Russia and Eurasia Programme
Meeting Summary

CHATHAM HOUSE
The Royal Institute of International Affairs

The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics

John Heathershaw

University of Exeter

David Montgomery

University of Pittsburgh

14 November 2014

10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
www.chathamhouse.org
Patron: Her Majesty The Queen Chairman: Stuart Popham QC Director: Dr Robin Niblett Charity Registration Number: 208223

This is a summary of the event held at Chatham House on 14 November 2014, at which John Heathershaw and David Montgomery presented their research paper, *The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics* (Chatham House, November 2014). The theme was then discussed with a roundtable of experts.

The formation of the myth

In their paper, John Heathershaw and David Montgomery argue that there is a security myth concerning radicalization, shared by both East and West, and that there is no evidence for many aspects of this myth.

There was some discussion as to why the myth has entered the security discourse. Within Central Asia, the threat of radicalization may be often overstated, reflecting a Soviet legacy of suspicion towards religion. Furthermore, depicting domestic instability as the result of radical Muslim groups is useful for domestic regimes. However, there is general consensus among regional security analysts that groups believed currently to be devoting their energies to other regions – Syria, Libya and Xinjiang, among others – will return to Central Asia in time. The process of radicalization is therefore not seen as a construct of the authorities, which provides some consistency with the Western discourse of radicalization.

Some claims – for example, that authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalization – may have entered the security discourse through the desire of Western governments to critique the regime in Uzbekistan.

However, in rebutting the myth of post-Soviet Muslim radicalization Heathershaw and Montgomery are not arguing that Western security analysts justify the policies of Central Asian authorities towards Islam. Some radical groups do exist, and some radicalization does occur. This aspect requires further analysis.

The six key claims

The paper identifies and questions six key claims of the international security discourse concerning Islamic revival and Islamist radicalization in Central Asia. This section sets out the authors' interrogation of these claims, and summarizes the discussion that each provoked.

There has been a post-Soviet Islamic revival

While there has been an increase in religious public display since Soviet times, to talk of revival suggests that Islam had no influence in the Soviet period; this was not the case. There is marked continuity between the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. However, one discussant noted that while this continuity does exist, the significant change in terms of public practice between 1980 and 2010 should not be understated.

To Islamicize is to radicalize

This is a wrongful conflation of two different processes, because piety is not necessarily a determining factor in radicalization. The two do none the less have a complex relationship, which is not fully understood and which requires further research. Furthermore, political Islam did emerge from areas of traditional piety in the early 1990s. There may therefore be some correlation that has not been explored.

Authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalization

It is almost impossible to provide evidence for this causal relationship, since jihadis exist worldwide, in countries with both high and low GDP, and among populations under both authoritarian and democratic governments. However, there is an element of truth in the myth, because repression may cause radicalization. In addition, when authoritarian regimes start to collapse, Islamist groups may be well-placed to gain more power. Worldwide trends show that protracted instability usually arises because of internal difficulties, such as succession struggles, rather than being originated by Islamic movements. This instability may then allow Islamist militancy to gain traction in the area concerned.

Underground Muslim groups are radical

This claim is often made, but Western analysts, while able to make a distinction between violent and non-violent underground groups, categorize all such groups as radical on the basis of little evidence. The term 'radical' lacks a clear definition in Western analysis, and in Central Asia it is used to describe any enemy of the regime.

On the other hand, implicit in the argument that underground Muslim groups may not be radical is the suggestion that many people join organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir without actually subscribing to their beliefs. However, in republics such as Uzbekistan, where membership entails severe penalties, it seems unlikely that those who did not subscribe fully would take the risk.

Radical Muslim groups are globally networked

The assumption is often made that anyone involved in a radical group is one step away from becoming a jihadist. However, the new mobility now possible in Central Asia should not be ignored; globalization does provide Islamist groups with new opportunities to interact with radical groups in different countries and regions.

Political Islam opposes the secular state

Secularism and Islam do not need to be mutually exclusive. Popular discontent is not with the secularism of the state. It should be noted, though, that while Central Asia experiences only a low number of terrorist attacks, this may also be due to the authorities' success in restraining these groups.

It was noted that control over political Islam is very tight in Central Asian republics, but there is a lack of knowledge about how to deal with them. Arguably, the authorities themselves do not understand or care about where genuine security threats originate. Anti-terrorist forces use their power to raid anyone considered a political threat. Many of the court bans on religious movements are unfounded, because governments are unable to separate radical groups from others.

So-called radical groups can be co-opted by the state. For example, the Islamist Renaissance Party of Tajikistan continues to exist and plays a useful moderating role in Tajik politics, providing a way for the government to demonstrate a degree of religious tolerance. Banning it would signal a move beyond the post-civil war agreement, and could spark new thinking about the present regime.

General discussion

Methodology

One discussant highlighted some problems of methodology. Much of the survey data in the paper is from a 2005 survey on religious and cultural practice in Kyrgyzstan. Things may have changed since that time; political Islam has certainly evolved over the last few years. In addition, Uzbekistan is very difficult for researchers to visit. The question was raised of how data on Uzbekistan have been extrapolated from the available materials.

Other areas for analysis

New trends have emerged that may affect the situation in unprecedented ways:

- The number of labour migrants going abroad, particularly to Russia, has risen hugely. Many from Central Asia living in Russia have organized themselves in new ways in order to protect their rights and interests in Russia. This is not generally an expressly political form of self-organization, but this may change in the future.
- The increased use of social media has led to crackdowns within Central Asian countries.
- Since the Ukraine crisis, agendas of Central Asian security analysts have changed, and the fear of Russia has grown. This may lead to changes in the Muslim radicalization discourse.

The debates going on in the republics with regard to Islam thus require continual assessment. Heathershaw and Montgomery agreed that the realm of analysis needs to be expanded, and that more questions need to be asked about this phenomenon. Their paper does not address where real or potential threats actually originate.