Central Asian Muslims in the Syrian War

Bashar al-Assad’s convincing victory in the presidential elections in Syria inspires hope for a speedy conclusion to the armed conflict which has lasted from March 2011 and has killed more than 150000 people. Government troops confronting Islamist militias that are up to 80% composed of foreign mercenaries. Among them include citizens of the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

According to rough estimates in Syria, about 400 fighters are from Kazakhstan, up to 300 from Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In smaller quantities from Turkmenistan, but for all these people who are fighting in Syria, for them, they are engaged in jihad. Professor Peter Newman of the International Centre at King’s College London on the radio station “Ozodi,” (Tajik service of Radio “Liberty”) explained the situation as follows: “Representatives of Islam are flocking to Syria because they believe that in this way they protect their brothers and sisters of the faith. In their opinion, people should not consider himself a citizen of a particular state or community member, he should think of himself as part of the global community, the community of believers.”

However, many Syrians consider the conflict to be a civil war, in which they have bet on the overthrow of the Assad regime and oppose the influx to the country of foreign militant groups. “We appeal to our brothers from all countries. Stay in your country and do something useful in your own country. If you want to help us, send us some money or weapons. You can pray for us, but we do not need you to come to Syria,” said the chief of staff of the free Syrian army, Selim Idris.

It is noteworthy that those arriving in Syria from Central Asia and the Caucasus, periodically fall into rival groups, and as a result, they end up fighting with one another. “Syria doesn’t have such a front line where on one side are government troops and on the other, opposition forces and rebels. The situation is complicated by the fact that other states supporting individual rebel and radical groups intervened in the war in Syria (USA, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, the countries of Western Europe), said Kazakh political scientist, Yerlan Karin to the news agency tengrinews.kz and as a result there formed a large number of different groups, most of them ended up at war with one another. The reasons for the conflict are varied; they cannot divide controlled territory, trophies, etc. Basically, Central Asians are fighting in three groups, “al-Nusra Front,” “Islamic State of Iraq and Levant” and the “Jaish-a-Muhadzhrin-wal-Ansar.”

“The supply of volunteer extremists for the camps has, over the years, been put aside. Infrastructure for recruitment relies on and is branched in the religious institutions of other countries. Islamic clerics engaged in recruitment have been trained in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Pakistan. Given the poor quality of life in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus, corruption, social inequality and the weak control by the state agencies, convincing young locals that the secular power in the country “comes from Satan” is not particularly difficult. With the spread of Islamic ideas in the country and a deteriorating education system, vulnerability increases and becomes a tool in the hands of global players.

A leading expert at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, Azhdar Kurtov, believes that in the battle for the participate of fanatics, ideologically convinced supporters of radical Islam is its extremist form. For them, the goal is not self-gain, but a fight for their own ideals. And if so, then their worldview contains an element of pan-Islam:
extend, by all means possible a radical interpretation of Islam throughout the world and without exception. Naturally, with such an approach, they, most of all, are drawn to this battle, which they and their family members consider “duty to the faith,” “feats” and “true jihad.”

Authorities in Tajikistan recognized that its citizens were active in the Syrian conflict only after a video clip appeared on Youtube showing 5 Tajik citizens burning passports after arriving in Syria to fight. Voiceover in Russian and Tajik languages reports that the “new brothers came to take part in jihad, inshallah.” “We burn this infidel passport as we do not intend to return to the “infidel,” says one of the Tajik militants. These people call themselves the first citizens of the Islamic state of Iraq and Sham (Syria).

Dushanbe was convinced that the sending of militants to fight in Syria was being organized by opposition political forces, in particular, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), and members of the clergy, for example, the well-known family in the country of the spiritual and political leader, a leader of the United Tajik Opposition during the Civil War (1992 to 1997) Haji Akbar Turajonzoda. Naturally, TurajonzodahandIRPleaderKabiridenytheseaccusations. “The main reason for the participation of citizens from other Islamic countries, including citizens of Tajikistan, in the war against the Bashar Assad regime in Syria is that they do not know the basics of Islam and are misguided people who have misinterpreted Sharia and Jihad,” said Tajik media, Turajonzodah. “In the reality of today's Tajikistan, the word “jihad” is associated with war, pursued by a group of religious fanatics against infidels; and for this reason many theologians are afraid to speak truly and sincerely about the realities of jihad. “In actual fact, jihad is a desire to protect the country from external enemies, to protect their religion and a desire to protect his family and to ensure the welfare and education of children,” he explained. Tajik theologian believes that Syria, under the regime of Assad clan, which ruled the country for over 40 years, no religious restrictions exist, armed clashes occur on the basis of political opposition. Turajonzodah, in particular, went to say: “Despite the fact that the Government of Syria is composed mainly of Alawites, Shiites, they never introduced restrictions against Sunnis. Over 50% of Islamic literature published in the world is printed in Syria. And to call a war against the Assad regime jihad is impossible.” He noted that the principles of jihad are such that if Muslim country attacks the Muslim country and Muslims in this country are unable to resist the invader, then Muslims from other countries can take part in this war, but the situation is different in Syria.

“The West and Saudi Arabia, in its history, has never carried such a burden in support of opposition forces of any country in the world, which today stand out against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Today in the UAE several television channels are broadcasting, including in the Tajik language, calling for jihad in Syria. In our country, educated preachers do not have a similar platform to explain to the citizens of Tajikistan the harmfulness of the fallacy of those calls,” said Turajonzodah.

Tajik experts suggest that if before the recruitment of young “jihadists” came under the influence of paramilitary groups, “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” and “Ansorallah”, then now this niche market for “recruits” is monopolized by the followers of the Salafi persuasion.

Salafists in Central Asia are relatively recent. Tajik authorities initially even “toyed” with representatives of the Salafist organization established in the country. Saudi Arabia supports this initiative. And this very same country and has a strong interest in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. As of now it has expressed interest in investment opportunities. For example, in Dushanbe, the Saudis have financed the construction of a new mosque and extended a 20 million dollar loan for the development of health care in Tashkent. But the most “dangerous” situation exists in Kyrgyzstan. “Cooperation on development with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has become one of the main priorities in the foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan: frequent visits to Bishkek of Saudi politicians, a new Saudi embassy opened, in addition to a planned logistics center is to be opened in Manas,” said author and expert on Central Asia and the Middle East, Alexander Knyazev. According to him, under the pretense of investment in the country, comes the ideology of Saudi Arabia. “The fact that Saudi Arabia is very careful in supporting so-called “non-traditional Islam,” but in Kyrgyzstan it is called something - salafi, fundamentalism, Arabic and Wahhabism, there is no doubt.” The Saudis do it everywhere they can. And in Kyrgyzstan, now there really is a problem of Islam or even of Islamists, both traditional and non-traditional (Salafi) and it is rather urgent. More than half of the society is worried that non-traditional Islam will gradually replace traditional Islam. Even more concerning is the fact that non-traditional Islam tends to attract the youth,” says Islamic scholar, expert of the Moscow Carnegie Center, Alexei Malashenko.

Particularly worrisome is the situation in Kyrgyzstan. Amid the lingering socio-economic problems in the country is an increase in the number of religious extremist organizations. According to local media, in the south of the country a special operation was conducted to neutralize an underground religious group; within this group were six residents of Osh region. Presumably, the detainees undertook special training in Syria and then returned home to continue
their destructive activities. As experts say, “due to the inaction and connivance of the state bodies, Kyrgyzstan is
gradually, but surely, turning into an incubator for ideas and radical terrorist groups in the region.” Moreover, the
country has become a haven for Islamized elements and trained fighters in camps in the Middle East or Afghanistan.
The main feature of Kyrgyzstan, especially in its southern regions, is that as of today, the activity of religious
institutions is not legally regulated. Many religious leaders have been trained by private sponsors from Saudi Arabia,
Qatar and Pakistan, without the knowledge and or consent of the authorities.

Deputy Chairman of the working group for the development of concepts for teaching history of religious culture in
Kyrgyzstan, Murat Imankulov, says that “currently, the country has intensified so-called political Islam by banning
political parties and movements such as, “Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in
addition to others.” “In conditions where there is an absence of a long tradition, experience of participating in
domestic theology, it becomes tempting to use the religious factor for political goals. Religion has an impact on the
social and political behavior of its citizens. If you create favorable conditions for its development, religion can
contribute to the stabilization of society; otherwise, it can become a source of instability, differences and of
destructive forces,” said Imankulov.

To the extent that the situation in Syria will be sorted out, militants will return to Russia and to countries of the CIS.
And this is a threat to peace in these countries. “These guys want to reach their full potential. Accordingly, they will
connect to the international Islamist cells in regions of Russia and disperse to other CIS countries. No matter their
ethnic origin, whether they are Uzbeks, Tatars or Azeris, they all fall under the banner, ”Hizb-ut-Tahrir.” In so much
as this organization, despite the fact that it is prohibited almost everywhere, it is gaining more and more traction,”
says Alexei Malashenko.

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