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TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the rise of terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan, focusing on the social and political factors that contribute to these threats. Using various sources, the study reveals concerning trends, such as an increase in terrorism-related arrests and crimes associated with extremism. It examines the recruitment tactics of terrorist groups, especially their targeting of vulnerable young people, supported by personal stories from individuals affected by these issues. The paper also investigates the conditions that allow international terrorism to grow in Kazakhstan, highlighting both local and global influences. It discusses how online platforms are used to recruit individuals and how social narratives can be manipulated to attract potential extremists. The findings stress the need for comprehensive counter-terrorism strategies that include psychological insights and community involvement to effectively tackle these challenges. Additionally, the research addresses the ongoing threat of religious extremism and its implications for national security. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration between government agencies and religious organizations to combat extremist ideologies. The study concludes with suggestions for improving preventive measures, such as community awareness programs and changes in legislation to limit the funding of terrorism. Overall, this paper enhances the understanding of terrorism in Kazakhstan and advocates for a combined approach to prevention that considers the complex social, political, and economic factors involved. By addressing these issues, Kazakhstan can create a safer environment and build resilience against the threats of terrorism and extremism.

INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly developing global world, the specter of terrorism and extremism extends its long shadow to every corner of the globe. According to the Global Terrorism Index report from the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) for the years 2022-2023, although the number of deaths from terrorist attacks decreased to 6,701 in 2022, the number of terrorist attacks resulting in fatalities increased by

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26% in 2023, with an average of at least 1.7 people killed per attack. This marks the first increase in death rates over the past five years [1].

One of the regions not immune to the influence of political movements aiming to use terrorism as a tool is Kazakhstan. Despite the country's Terrorism Index (TI) being equal to 0 and this figure being significantly lower compared to regions like Afghanistan (8.822) or the United States (4.799), Kazakhstan has faced several challenges in recent years in combating the rise of extremism and terrorism [1].

The objective of this research is to systematically assess the level of terrorism in Kazakhstan, based on terrorist and extremist incidents in the country, as well as to evaluate the measures taken to combat these radical and aggressive movements.

The following tasks will guide and support the achievement of this objective:

1. Analyze the causes of the emergence of extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan and the factors influencing them.
2. Review terrorist and extremist incidents in Kazakhstan.
3. Analyze the level of extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan.
4. Evaluate the measures taken to prevent terrorism and extremism.
5. Compare Kazakhstan's anti-terrorism measures with those of countries with higher and lower levels of terrorism.

The research questions that will help identify the key parameters considered essential for achieving the main objective, as well as reveal the outlined goals, are as follows:

What is the level of terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan?

What are the reasons for the increase in terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan in recent years, and what factors contribute to their spread?

What is the role of religion and culture in the emergence of extremist and terrorist incidents in Kazakhstan?

What are the consequences of terrorist and extremist activities for Kazakhstan and its citizens, and what measures are being taken to protect society from threats?

Which organizations and countries cooperate with Kazakhstan in the fight against terrorism and extremism, and what are the results of this cooperation?

What future perspectives can be considered for ensuring security and stability in the country?

Research Hypothesis: The rise of terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan is influenced by both internal and external factors, including a combination of socio-economic grievances, political instability and religious radicalization. Additionally, despite the low level of terrorism in the country, the measures implemented by the government are moderately effective. This research aims to thoroughly analyze the root causes of terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan by examining the country's historical, cultural, and political contexts, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures the country has taken to prevent and combat violent extremism.

MAIN BODY

Terrorism and extremism are major concerns around the world. These phenomena, which threaten regional peace and security, are being actively countered by Kazakhstan as well. In recent years, for example, terrorist and extremist movements have gained strength: since the beginning of 2023, more than 30 people have been arrested in Kazakhstan on charges of terrorism [2]. Moreover, during the first half of 2021, 139 offenses related to extremism and terrorism were registered, an increase of 19.8% compared to the same period of the previous year. It should be noted that a significant portion of these offenses was observed in the Atyrau and Turkestan regions [3]. These data indicate that the influence of terrorism in Kazakhstan is still significant and underline the urgent need for effective anti-terrorism measures within the country.

Several scientific works, press articles, publications, and internet resources have been dedicated to analyzing terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan. These works provide various perspectives, including the root causes of the problem, the methods of action employed by terrorists, and the government's response. However, it is essential first to address the question: "Why do people engage in such terrorist and extremist activities?"

Firstly, it is the influence of radical religious-political militant movements and organizations like "Al-Qaeda" and "Taliban." These organizations use the internet and social media to propagate their

ideology and recruit new members, including Kazakhstani citizens. Many of the recruits are young people whose thoughts and worldviews are still developing. As a result, these young people easily become "blind tools" for extremists, leading to the formation of a violent culture that devalues human life and fosters hostility and cruelty. Extremists force these youth to reject their own thoughts and reasoning in favor of radical ideas they deem just and right. For instance, they romanticize military lifestyles and the "heroism" of militants by showcasing their successful terrorist attacks on social media. To amplify the impact, they frequently use provocative slogans such as "Don't be left behind, join our ranks, and serve your homeland!" [4]. Moreover, modern terrorist organizations like "ISIL" are increasingly utilizing the evolving capabilities of cyberspace. They particularly target socially isolated individuals on social media platforms. This trend sheds light on the evolving tactics of contemporary terrorist groups and emphasizes the importance of strengthening cybersecurity strategies [5]. As evidence of these claims, a video featuring a 17-year-old teenager that went viral on the Kazakh social medias on January 8, 2024, can be cited. In the video, the teenager stated that terrorist organizations primarily target individuals without religious knowledge, often focusing on young people whose worldviews have not yet fully formed. According to the teenager, one day, a stranger who considered herself religious sent him a message suggesting they meet. Later, this girl introduced him to her brother, who sent him videos via Telegram. Over time, the teenager found himself part of a group of people on social media with whom he regularly interacted. However, during all this time, the teenager did not realize that the extremist group was brainwashing him and promoting their radical ideas. As he pointed out, the psychological influence of such groups was so strong that he ended up rejecting all his family members and friends [6].

Secondly, as noted by the author of the article titled "The Causes, Preconditions, and Conditions of the Emergence and Spread of International Terrorism," terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon that continues to evolve over time and lacks a single definition. The factors and preconditions that contribute to the emergence and escalation of this movement on an international level include religion, ethnic conflicts, political repression, economic disparities, and geopolitical rivalries. These factors can create favorable conditions for the emergence and proliferation of extremist groups. Moreover, the further spread and development of these movements are influenced by factors such as weak state institutions, porous borders, and the lack of systems regulating social networks [7].

For this research work to fully achieve its objective, it is essential to answer the question: "What terrorist and extremist events have occurred in Kazakhstan?" Despite the low frequency of terrorist acts in Kazakhstan, the terrorist attack in Aktobe on June 5, 2016, was a tragic event that shook the entire nation. The attack took place in two different locations in the city of Aktobe, resulting in the

deaths of four civilians and three military personnel. The underlying causes of this terrorist act ranged from poverty and unemployment to religious extremism and geopolitical tensions. According to state security agencies, the attackers were a group of radicalized youths influenced by ISIL propaganda. This group planned to seize military and police facilities in Aktobe and stage an attack on Kazakh soil. On June 5, 2016, the group carried out coordinated attacks using homemade explosives at two weapon stores and a military unit in Aktobe. The attackers also hijacked a bus, using it as a military target, killing three soldiers and wounding several others. Security forces responded swiftly, and within 48 hours, all attackers were killed, and several others were captured. The government declared a state of emergency in Aktobe, sending additional military and police forces to the area to restore order [8].

The consequences of this terrorist act were undoubtedly vast and profound, as it revealed the complex relationship between the attack and the socio-economic, ideological, and security factors, while also demonstrating the direct and long-term effects on the affected community. Additionally, this attack highlighted the growing threat of ISIL in Central Asia and the need for international cooperation in combating terrorism. Despite the adoption of legislation such as the “Law on Countering Extremism and Terrorism” on February 15, 2005, and July 13, 1999 [17], the government of Kazakhstan faced the necessity to strengthen its security infrastructure and adopt preventive measures to avoid future attacks. Thus, the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan approved a program aimed at combating religious extremism and terrorism for 2018-2022, allocating approximately one billion U.S. dollars for its implementation, according to official data. As part of the program, the government focused on repatriating Kazakh citizens from conflict zones in Syria through the “Zhusan” operation. During all three phases, 524 Kazakh citizens were evacuated, including 30 men, 137 women, and 357 children. It is worth noting that in 2021, more than 181,000 online materials promoting religious extremism and terrorism were identified and removed by the government, which is eight times more than the previous year. This clearly shows that the government is taking measures to prevent the formation and spread of radical ideas among its citizens [9]. Additionally, counter-terrorism training exercises are being organized in the country. For example, in 2021, a meeting was held in the assembly hall of the "Akzhaik" music school in Turkistan to explain the decree on approving the model passport for anti-terrorism protection of vulnerable facilities. The meeting discussed the requirements for developing this anti-terrorism protection passport, which will apply to all vulnerable facilities in Kazakhstan [15]. Moreover, on March 31, 2016, at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, the “Religion Against Terrorism” conference was initiated by Nursultan Nazarbayev. During the conference, the former president and Chairman of the Senate of Kazakhstan’s Parliament, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, emphasized that combating terrorism is not just the task of individual states or their groups but of the entire global community. He also highlighted those religious leaders and

parliamentarian, as the most prominent and influential representatives of the public, should fully participate in this effort [10]. It is also worth mentioning Kazakhstan's membership in international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which aim to combat international terrorism and aggressive extremism. An example of the outcomes of such cooperation is the CSTO operation, where member states allocated around 2,000 soldiers and 500 units of equipment to prevent the seizure of administrative buildings in several cities of Kazakhstan.

However, after the January events (also known as "Qandy Qantar" (Bloody January), the mass protests and subsequent violent clashes that took place across Kazakhstan in early January 2022), when religious radicals and criminal groups used the public's dissatisfaction to pursue their own goals, putting the peace of the country at great risk, many residents, as well as even political figures, began to doubt the effectiveness of the measures taken against religious terrorism and extremism. One of them, Sultan Dyusseminov, a deputy of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan, noted that the state allocated 270 billion tenge from the budget over five years to implement the 2018-2022 program for combating religious extremism and terrorism. However, only 4% of this budget was spent on preventive measures. The program's effectiveness, especially after the tragic January events, raised significant dissatisfaction and doubt, yet the responsible authorities have not fully assessed the situation. Hence, the actions taken by law enforcement agencies to apprehend and hold terrorists accountable are merely a drop in the ocean, while poverty, political instability, and the lack of future prospects lead many young people to join destructive organizations each year [9]. This view is also reflected in the expert opinion of Dr. Zarema Shaukenova, a sociological researcher, who shared her perspective on the mechanisms for combating terrorism and extremism in the country. According to the expert, measures such as organizing activities for minors and young people, assisting in employment, and providing social support to vulnerable families are crucial elements in preventing extremist motivations [16].

Nevertheless, to evaluate Kazakhstan's system for combating terrorism and extremism and its effectiveness, it is worth comparing it with countries that have both high and low levels of terrorism. One of the countries with a medium-to-high level of terrorism is the United States of America. As a globally recognized superpower, the United States (hereafter the U.S.) faces a complex combination of domestic and international threats that affect the overall terrorism situation within its borders. As a result, the U.S. has established a comprehensive anti-terrorism system. For example, the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign encourages citizens to report suspicious behavior, particularly

individuals who pose a threat to public safety, to authorities. This program has proven to be effective in combating terrorism because it ensures community participation in national security. By involving the public, law enforcement agencies can receive valuable tips and information that help prevent potential attacks or identify suspicious individuals [11]. If we consider a country with a low level of terrorism, one example would be Switzerland, one of the most important financial hubs in the world. Despite the freedom for citizens aged 18 and older to purchase firearms [12], this country is renowned for its political neutrality and low levels of terrorism. One of the main reasons for this reputation is that Switzerland has signed all 16 United Nations (UN) counter-terrorism conventions and protocols and is also a member of the Counter-Terrorism Action Group [13]. Despite the widespread availability of firearms, the firearm-related death rate in Switzerland in 2019 was 0.2, which is 20 times lower than in the U.S [14]. This indicator is not only a result of effective government initiatives but, according to many, also due to what is referred to as the "Swiss DNA." In other words, the nation's friendly mentality and the population's overall satisfaction pose a significant obstacle to the emergence of domestic terrorism.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the nature of terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Firstly, significant factors contributing to the emergence of terrorism and extremism include manipulation or coercion by organizations such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and Al-Jihad, whether directly or through cyberspace, along with political instability, poverty, and the nation's standard of living. The decisive influence of these factors is confirmed through analysis of articles, writings, and research.

Secondly, the government has implemented several measures to counter religious extremism and terrorism, including the adoption of laws on countering extremism and terrorism, a program from 2018 to 2022 funded with nearly one billion US dollars, the "Zhusan" operation, and efforts by information-educational groups to eliminate extremist content online.

Nevertheless, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) report analyzing terrorism levels worldwide, Kazakhstan's annual terrorism index stands at 0. Although the influence of such radical movements is rarely seen in Kazakhstan, events such as the 2016 Aktobe attack or the tragic January 2022 events revealed that the country is not fully prepared for such sudden assaults and demonstrated the need to develop preventive measures against terrorist organizations.

The research hypothesis was partially confirmed, as social and economic grievances and political instability indeed have a significant influence on the emergence of terrorism and extremism in Kazakhstan. However, with the rise of social media, terrorist organizations are increasingly exploiting cyberspace to recruit isolated individuals, especially vulnerable youth who spend much of their time on these platforms. Many experts believe this to be one of the key factors in the development of modern terrorism. Furthermore, contrary to the hypothesis, the government's actions have largely focused on addressing surface-level issues of terrorism without tackling deeper root causes, such as youth unemployment and the lack of preventive practices.

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