



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Daniel Rosenblum

[Print](#)

Deputy Assistant Secretary - U.S. Department of State

Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Daniel Rosenblum Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Department of State Addressing Security Challenges Associated with Recruitment of Central Asian Foreign Fighters by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe June 10, 2015

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission: I welcome your invitation to review U.S. efforts to address the issue of foreign fighters from Central Asia joining the ranks of ISIL (Daesh) and other terrorist organizations. The United States is working with governments in Central Asia and with multilateral organizations in the region – including the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – in ways that parallel our work with partners around the world. Together with our international partners, we are committing significant resources to track and disrupt foreign terrorist fighter travel and recruitment. We are working together on information sharing and border security, legal reform and criminal justice responses, and countering violent extremism to prevent recruitment and radicalization to violence. And we marshal our resources to encourage key partners in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia – including in Central Asia – to prioritize the threat, address vulnerabilities, and adopt preventive measures.

Central Asians and the Conflict in Syria and Iraq

For the overwhelming majority of Central Asians, the conflict in Syria and Iraq is a distant phenomenon; it is not something they think about day-to-day. But a small minority of Central Asians have been successfully recruited by violent extremists to join the conflict. Violent extremists have attempted to recruit Central Asians, millions of whom live and work in Russia as migrant workers, into the conflict in Syria and Iraq. In fact, while the nature of the conflict in Syria and Iraq and the clandestine nature of foreign terrorist fighter recruitment make reliable statistics nearly impossible to obtain, a variety of research suggests the vast majority of Central Asian recruits are being recruited from outside the borders of Central Asia, and many come from the Russian Federation.

Why are these Central Asians leaving Russia to fight in Iraq and Syria? Motivations vary widely throughout the world, and even on a country-by-country basis within Central Asia. One key factor for migrant workers in Russia can be the lack of a positive presence of family, community, and religious leaders that, back home, would all work to prevent recruitment and radicalization to violence. Furthermore, once in Russia, Central Asian migrant workers are often subject to ghettoization. Many regularly experience discrimination, harassment, and humiliation from both the public and the authorities. The absence of mitigating factors such as social, familial and spiritual bonds together with the presence of aggravating factors such as marginalization and disenfranchisement create fertile ground for extremist recruiters. Recruiters are able to traverse migrant-labor heavy neighborhoods in Russia's cities and use social media to find and target their quarry – isolated and lonely individuals who want to feel connected to something empowering and larger than themselves, often including individuals who were not previously religiously observant or educated. Recruiters employ a variety of narratives to attract adherents, including the idea of a "just war" in defense of innocents, an Islamic caliphate as a utopian paradise, and the opportunity to fight back against alleged "Western oppression." When one or more of these narratives resonate with vulnerable individuals, they are encouraged to travel to the conflict zone to take up arms, either by recruiters face-to-face or through mechanisms such as social media. The new recruits are not only joining ISIL but also a range of other terrorist organizations, such as al Nusrah

Front, some of which in fact are in conflict with ISIL. Recruiters also use similar tactics to attract the smaller numbers of individuals who travel directly from Central Asia to the conflict zone.

What can be done to disrupt the flow of Central Asian fighters to Syria and Iraq? No one-size-fits-all approach could succeed, since radicalization involves a complex interplay of personal, group, community, sociopolitical, and ideological factors. Key to countering violent extremism is to mitigate causes of radicalization, such as economic distress and hopelessness; as such, one key effort is to improve economic prospects and job opportunities in the Central Asian countries themselves, where radicalization is less likely to take place than among migrant worker communities in Russia. Of course, improving economic opportunities in Central Asia is a long-term effort, and one that the United States and other donor countries have tried for years to address through various development aid efforts. There are also lessons to be learned about promoting safer labor migration as in the countries of South Asia. But there are also plenty of actions that can be taken in the short-to-medium term to address the threat of recruitment. And so, we have begun to engage the governments of Central Asia – and their peoples – about steps they can take to identify and disrupt recruiting networks, prevent radicalization to violence, hinder financing, monitor and prevent travel and transit of recruits, engage civil society to develop resilient communities, build migrant support networks, and counter the false narratives spread by violent extremists. Additionally, we encourage Central Asian governments to identify and act upon credible domestic and transnational security threats, and to avoid conflating violent extremism with political opposition, the activities of civil society organizations, and peaceful religious practice. To prevent radicalization to violence, governments need to distinguish peaceful expressions of conscience from genuine threats of violence.

Let me also turn for a moment from the conflict in Syria and Iraq to briefly address recent media reports on the presence of ISIL in Afghanistan. We have seen signs that ISIL is attempting to spread into Afghanistan, and that some Taliban groups have rebranded themselves as ISIL to attract funding and recruits. ISIL's presence in Afghanistan is a relatively new phenomenon and it will take time to evaluate its long-term prospects.

It is clearly a complicated situation, and one that requires a complex response. Let me turn to some of the efforts we are undertaking globally, regionally, and at the national level through both bilateral and multilateral engagement.

Global Efforts

Under the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, which we have been encouraging our partners in Central Asia to join, our key efforts include disrupting the flow of foreign fighters and countering the messaging of violent extremists. On the former, efforts range from legal reform and criminal justice responses, to border control, to information sharing, to interdicting the travel of known and suspected terrorists, and more. On counter-messaging, the United States, along with the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom, lead the Coalition Working Group on that subject, which directs coalition efforts on counter-ISIL messaging across platforms and languages. The UAE has established a messaging center in the UAE and may examine prospects for other regional messaging centers. This is a critical element because, as I mentioned earlier, so much of the violent radicalization and recruitment begins on social media, on people's smartphones, where our enemies are employing sophisticated and effective techniques, and we have to counter them.

Another global effort regarding foreign fighters is through the United Nations. In September 2014, President Obama chaired a session of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that adopted Resolution 2178, which requires countries to take several steps to address the threat of foreign terrorist fighters, including preventing them from entering or transiting their territories and to adopt and implement appropriate legislation to prosecute them. Resolution 2178 also called for improved international cooperation through sharing information on criminal investigations, interdictions, and prosecutions. The resolution marked the first time that the UNSC named countering violent extremism as a priority for Member States. The UNSC directed UN counter-terrorism organizations to assist countries in enforcing the resolution. The resolution resonated in Central Asia, as shown by Kazakhstan's statement accompanying the resolution, in which Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbaev said cooperation between neighboring States and regional organizations plays a key role in preventing terrorism and highlighted specific concerns about young people travelling to join "terrorist-driven conflicts."

Third, in February the White House convened the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism that brought together ministers from more than 60 countries, the United Nations Secretary-General and other international organizations – including the OSCE Secretary General – and representatives from civil society and the private sector to develop a comprehensive action agenda against violent extremism. It charted a path for progress that includes a leaders-level summit on the margins of the

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2015. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan took part in the event in Washington and have continued to engage as the participants have built on the Summit's action agenda.

So that covers some of our global efforts, but what are we specifically doing in the region?

Regional Efforts

At the end of this month, the Government of Kazakhstan will host a ministerial-level Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Summit in Astana. The Astana event follows up on the White House CVE Summit and aims to bring together government authorities, multilateral representatives, and civil society leaders to exchange perspectives and share information, and propose programs that will address violent extremism at its roots. The Summit's sessions plan to focus on eight priority areas:

- ? Assessing the Drivers and Threats of Violent Extremism in South & Central Asia
- ? Innovative Approaches in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
- ? Violent Extremist Propaganda: Countering the Message and Offering Alternatives
- ? Developing National Strategies/Action Plans to Counter Violent Extremism
- ? Promoting Local Research on the Drivers and Spread of Violent Extremism
- ? Building Relationships and Success Stories – Government and Community Collaboration
- ? Empowering youth, women, and religious leaders and civil society to prevent violent extremism
- ? The Role of the Private Sector in Helping to Prevent Violent Extremism

Later this month, and complementing the Astana event, we are supporting a Civil Society CVE Summit in Istanbul. That summit plans to focus on nine priority areas:

- ? Promoting Local Research and Information-Sharing on the Drivers of Violent Extremism
- ? The Role of Civil Society, including Women and Youth in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
- ? Strengthening Community-Police and Community-Security Force Relations as Ingredients for Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism
- ? Promoting Positive Narratives and Weakening the Legitimacy of Violent Extremist Messaging
- ? Interactive Technology Training for Addressing CVE
- ? Promoting Educational Approaches to Build Resilience to Violent Extremism
- ? Enhancing Access to Mainstream Religious Knowledge
- ? Preventing Radicalization in Prisons and Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Violent Extremists
- ? Identifying Political and Economic Opportunities for Communities Vulnerable to Radicalization and Recruitment to Violent Extremism

So our regional approach is to bring together governments and civil society across Central Asia to identify the drivers of radicalization and find the solutions.

We are also helping to support the OSCE as it leads several regional efforts on the issue in Central Asia. This past February, the OSCE's Transnational Threats

Department and its Tajikistan office organized a regional three-day workshop on promoting regional cooperation and response to foreign terrorist fighters. This workshop was the first of its kind in Central Asia and brought together participants from government and civil society to discuss the requirements of the UNSC and OSCE resolutions on countering foreign fighters. From Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan all sent representatives. The OSCE also plans an August regional workshop on preventive obligations regarding foreign terrorist fighters under UNSCR 2178 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in addition to a June OSCE-wide Conference in Vienna on countering the incitement of foreign terrorist fighters and preventing their recruitment and departure. And as a follow-up to the White House CVE Summit, the OSCE has developed a multi-year program that aims to build the capacity of civil society leaders, including youth, women, and religious figures, to contribute to CVE efforts.

National Efforts

Central Asian governments are deeply concerned about the spread of violent extremism, and they want to engage with the United States and like-minded partners. Our diplomats regularly discuss these issues with their counterparts, and we encourage the countries of Central Asia to take a comprehensive approach to CVE and countering foreign fighter recruitment and radicalization to violence that includes improving security and law enforcement capacities consistent with international human rights obligations, as well as broadening engagement with civic groups, religious organizations, private businesses, and other groups to counter the spread of violent extremism through grassroots programs. Our bilateral programs also encourage this kind of comprehensive approach. These efforts include security-focused programs such as building law enforcement capacity and enhanced investigative skills, but also broader programs such as those aimed at training law enforcement in community policing techniques, or increasing the role of religious leaders in conflict resolution at the local level.

Kazakhstan

As shown by their hosting of the upcoming CVE Summit and co-sponsorship of UNSC 2178, Kazakhstan is a leader on these issues in the region. At the highest levels, Kazakhstan's leadership has stressed the importance of joint efforts to discredit ISIL and counter its propaganda. We could not agree more, and we look forward to working with Kazakhstan and other countries in the region on counter-ISIL messaging. We are already working with the Kazakhstani, through our assistance efforts, to help increase access to civically-relevant information; and to support increased communication among communities, civil society organizations, the private sector and government officials. The Department of Defense is also using counter-narcotics funding to build the capacity of Kazakhstan's border guards with border outposts and training.

Kyrgyz Republic

The Kyrgyz Republic has followed up on the White House CVE Summit with programming and policies based on the Summit's recommendations, and our Embassy reports very positive engagement on this issue. U.S. development assistance provides economic growth programs designed to improve people's lives, promote jobs, and enhance business and trade, as well as to support the development of a more collaborative relationship between government and civil society. NGOs like Foundation for Tolerance International have partnered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) to conduct preventative training exercises in areas that are especially susceptible to recruitment. Our Embassy funds programs on increasing the role of religious leaders in peacekeeping in volatile areas, as well as English language and vocational skills training for madrassah students. And the OSCE, through its Community Security Initiative, is embedding police advisors in at-risk neighborhoods in the south of Kyrgyzstan to promote community policing approaches, encourage ethnic reconciliation, and mitigate tensions.

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, we are working to address some of the drivers of radicalization by increasing economic opportunities within the country in an effort to reduce migration and potential exposure to extremist ideologies. USAID's Feed the Future initiative, for example, seeks to improve food security, and reduce poverty and hunger. Its programs work with local communities to improve irrigation water management and help local families to improve the quality and quantity of their crops, thereby increasing family incomes. USAID is also helping to strengthen citizen participation in local government decision making and to improve local governments' abilities to support its communities. The Department of State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) operates a Border Guard Infrastructure program that, in addition to training and equipping border guards, focuses on district-level community policing efforts that work to counter violent extremism in remote areas. This program runs in parallel to an OSCE project that focuses on regional-level community-policing coordination. INL and OSCE are working to dovetail their efforts to create direct communication, coordination, and community input on policing efforts at district, regional, and national levels. The OSCE has also partnered with international and local NGOs on initiatives focused on encouraging family members, particularly mothers, to identify and address early signs of violent extremism in their local communities. For example, we supported a pilot OSCE CVE program in Tajikistan aimed at supporting women's roles in security, working with mothers groups in rural villages to train them to recognize and respond to early warning signs of potential radicalization in their children. We are also in the planning stages of a community-based cultural program designed to counter extremist messaging in Tajikistan. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Defense provides counter-narcotics funding in Tajikistan to build the capacity of border guards with border outposts, training, and communications gear.

Turkmenistan

We support an ongoing OSCE project to train officers from Turkmenistan's State Border Service on border management that enhances that country's ability to patrol and conduct searches, surveillance, and counter threats at the border – a key component in the effort to identify credible security threats in the region and addressing them accordingly. Additionally, in March, we sent representatives to a regional workshop on border security management for countering terrorism hosted by Turkmenistan and organized jointly by the United Nations Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, and the OSCE's Center in Ashgabat and its Transnational Threats Department/Action against Terrorism Unit. The workshop focused on countering the flow of foreign fighters through enhanced transnational cooperation by law enforcement agencies.

Uzbekistan

For the first time in ten years, two Uzbekistani officials participated in training this past April by the Department of Defense on the law of armed conflict. The training dealt in part with the nexus between terrorism and human rights. In 2014 Uzbek security forces also participated in border security training through a resumption of the Department of State's Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) program. In addition to anti-terrorism training, our Embassy's social media and programming in Uzbekistan, as elsewhere in Central Asia, focuses on education, family, and peace – topics that, at their heart, are the surest ways to counter the appeal of violent extremism over time. Furthermore, anti-trafficking activities in Uzbekistan promote safe migration and minimize the risk of labor exploitation that can exacerbate radicalization.

Conclusion: A Generational Challenge

To conclude, I could not do better than to quote from the recent speech in Doha by General John Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL: "From the point of radicalization and recruitment to the process of rehabilitation, we as a Coalition and a community of nations must work together to confront this generational challenge."

The nations of Central Asia, and the nations of the world, are waking up to the challenge of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq. The United States plans to continue to work with global institutions, regional groups, and national governments to confront the challenge of foreign fighters and reduce the threat to our partners, allies, and to our own country. And the Department of State is eager to work closely with this Commission and others in Congress to address this generational

challenge. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.