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Combatting Global Threat of Religious Radicalization: Hard-line and Soft-line Measures (Policy Recommendations for Azerbaijan)

Summary. This paper reviews the current trend in religious radicalization, its impact on security and stability in the world, as well as an international experience in combatting this global threat. The author has also studied the hard-line and soft-line measures that Azerbaijan is taking in the fight against religious radicalism and extremism and has developed recommendations for improving the efforts in this field.

Key words: religious radicalization, deradicalization, rehabilitation, ISIL, combatting terrorism, soft-line measures, hard-line measures, Azerbaijan, radical groups

Introduction

The latest developments in Syria and Iraq again demonstrate that religious radicalism and extremism has already exceeded the national borders and threatens the international community. It has become the global threat that affects the security and stability of most countries. It is well-known that the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) army is composed of citizens from different countries, including the United States, EU member states and others. Hundreds of Azerbaijani citizens also joined this radical army and reportedly, the number of killed Azerbaijanis exceeds one hundred. The affected states may experience more problems, when the members of this and other radical groups will return to their homelands. They can be involved in attempts of terror attacks or dissemination of radical views to

others. The incident at the Jewish Museum in Brussels on May 24, 2014 was the first example in this respect. The terror attack, which killed four people, was allegedly committed by the ISIL member Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29 year old French citizen of Algerian origin.

While the Islamic State military group is advancing its positions in Iraq and Syria, the anti-ISIL international coalition of 62 has been established. According to the US State Department, 20 members, including two international organizations – European Union and Arab Leagues, provide the coalition with air support or other military equipment. Other members are providing logistical or humanitarian aid¹.

However, the international community and individual countries also consider the application of soft-line measures aimed at preventing vulnerable groups and individuals from joining the radical streams, as well as rehabilitating those who have already accepted extremist views. Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes, which have already been carried out in a number of Middle Eastern and European countries and produced relatively positive results, can also be included into the anti-radicalization strategies.

1. Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes

The RAND National Security Research Institution published a very interesting and comprehensive report about the deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes conducted post-9/11 in some Middle Eastern, Asian, African and European countries². Comparative analysis of such programmes gives us an understanding of their advantages and disadvantages, as well as possibility of their implementation in other countries, including Azerbaijan. According to this report, the prison-based individual programmes implemented in the Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries focused on promoting the state-sanctioned brand of Islam by “credible interlocutors,” including clerics, scholars and university professors. The reason for such an approach was the conclusion of the programme designers, who found out that most of the arrested radical group members had little knowledge of Islam and/or just radical understanding of the faith. Representative of the Saudi Arabia’s Interior Ministry Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, who reviewed the lives of about 700 militants, recommended that lecturers in prison should concentrate on

¹ C. Freeman, *Who is in the anti-Islamic State coalition and what they are contributing?*, “The Telegraph”, 26 September 2014, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11124070/Who-is-in-the-anti-Islamic-State-coalition-and-what-they-are-contributing.html [15.10.2014].

² A. Rabasa, S. Pettyjohn, J. Ghez, C. Boucek, *Deradicalising Islamic Extremists*, “RAND National Security Research Institute” 2010.

the essential theological areas like the Islamic theory of jihad, takfir, and relations with non-Muslims”³. Another finding of the programme officials was that the majority of “the offenders were radicalized through extremist books, tapes, videos, and more recently, the Internet”⁴.

The Saudi programme, which claimed 80 percent success rate⁵, had been considered to be a relatively successful one among those implemented in Muslim countries. The main reason was that the Saudi programme, in addition to the religious education component, also included extensive social support aspect, which lacked for instance, in the Yemeni programme. The “dialogue” programme launched in Yemen prioritised an obtainment of guaranties from the detained radicals that they would not engage in any violent activity within the territory of Yemen in exchange for their release⁶. Unlike to Saudi Arabia, Yemen didn’t have necessary economic resources to provide adequate post-release care, which was crucial to the programme’s failure.

Deradicalization programmes in the European countries (UK, Netherland, Denmark) put an emphasis on addressing the social and integration problems, as they considered the radicalization an issue stemming from an inadequate or unequal economic, social and political participation, as well as high unemployment rates, criminality and other social sickness⁷. The Dutch authorities, for instance, linked the process of radicalization with the social polarization observed in this country. A survey undertaken by the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies in the fall of 2006 suggested that up to two percent of the country’s Muslim population was prone to radicalization or predisposed due to conservative religious views in conjunction with a conviction that Islam was under attack and must be defended⁸. With this approach, the European countries tried to focus on the root causes that contributed to facilitation of extremism and radical moods in their societies.

The European programme also discovered that the promoters of radical views target persons with low level of religious knowledge. Sulaimaan Samuel, a mentor with the UK government’s ongoing “Channel” deradicalization programme, said that “the arguments they (radicalisers) use are normally deliberately constructed and aimed at people who probably don’t have an in-depth understanding of Islam.” According to him, “religious ideology does not appear to be a major

³ J. Burke, *Saudis offer pioneering therapy for ex-jihadists*, “The Guardian/The Observer”, 9 March 2008, www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/09/saudi-arabia-terrorism [15.10.2014].

⁴ C. Boucek, *The Sakinah Campaign and Internet Counter-Radicalization in Saudi Arabia*, “CTC Sentinel” 2008, Vol. 1, No. 9.

⁵ The remaining 20 percent includes the detainees, who refused to participate in the programme, failed and subsequently rearrested.

⁶ A. Rabasa, S. Pettyjohn, J. Ghez, C. Boucek, *Deradicalising Islamic Extremists*, “RAND National Security Research Institute” 2010, p. 45.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 122.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 140.

influencing factor. Many of those seeking to fight in Syria and Iraq have poor knowledge of Islam. They are motivated by images they have seen online, or are lured by the promise of adventure⁹.

One of the peculiarities of the deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes in the European countries was the involvement of civil society organizations to the implementation of these activities, including Muslim non-governmental organizations, which mainly promote moderate Islam. For instance, the NGO-implemented projects in the United Kingdom included organization of roundtable discussions on Islamophobia and extremism, facilitation of mentoring and training activities for members of Muslim communities, which provided the participants with knowledge and skills in fighting terrorism and radicalism. Through these programmes, the UK government was trying to avoid imprisonment of people and pre-empt radicalization mood among the young members of Muslim communities.

Evaluation of such programmes seems to be very complicated. Via the short-term evaluation of prison-based individual deradicalization programmes, it is possible to identify the number of people who remained disengaged with the radical groups following their release and also the number of rearrested persons. However, monitoring of released persons has to continue in order to see whether the low recidivism remains or not. Experience in this field confirms the necessity of social programmes, which appear to be a crucial element in successful deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes.

Russian Federation, which also has suffered from terror and extremism, is also planning to start implementation of prison-based deradicalization and rehabilitation programme, using experience of Saudi Arabia. The representative of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FPS) Valery Trofimov stated that the Penitentiary Service will strengthen an individual psychological work with inmates and use special correctional programmes with people imprisoned for terrorist and extremist activities. According to Trofimov, there are about 10 thousands Muslim inmates in Russian prisons¹⁰. Russian authorities realize that extremist ideologies are also trying to enter the prisons, where they carry out very active recruitment processes. Only in 2013, the Russia FPS prevented 97 attempts to deliver to prisons books propagating extremist views. Russian authorities, as well as Saudi Arabia, want to use the services of moderate religious figures who have credibility among the Muslim communities in the country, in implementation of the rehabilitation programmes.

⁹ M. Holden, *Why Britain is still losing its fight against radicalization*, "Reuters Information Agency", 13 October 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/13/us-mideast-crisis-britain-radicalization-idUSKCN0I20ET20141013 [15.10.2014].

¹⁰ ФСИН: *Перевоспитать радикальных исламистов поможет опыт арабских стран*, 21 ноября 2013, *Vzglyad newspaper*, www.vz.ru/news/2013/11/21/660765.html [15.10.2014].

2. Arrest of radical group members in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan was one of the first countries, which joined the international anti-terrorist coalition established after 9/11. The Azerbaijani peacekeepers joined the anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the country's airspace and airports were opened to the anti-terrorist coalition combatting the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda.

In the meantime, radical religious groups are trying to strengthen their positions in Azerbaijan. The latest operations conducted by the Ministry of National Security (MNS) of Azerbaijan, which resulted in detention and later imprisonment of hundreds of radicals, demonstrate that their efforts allegedly produced certain results. Allegedly, hundreds of Azerbaijanis (local mass media reports claim the number ranging from 300 to 700) are fighting on the side of ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

On September 23, 2014, the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan released an official statement about the arrest of 26 members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in Azerbaijan¹¹. It happened as a result of the first large-scale operation of Azerbaijani security forces against the members of this group on the territory of Azerbaijan. It is interesting that the operation and the arrest of radicals came just three weeks after the statement of ISIL members about their plan to start military operations in the Caucasus region. The Al-Arabiya TV channel published a video, with a Russian translation, in which a militant speaking from the cockpit of a fighter jet at a military airstrip stated their plan to "free Chechnya and the Caucasus with the mercy of God"¹². Local mass media also reported about the arrest of several Azerbaijani citizens upon their return from Syria.

Azerbaijani citizens joined radical groups in the past as well, especially during the conflicts in Chechnya (Russian Federation) and Afghanistan. From 2001 to 2003, the MNS detained more than 70 citizens of Azerbaijan, thus preventing their visit to Chechnya to support jihadists' actions against the Russian army. Reportedly, "at least 33 Azerbaijanis died in the North Caucasus, mainly during the years of the heavy military operations (1999-2005), and at least 23 Azerbaijanis were killed in Afghanistan"¹³.

¹¹ Official website of the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan, 23 September 2014: www.mns.gov.az/en/news/407.html [15.10.2014].

¹² *ISIS Militants Threaten to Launch Caucasus Campaign*, 3 September 2014, RIA Novosti, <http://en.ria.ru/world/20140903/192584368/IS-Militants-Threaten-to-Launch-Caucasus-Campaign.html?id=> [15.10.2014].

¹³ *Azerbaijani Foreign Fighters in Syria*, 28 January 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/28/guest-post-azerbaijani-foreign-fighters-in-syria/> [15.10.2014].

The radical religious groups were very active in Azerbaijan on the eve of the Eurovision Song Contest, which took place in May 2012. They issued several statements criticizing the hosting of this event in a Muslim country and warned the Azerbaijani authorities with retaliation. On May 30, 2012, two weeks after the contest, the Ministry of National Security (MNS) of Azerbaijan issued a statement about the arrest of 40 members of the radical group, who allegedly planned a series of terror attacks on the eve of the event and during the song contest. In particular, the group had planned an assassination attempt on Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev during his visit to the north-western region of Azerbaijan in early April 2014. Moreover, the members of the group were planning to bomb and carry out armed attacks on the Hilton-Baku and Marriott-Absheron hotels during the Eurovision song contest. One of the terrorists was supposed to buy a ticket for the Eurovision concert and detonate a "shock bomb" inside the Crystal Hall, the international music event's venue. Simultaneously, several bombs were to be blown up in cars parked near the above-mentioned hotels. The MNS confiscated 13 submachine guns; an "RPK" machinegun; different types of pistols; three carbines, 3,424 types of various calibre cartridges; 66 charges for machineguns and pistols; 23 "RGD-5", 26 "F-1" and three "RG-42" hand grenades; as well as a large amount of grenade detonators¹⁴.

The MNS arrested members of such groups in previous years as well. It is noteworthy that the arrested groups represented both Sunni and Shia sects. However, a turning point in the fight against terrorism and extreme religious groups was the terror attack committed at the Abu-Bakr Salafi mosque in Baku. On August 17, 2008, members of the terrorist Forest Brothers group threw a grenade through a window of the mosque, which killed three persons and injuring 13. The MNS later arrested 17 members of this group, which was planning a number of robberies in Baku and other cities of Azerbaijan to collect funds for holy Jihad¹⁵. It remains the first and the last pattern of terror attacks, when the grenade was thrown to the mosque, which has been more widespread in Iraq. Since then, the Abu Bakr mosque remains closed.

The North Caucasus, Russia, is considered to be the main source of distribution of radical religious views for Azerbaijan. It is not accidental that most of the Azerbaijani citizens fighting on the side of ISIL are from the northern district of the country, which is located on the border with Dagestan Autonomous Republic of Russian Federation. Therefore, in order to prevent terrorists' movement through the borders, security forces of Azerbaijan and Russia conduct regular anti-terrorist operations with the code name "Border-Shield", the last of which took place in May 2014.

¹⁴ Official website of the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan, 30 May 2012, www.mns.gov.az/en/news/341.html [15.10.2014].

¹⁵ Ibidem, 2 September 2008.

3. Other counterterrorism measures in Azerbaijan

In addition to the hard-line measures, the Azerbaijani authorities also take some soft-line and legislative measures to punish, deter and prevent participation of its citizens in international terrorist organizations or groups.

Studying the possible causes of radicalization in Azerbaijan, local experts indicate socio-economic reasons, deepening gap between rich and poor, low credibility of religious figures, promotion of radical understanding of Islam by extremist wings and so on. Taking into account the fact that 70 percent of Azerbaijani population have an access to Internet, the latter becomes another serious tool in the hands of radical and terrorist organizations to reach vulnerable groups, communicate, convince and co-operate with them. So, the efforts of the Azerbaijani authorities are focused on the above-mentioned and other causes that can trigger radicalism trends in the country.

The Azerbaijani Parliament recently amended some legislative acts increasing penalties and toughening punishment of persons for mercenaries and terrorism. According to the new amendments, recruitment of mercenaries, funding their activities, as well as using them in military conflicts and operations will be punished by imprisonment for the period from 8 to 12 years¹⁶.

On May 30, 2014, the Azerbaijani Parliament also amended the Criminal Code increasing penalties for the crimes that can also be committed by radical groups. Thus, according to the amendment to Article 278, “actions aimed at seizing power or forcible retention of power, as well as changing the constitutional order of the state” will be punished with imprisonment from 12 to 20 years or life imprisonment. Previously, a similar crime could be punished by imprisonment from 5 to 10 years. The Parliament also toughened penalties for acts of armed rebellion (Article 280), treason (Article 274) [...] and the use of the army against people, which would cause grave consequences (275.2). In the meantime, for terrorism committed with weapons or re-set, the sentence is 14 to 20 years of imprisonment (previously it was 12 to 15 years) or life imprisonment¹⁷.

One of the central activities currently implemented by the Azerbaijani authorities in this respect is the awareness-raising works. The State Committee for Work with Religious Associations is organizing various training courses and seminars for members of diverse religious communities and local executive bodies on state-religion relations, necessity of joined efforts in combatting radicalization trends and options for the government and civil society organizations to co-operate in

¹⁶ F. Medzid, *Azerbaijan toughens punishment for recruiting mercenaries and terrorism*, “Caucasian Knot”, 15 March 2014.

¹⁷ *Parliament adopts amendments to the Criminal Code*, Azerbaijan official newspaper, 1 June 2014, p. 4.

this field. The government decided to be more careful with the problems of all religious communities in order to improve their loyalty to the authorities and make them partners in their struggle against all forms of radicalization and extremism¹⁸.

Azerbaijani authorities also support the implementation of socio-economic programmes in the regions of the country, which aimed at reducing poverty and minimizing the unemployment rate.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

As we mentioned above, Azerbaijan is taking both hard-line and soft-line measures in combatting terrorism and religious extremism. However, these actions need to be re-considered and re-modified further in the light of latest developments (ISIL).

Taking into account an increasing number of arrested radicals, Azerbaijan can use experience of the Middle Eastern and European countries in implementing prison-based deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes. Certainly, culture and geopolitical realities matter and there is no “one-fits-all” model for all countries. Azerbaijani programme should reflect the social and cultural features of the country, as such programmes even with the best practices, cannot be just transferred from one country to another and implemented there without the relevant modifications. As we mentioned before, the Middle Eastern countries prioritized the theological component in their deradicalization programme, while the European countries carried out the relevant activity in the context of the broader social problem. The ideal programme for Azerbaijan should include both aspects, as observations show that both social problems and misinterpretation of Koranic verses have significant impact in radicalization of young people and their participation in the military operations conducted by the radical groups. The example of a 20-year old Azerbaijani citizen, who was captured and killed by Kurdish Syrians in Kobani, shows the impact of jihadists’ teachings on their followers. The young man from Azerbaijan called the Kurds the infidels and even asked to be killed “to go to paradise to find the 40 women who had been promised to him”¹⁹. Though the level of credibility of Azerbaijani religious figures in general, leaves much to be desired, there are still credible clerics and academicians, who can be involved in the process of dialogue with the arrested radicals in order to persuade their disengagement with the radical groups and their views. Azerbaijan has enough

¹⁸ *Awareness raising as the main tool in combatting religious radicalization*, Azertag official information agency, 16 February 2013, http://azertag.az/xeber/Dini_radikalizme_qarsi_mubarizede_maarifchilik_esas_silahdir-20056 [15.10.2014].

¹⁹ *The Islamic State militant who begged for death in Kobani... and got it*, 16 October 2014, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/syriakurd1534.htm [15.10.2014].

resources to carry out special social post-release activities for participants and “graduates” of the deradicalization programmes. The experience of Saudi Arabia can be useful in this regard.

The awareness raising activities run by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations are targeting certain groups, including religious communities, local executive authorities, law enforcement agencies and so on. However, the scope of activities needs to be widened. Surprisingly, the authorities do not fully use the potential of TV channels in this respect. Considering that the TV channels, both nation-wide and regional, are under strong influence of the authorities, this factor can be used in promoting the state-sanctioned moderate brand of Islam. Lack of such programmes (exceptions are short weekly programmes on the state and public TV channels) direct vast majority of Azerbaijani viewers to watch religious programmes on Turkish, Iranian (people, who live in the southern regions of Azerbaijan and understand Persian language) and Internet TV channels, where Salafism ideology is dominating. Religious identity building process started [resumed] in Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union and this process is still underway. Therefore, it is important for Azerbaijani authorities to dominate in the religious education field. Otherwise, this gap will be filled by others, including radical movements.

Special attention needs to be paid to the Internet. It is well-known that the radical organizations use the Internet in spreading their publications and in recruitment processes, which makes it easier for them in terms of finding supporters, to communicate with them and organize their travels to the hot spots. As it was mentioned before, 70 percent of Azerbaijani population have access to Internet, which makes them an easy target for extremists. Azerbaijan, as many other countries in the world, has prepared a list of banned literature propagating religious extremism, and the relevant bodies confiscate them during house searches of terrorist/radical suspects, on the land border checking points, as well as at the airports. However, the easiness to obtain such material through Internet (downloading from certain website, purchase of online versions or simply circulation of such materials by email) makes these efforts less effective and requires additional measures from the government to prevent the spread of materials promoting radical views. For instance, Britain has a special police unit dealing with extremist publications on the Internet, which, over nine months in 2014, removed more than 30,000 pieces of terrorist and extremist materials published on the Internet. “But the lack of any international agreement means British police can only deal with content hosted in Britain. Material that is taken down will often crop up again elsewhere”²⁰. Therefore, there is also a need to develop international co-operation

²⁰ M. Holden, *Why Britain is still losing its fight against radicalization*, “Reuters Information Agency”, 13 October 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/13/us-mideast-crisis-britain-radicalisation-idUSKCN0I20ET20141013 [15.10.2014].

in fighting against the spread of radicalism and separatism ideas on the Internet, as well as taking global measures against circles dealing with recruitment, which are located in different parts of the world.

There is a need for special training activities for the representatives of the law enforcement agencies on careful treatment of terrorist and radical suspects. There were reports of police ill-treatment against the representatives of Salafi group in the northern districts of Azerbaijan, which claimed that police forcefully shaved the beards of detained Muslims.²¹ This behaviour could produce the negative consequences, i.e. further radicalization of religious activists. On the other hand, the radical groups masterly use such examples as arguments in the recruitment process.

International terrorism, which also stems from the religious radicalization, cannot be considered just as a threat against individual state. It is a looming challenge for the international community and, therefore, it needs a global response. The establishment of the anti-ISIL coalition demonstrated the readiness of most of the countries to act together against this global threat, which, on the other hand, shouldn't be limited to the military response. Countries have to share their experience and best practices in application of soft-line measures, which can ensure the long-term results in combatting radicalism and extremism. There is also need for a global response in finding out the sponsors of such groups and taking joint measures against them. This will further need legislative reforms in the individual countries, which would ensure more transparency of financial transactions, and will require the international organizations to pay more attention to the implementation of the relevant commitments by their member states.

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²¹ *Azerbaijani Muslims say police shaved off their beard*, 8 October 2010, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijani_Muslims_Say_Police_Shaved_Off_Their_Beards/2184739.html [15.10.2014].

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Walka z religijnym radykalizmem jako globalnym zagrożeniem: twarda czy miękka linia (polityczne zalecenia dla Azerbejdżanu)

Streszczenie. W artykule dokonano przeglądu aktualnych tendencji do religijnej radykalizacji, omówiono ich wpływ na bezpieczeństwo i stabilność na świecie oraz opisano międzynarodowe doświadczenia w zwalczaniu tego zagrożenia. Autor przebadął ponadto na przykładzie Azerbejdżanu efekty twardej i miękkiej postawy w walce z radykalizmem i ekstremizmem religijnym oraz wypracował zalecenia służące poprawie skuteczności wysiłków podejmowanych w tym względzie.

Słowa kluczowe: radykalizm religijny, rehabilitacja, Państwo Islamskie, zwalczanie terroryzmu, miękka linia, twarda linia, Azerbejdżan, grupy radykalne