syria) and Iraq discredited Muslims”\(^{28}\)

\(^{28}\)13 articles on the topic “Terrorism and Islam” are counted among the publications of these sites for 2019 and beginning of 2020.

\(^{29}\)See, for example, series of articles for 2018-2019 on situation in Syria and Iraq and participation of Uzbeks in this war.


themselves as Muslims, stating in each that they are aware of all the ritual-dogmatic prescriptions of Islam and try to follow them\textsuperscript{33}.

According to the bloggers themselves\textsuperscript{34}, as well as based by the numerous comments on their channels, the bulk of their audience is young people (70-85% for different bloggers), of which about 10% are girls and young women\textsuperscript{35}. Attendance rates vary, depending on the popularity of the blogger. The most popular bloggers of this group is P. Shukhrat with up to 306,7 thousand offline visitors as of February 18, 2020 with visitor ages varying from 25 to 35 years old and M.Abror with up to 56.2 thousand offline visitors as of February 20, 2020 and visitors from 16 to 55 years old\textsuperscript{36}.

Both groups of independent Islamic bloggers are united by their extreme hostility to the radical religious opposition (bloggers), hosted abroad (see below). Islamic bloggers often discuss the issue of the permissibility of polygamy, according to Islamic legal regulations. Some of them are ready to recognize the right of Muslims to polygamy, which contradicts to the existing legal system, but provided that the man is able to ensure a comfortable life for the chosen one and with the consent of the first wife (or first two wives). Others, referring to the opinion of the Shaykh Muhammad – Sodiq Muhammad-Yusuf, mentioned above, believe that it is advisable for modern Muslims to have only one wife, in order to avoid an additional reason for external criticism\textsuperscript{37}.

**MEDIA RESOURCES OF RADICAL ISLAMIC OPPOSITION**

This group includes online Islamic sites and personal web-pages, applications in the form of video and audio speeches (mainly on YouTube), posts from foreign hosting services (Turkey, Sweden) mainly from bloggers, and founders of information websites (see Annex 9). They prefer to use voice (audio) and video messages to their audience. Based on the comments and questions of users, the majority of their audience is labor migrants and mujahedeen in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Another part of their audience is young residents of Uzbekistan (around 17 to 30 years old) and neighboring countries with Uzbek enclaves.

The main feature of the radical religious opposition is a complete rejection of the political norms and legal system of a secular (democratic) state, as a political system alien to Islam. Accordingly, pursuant to the radical opposition, the rights of believers should be formed solely on the basis of Islamic dogmas and legal prescriptions, which can only be embodied in an Islamic state (“Caliphate”). This view dominates among Salafists and those who adhere to more radical versions of Islam.

**Example 5.**

Mr. Abdalmumin («Echim Islomda/ Settlement of a problem in Islam ») sharply criticizes the political system and laws of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In his opinion, genuine freedom, including freedom of religion, can only be ensured by an Islamic state, “which should be guided by the best political structure for Muslims in the world - the Universal Caliphate. ... All , who are opposed to this - those enemies of Islam and are the servants of the Jews”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33}Such Muslims in Uzbekistan are called “Ibodati to’la”, that is, “Fully fulfilling the ritual requirements”. “Some statistics on this group were collected during the meeting of Presidential Advisor R. Kasymov with independent Islamic bloggers (22.02.2020). The goals of the meeting are to create a platform for dialogue between state institutions and bloggers, to achieve mutual understanding and join forces against the onslaught of the radical Islamic opposition, who immigrated from the country. In general, Islamic bloggers showed a tendency to cooperate with the state, but tried to use the meeting to get their preferences.

\textsuperscript{34}We were able to conduct brief interviews with 4 bloggers who wanted to remain anonymous.

\textsuperscript{35}The calculations are based on automatic statistics of the “likes” and information of the bloggers themselves.

\textsuperscript{36}The estimations were made based on automatic statistics of “faces”, as well as during interviews with these bloggers.

\textsuperscript{37}See videos and comments at https://t.me/Islamictalkss

\textsuperscript{38}«Mana Haqiqat!/Here is the truth!» (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K67nu9J3mdo Jan 28, 2020, 39 585 views, 1,6 thousand likes, 105 dislikes).
The websites of religious opposition abroad declare the territory of Uzbekistan the territory of “oppression” (zulm) or “the territory of war against Muslims” (Dar ul-kharb). They are opposed by the majority of Muslims and theologians within the country. Theologians with moderate opposition have active discussions with radical religious opposition and uphold the idea that the full observance of secular democratic freedoms is a sufficient condition for the comfortable existence of the Muslim community.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Judging by the content of the media and social media, at least three participants in the discussion about forms of religious freedom and the view on religiously motivated extremism can be identified. The first is the state and its institutions, which traditionally have a legitimate position and are supported by the majority of the population. State institutions have the advantage of initiating and enforcing laws and other functions that oblige them to discuss religious freedoms within existing laws or to give them a form of ‘majority expression of will’ using a well-established vocabulary. This means that all types of legal discourses regarding religious freedom and the official media acquire monotonous stylistic cliché, most often listing laws and other legal acts to prove the exceptional loyalty of the state in ensuring the rights of citizens, including believers.

Religious opposition and their respective media is represented by two opposing wings of the new wave of religious leaders, moderate and radical, who have formulated diametrically opposing views on justice and present their beliefs about the rights of believers in the media. Foreign bloggers from the radical wing have also formed their own discourse based on radical Islamic ideology. They openly criticize existing secular laws, believing that the real embodiment of religious freedom is possible only with the revival of Islamic rule.

At the same time, Islamic bloggers (both liberal and radical) are trying to revive Islamic law, but they do not agree on how to revive it. The alternative, as a rule, is either the evolution of the electorate or the forcible seizure of power by the mujahideen and forced Islamization. But in both cases, media resources remain the main instruments of persuasion and struggle for the electorate.

In Summary, it is important to pay attention to the following points:

● It is important to consider a large-scale and in-depth study of the influence of narratives of the media and online platforms on the Muslims of Uzbekistan. In particular, it is a question of understanding the perception of democracy by different Muslim strata within personal, social and political contexts and the role of “Internet involvement” (Internet dawah) as a result of the interpretation of visual narratives and narratives by violent extremist groups. This will help to understand and explain the growing ideological involvement based upon the psychological or social motivations of potential recipients.

● It is important to understand and recognize that political, socio-economic and other repulsive factors affect believers differently as only a small part of them are involved with jihadists. Therefore, studying the driving forces of resistance and immunity is just as important as studying the causes for involvement in radical groups.

● It is important to stimulate positive experiences in countering violent extremism ideology. For example, continuing the Presidential Adviser’s initiative to establish a dialogue with liberal Islamic bloggers.

● It is important to consider legalizing analytical NGOs and using them as a tool to enhance cooperation between internal and external experts at the regional and international levels.