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REINA ATTACK, MASHARIPOV AND RADICALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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With the attack on the nightclub Reina on 31 December 2017 and arrest of the terrorist Abdülgadir Masharipov who carried out the attack, besides Masharipov's personal background, education and the possible contacts he had in Turkey, a broader topic for further investigation re-iterated itself once again. This topic, namely radicalization and violent extremism in Central Asia poses a great challenge not only for the countries of the region but also has a global impact, too, with foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) joining the ranks of Al-Qaeda and DAESH from the region. After grasping the particular dynamics and historical experiences in the region laying the ground for such an outcome, a clear comprehensive and multi-dimensional roadmap needs to be devised and implemented in order not to experience such inhumane terrorist attacks again as well as to eliminate a fertile ground for radicalization and violent extremism.

On the New Year's Eve, a terrorist attack on the nightclub Reina was carried out. In this piece, first, details about the attack and the terrorist who carried out will be presented followed by a broader understanding of the dynamics which paved the way for radicalization in Central Asia and the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters from the region joining Al-Qaeda and DAESH. Lastly, several ideas about tackling this phenomenon in the region will be discussed.

The Reina attack was claimed by DAESH, making the attack the second one in Turkey, directly claimed by the terrorist group. DAESH, in its statement claiming the attack, stated that the perpetrator “struck one of the most famous nightclubs where the Christians celebrate their apostate holiday”.¹ Just after the attack, as another propaganda activity of the group, it released another video which signalled the intention to carry out more attacks in Istanbul, especially in the areas where tourist mobility and symbolic significance are high. In the Reina attack in which the perpetrator fired more than 180 bullets, 39 people lost their lives whereas 71 injured including citizens from Israel, France, Tunisia, Lebanon, India, Belgium, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Thanks to the recent efforts of the Turkish security forces, Abdül-gadir Masharipov, with the codename Abu Muhammed Horasani, was arrested. In order to do so, the security forces carried out extensive surveillance since the attack after which 5 neighbourhoods in Istanbul were mainly focused on and 50 people were taken into custody within the context of these operations. The police investigated around 7200 hours of video recording and around two thousand police forces took part in the operation. On 17 January 2017, Masharipov was captured in Istanbul, Esenyurt. He is believed to be part of a sleeper cell to which several Uighurs, Syrians and

Daghestanis, who were taken into custody in the meantime, were also related. In the home he was captured, there were 3 women, 1 men, two drones, two guns (of which one is air pistol) and their ammo, and several SIM cards were also found. A total of \$197,000 cash was also captured from the places raided during the hunt for Masharipov. Masharipov confessed to be the one who carried out such a brutal and inhumane act of terror and showed no regret about it in his testimony.

Masharipov, a Tajik-origin Uzbek, was born in 1983 and graduated from the Fergana University with a BA in Physics. He also studied computer science as part of his double major there, but could not graduate. However he has become competent in the area. He can speak Turkish, Chinese, Russian, and Arabic. He was trained in Afghanistan most possibly by Al-Qaeda, the group which is known to be the one he was affiliated with before his ideological and militant “journey” to DAESH. He was arrested in Iran after being caught with counterfeit documents in 2015 and imprisoned there for around a month. Again, according to his testimony, he then travelled to Turkey in 2016 and lived in Konya for a year, where he was in constant contact with DAESH headquarters in Raqqa over messaging applications. In his testimony, he stated that, at first, the plan was to carry out a suicide bomb attack on Taksim Square. Masharipov had earlier recorded a selfie video during the Book Fair in the square which he said he had sent to the so-called Amir of Istanbul, Hoca Aka who gave a go for the attack. However, due to intense security around the square, Reina was chosen later on again with the command of Hoca Aka. He was sent a video of Reina nightclub by his Amir in Raqqa and he watched it over and over again before the attack as well as his “reconnaissance”

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patrols on the shore in order to get to know further details about the surroundings.²

Masharipov case, aside from the tragedy he caused and interesting details about his early life, his escape after the attack and what was found at the house where he was captured, point to a phenomenon which deserves a closer look, namely radicalization and violent extremism in Central Asia. Even though the subject itself needs to be covered in length by itself, several key points need to be made in order to understand the dynamics that might have helped the emergence of figures such as Masharipov and more than 10000 foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq coming from the region, making Russian one of the three languages most widely spoken among DAESH terrorists. As a foreign terrorist fighter coming from the region, among many others, for instance, Kyrgyz Cafer Al Tayard code named Babur Īsroilov carried out a suicide attack later on and a video showing him before the attack was broadcasted by DAESH.

In order to understand the driving factors of radicalization in the region which provide a fertile ground for groups like DAESH to recruit people, several key factors need to be mentioned here. To begin with, it is widely believed that the Soviet oppression against any religious activity especially in an organised manner, with its ups and downs over decades, gave way to first gradual distancing from and then “return” of religion to the ex-Soviet space, and Central Asia is no exception. This conforms to a pattern that has been largely acknowledged in the literature on radicalization, namely lack of basic religious consciousness and education, coupled with oppression and marginalization as some key driving factors of radicalization. Moreover, the “return of religion” also brought different interpretations than traditional historical roots of the religious understanding in the region. Groups such as Al-Qaeda and DAESH found the opportunity to take advantage of the penetration of Salafi-Wahhabi interpretation into the region which they strictly adhere to and advocate.

Moreover, it is also known that the regional countries, after the dissolution of the USSR, struggled with the economic, political and social difficulties following their independence. Under these conditions, several key motivations of radicalization need to be recalled, namely distrust to the political system and the state mechanism itself and lack of equal economic and political opportunities for the people to live a decent life. Once all the factors are combined, a fertile ground for radicalization was provided on which not only foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) can grow. Such an environment also brings the risk of terror attacks in their home countries where people are drawn into violent extremism and the challenge of how to manage the question of returning FTFs.³

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Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, designated as a terrorist group by Turkey, the United Kingdom, United States, Russia, Canada, and Kazakhstan among other countries, has been one of the key actors in terms of radicalisation as well as organising and planning terror attacks in the region. There is substantial potential for such a tendency in the region and such a movement can have how wide ethnic and geographical reach. The group was actually formed as Adolat in 1991 which was outlawed by Islam Karimov in 1992 and its leaders had to flee from the country. In 1998, the group was re-named to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and started to establish bases in Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. Almost each and every ethnic group in the Central Asian region are present within the group. Due to the global war on terror and failed efforts to overthrow the Uzbek government, the group was scattered to neighbouring countries but mostly centred on Pakistan where Pakistani, US and Afghan security measures dealt a heavy blow to the organisation and its leadership. The group is still active and

cooperates with the Haqqani network and TTP (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan) and is believed to have close ties with the Turkistan Islamic Movement, formerly known as ETIM, designated as a terrorist organisation by many countries including Turkey, the United Kingdom, United States, Russia, and China. With their new leader Osman Ghazi's announcement, IMU also revealed its cooperation with DAESH in 2015 which resulted in an increase in the number of FTFs travelling to fight in Syria. This strategic step also branded the group as one of the key partners of DAESH in the region, posing another threat for the region in the long term whereas raising the profile of the movement among similar groups.⁴

As the Reina attack and Central Asian FTFs fighting in DAESH's ranks show quite clearly, radicalization in Central Asia engenders several major threats and challenges. It ranges from the FTFs to the risks associated with their return and questions about how to rehabilitate and de-radicalize them to the terror attacks conducted by the people with Central Asian origin. It can be argued that this danger is likely to last beyond even DAESH's demise and might prolong the impact in the long-run due to the above mentioned factors which are deep-rooted in the region and provide a fertile ground to be utilised by groups like DAESH. For a comprehensive solution, putting aside the essential component of required security and intelligence measures, social and economic improvement seems to be a must. Moreover, historically well-established religious understandings and approaches might be empowered. This might be done with an eye on providing the people with the basic religious understanding in order to avoid their tendency to show interest in alternative interpretations which gain ground in the region due to the lack of such an education. Stronger state

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mechanisms and more room for people's value systems and political participation as well as provision of equal job and education opportunities needs to be guaranteed by the governments and strongly encouraged and when necessary, supported by the international community. Therefore, it would be valid to argue that a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach would be the key in the long term for the region to fight the phenomena of FTFs and radicalization and violent extremism which poses an important challenge both for the region and the world as a whole. Otherwise, difficulty of facing the challenges of more examples like Masharipov and FTFs with Central Asian origin and how to manage their return would gradually increase in time.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 “Istanbul: ISIL claims responsibility for Reina attack”, AJAzeera, 2/1/2017.
- 2 For information about Masharipov and his testimony, see “Istanbul nightclub attacker says was directed by Islamic State”, Reuters, 18/1/2017; “ISIL militants in Raqqa sent footage from inside nightclub attacked by Masharipov”, Hürriyet Daily News, 19/1/2017; BBC, “Abdulkadir Masharipov: Who is Istanbul gun attack suspect?”, 17/1/2017; “Istanbul nightclub attack suspect confesses, governor says”, CNN, 17/1/2017; “Reina katliamcısı pişman değilmiş!”, Hürriyet, 20/1/2017.
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- 4 On the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, see Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Australian National Security, “Listed terrorist organisations”, <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/IslamicMovementofUzbekistan.aspx>; Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), START, <http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/islamic-movement-uzbekistan-imu>, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/imu.htm>; “IMU Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State”, Eurasia.Net, 1/8/2015.

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