

Kazakhstan is combating Islamic terrorism

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On 15 October, Ermukhamet Ertysbayev, a political advisor to President Nursultan Nazarbayev, recommended an Anti-Terrorist Committee to be established in Kazakhstan. The committee would be in charge of broadly defined fight against terrorism, which is becoming an increasingly serious problem in the country. The new agency would have extensive competences and Kairbek Suleymanov, the former minister of justice, was proposed to lead it. Ertysbayev's crucial position in Kazakhstan, and his personal high political rank, indicate that work on the establishment of the Committee is at an advanced stage.

The problem of Islamic Terrorism in Kazakhstan emerged in May 2011, when the first suicide attack took place in Aktobe. Since then, at least forty people have been killed in both terrorist attacks and those imputed to terrorists, and above all in anti-terrorist operations. A greater intensity has also been observed in legal actions (for example, adopting stricter legislation concerning the operation of religious associations) and in arresting suspects on a grand scale.

Commentary

- The scale of terrorism in Kazakhstan has so far been limited, but it brings a new quality to this country, seen as the most stable in the region and free from religious extremism. In this context, it is worth noting not only the endogenous nature of most of the terrorist attacks, but also the increasing activity in Kazakhstan of the terrorist organisations operating from the Afghan-Pakistani frontier (a Kazakh branch of the Islamic Jihad Union, i.e. Jund al Khilafah, was established in 2011). The potential social base for terrorism has also seen rapid development – the radical Salafi circles, which count between 10,000 and 15,000 people (predominantly in western Kazakhstan), are closely linked to Russian Salafis (especially those from Dagestan), and effort by Jund al Khilafah to infiltrate them are being made.
- The proposal to create a new agency (in addition to the actions taken so far against potential radicals) is a sign that the tough and confrontational strategy the government has adopted towards the Salafi community will be intensified. The government sees the Salafi community as one of the sources of the problem. Salafis in Kazakhstan have not yet shown any political aspirations and do not form a homogeneous community. Most

Salafis reject terrorism, but some of them accept it as a response to persecutions from the law enforcement agencies. An intensification of the government's repressive actions, may provoke a further radicalisation of both Salafi circles and the peaceful Salafi leaders, whose popularity extends beyond Kazakhstan.

- The establishment of a new agency for combating terrorism would also mean weakening the position of the National Security Committee (which was established on the foundations of the KGB in 1992; its structures include the security service, intelligence and counterintelligence, as well as border guard) and also of its head, Nurtai Abykayev, who has been a trusted aide to the president for many years and who recently has been accused of incompetence. Thus, combating terrorism is also becoming both a tool and a plane for the rivalry inside the ruling elite and may indirectly affect the difficult process of preparing the successor to President Nursultan Nazarbayev.