

IRPT and the De-Radicalization Program in Central Asia and among the Refugees

IRPT's crackdown and its impact on radicalization of the region

The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) as the only registered political party based on national and Islamic values in Tajikistan, had been providing an adequate space for the religious groups' participation in political process. Although the elections and political acts in this country were neither free nor democratic, the official existence of the party itself had a positive impact in this regard. According to various statistics, Tajiks in comparative to their neighbors have more tendencies to religious values, but despite this, extremism and radicalism level was lower relatively. Experts think that the official IRPT and its moderate policies played a vital role in this regard. By radicalism we mean here the turn to violence to achieve political aims. IRPT does not adhere to the religious justification of such behavior, although others do.

After Tajik government crackdown on the Islamic Revival Party and arresting tens of its leaders and high-ranking members in September 2015, thousands left the country that was much bigger than previous years. According to the previous statements of the Tajik Interior Ministry, the number of Tajik citizens fighting in the line of ISIL until September 2015 was about 300 persons, but the last findings of the same ministry say the number reached 2000. However, the independent sources believe that the number of Tajik fighters in Iraq and Syria is more than four thousand.

The IRPT leadership is concerned that after banning of the party and arrest of most of its high-ranking members, many of the IRPT's members and supporters despaired of reaching political solutions and peaceful way for changing the situation and thus tend to join extremist groups. This threat had been also expected by the experts. But the IRPT's leaders who survived the government crackdowns and has been active outside the country set programs for preventing radicalization among members and supporters of the party as well as among other groups that led to a less number joining the radical groups.

The party's leaders tried their best to convince party members and followers that political solution and democratic mechanisms are still possible and effective and the party keeps continuing in this path. It is natural that all people of Tajikistan after government crackdown on the party and breaking peace treaty of 1997 that ended the 5 years of civil war, totally lost hope and despaired. However, the first statements of the Islamic Revival party's leadership and its call to members and supporters as well as meeting with international organization and European countries' representatives and positions of some international organizations, especially European Union on the situation played a vital role in reducing radicalization.

Political Refugees and its impact on radicalization

After government crackdown on the IRPT, thousands of Tajiks left the country and sought refuge outside the country, especially in Europe. Tajik citizens previously used to leave the country to Russia and Kazakhstan, but at the moment the number of Tajik political refugees in Europe and Turkey is on the rise. According to the statements of Polish Migration Policy Department, border guards of this country during last months warded off entry of more than 3 thousand Tajik citizens into Poland. Similarly, the number of Tajik political refugees in Germany and Austria is growing. More than 2 thousand Tajik families reached Turkey and most of them live in Istanbul and a Tajik Cultural Center, a NGO working for Tajik community in Turkey, was recently founded. The number of Tajik labor migrants who individually left Russia to Turkey after the economic crisis hit Moscow is yet unknown. It is worthy to note that Turkey has been the main transit place for militants to join radical groups. The party's thinking is that, social and cultural programs among the Tajik community in Turkey and other European countries has to some extent reduced the risk of radicalization.

Analyses show that the most Tajiks who have fought alongside ISIL and other extremist groups, came from Russia where they were working as labor migrants, as well as directly from inside Tajikistan. With the continuation of the economic and political crisis in Tajikistan and the risk of being arrested or worse if they return home, many of young Tajiks, unable to make a living in Russia, are likely to join terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. Although the economic crisis is still one of the main factors that push young people towards radicalized militancy, crackdown of the political opposition, widespread corruption and lack of political and religious freedom are other factors that cause radicalization in Central Asia and among refugees.

The IRPT Steps for de-radicalization of its members and followers after crackdown

Immediately, after announcement of banning of the party, the chairman of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) called upon the members and followers in a statement to adhere to the peaceful lines of action of the party and to prevent all kinds of illegal activities. This statement aimed to reduce at curbing the new waves of government oppression and crackdown on them. Otherwise there would have been more imprisonment against the members and more refugees leaving towards Europe.

For the first time after its ban, the IRPT hold the first meeting of the Political Council outside the country laying out its future plan and strategies. The party in this important meeting decided that despite the ongoing pressures and crackdowns, breaking the peace treaty and government crimes against the party and its members, the IRPT will fight against the government in peaceful manner and through democratic mechanism. The party called upon its members and supporters not to resort to violence and keep themselves away from radicals and terrorist groups. Although every member was not pleased with such position of the party, the leadership of the IRPT's aim is to avoid the negative consequences of members and supporters acting out of despairs of the political solutions and democratic mechanism in changing situation of the country.

It was necessary for the party to change the party structure and assume short-term and medium-term planning in accordance with the new circumstances. The Supreme Council's first meeting was held in March 2016 outside the country and the party structure and the reformed planning was accepted in this meeting. Especially, supporting refugees and preventing radicalization will be among the main activities of the party in the future.

The Islamic Revival Party for this purpose founded some departments. One of these departments is Department of Refugees Affairs which aims to boost activities among refugees especially in Europe, Turkey, Russia, etc. Works and close connection with the refugees in Turkey showed that there are possibilities to influence refugees and prevent them to be radicalized. Despite having a limited financial and human resources, the IRPT was able to hold many conferences and round-tables with participation of effective personalities among refugees which discussed the causes of radicalization and steps for preventing it.

What are the ways for preventing radicalization among the refugees?

As the main factor of religious radicalization in Central Asia is lack of hope for a bright future and lack of political and religious freedom, we must first of all send an effective message to the society that there is still possibility of changing the situation through peaceful ways and democratic mechanisms. What lead the youth to radicalization is that they no longer believe in democratic mechanisms as a means for changing the situation. For example, immediately after IRPT's crackdown and arrest of tens of activists there was call raised for using armed confrontation, because people think that other means for the change do not work so far. Nevertheless, calls to armed confrontation decreased when they saw the IRPT's leaders meeting with high-ranking representatives of international organizations and effective countries and the consequent strong condemnation on of what is going on in Tajikistan. The reason for this relent in calls for violent was a hope that the political crisis might be solved by diplomatic and political ways. Moreover, the regularly meeting of the IRPT's leaders with members and Tajiki refugees and their calls for preventing radicalization in their interviews and speeches have also impact in de-radicalization.

This experience showed that there are many intellectual and cultural competences do exist that was not yet used; especially abilities of figures and moderate religious organizations should be properly used. This is one of the goals of the Islamic Revival Party in the current situation.

For the sake of reaching these goals and supporting refugees and other groups inside and outside the country, the members and supporters of the party were recommended to cooperate more with social and non-government organizations (NGO). Focusing on political and oppositional activities at the current moments might impact negatively on de-radicalization.

Therefore, further activities for preventing radicalization will be purely intellectual and cultural that will be carried out in the framework of NGO's. It is worthy to note that many cultural centers were so far founded for this purpose. For example, Tajik Cultural Center in Turkey (TCCT) was recently registered and activities since then are being carried out.

With a greater number of Tajik and other Central Asian refugees in Europe, it is necessary that such intellectual and cultural centers be also founded in Europe. Holding round-table, short-term courses, integration programs, meetings and speeches among refugees can be one of effective means for de-radicalization among refugees in Europe, Russia and Turkey. Furthermore, intellectual and human abilities in this regard do exist.

Conclusion

Despite many efforts in fighting terrorism, the used means did not yet give good results. Limiting means in the fight against terrorism and de-radicalization to military, security and economy will not be effective, because the main root causes leading to radicalization and violent terrorism are intellectual, political, social needs of human being as freedom, justice and human dignity. Authoritarian and corrupted regimes, limitation of freedoms, pressures on people, crackdowns on moderate religious and liberal parties and organizations are among the factors which lead to radicalization. On the other hand, the focus of the country's main forces on political and oppositional issues deteriorate sharply political atmosphere and cause political and violent conflicts. Hence, it is very important that alongside political activities, there must be sincere dialogue among political rivals, other soft mechanisms as intellectual and cultural also be used.

Countries and organizations which care about sustainable stability and development of nations, especially in vulnerable regions, should review their strategies on fighting terrorism and de-radicalization. Along with increasing pressures on authoritarian and unjust regimes and paying more attention to human rights issues, political and religious freedoms and respect to laws, attentions must be drawn to intellectual and cultural issues in this regard too. Especially, close cooperation with the effective forces and figures who have vision and moderate strategies and at the same time they have influence in vulnerable groups in radicalization case, must be figured out.

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