

“UZBEKISTAN’S EXPERIENCE IN RETURNING AND RESOCIALIZING FORMER ISIS REPRESENTATIVES: OPERATION “MEHR”(MERCY)”.**Andrey Dunaev**

Senior Research Fellow, Modern Islamic Studies, Imam Maturidi International Scientific Research Center

ANNOTATION

The article highlights the experience of Uzbekistan in the return and resocialization of its citizens from the hostilities zone in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan and who were members of religious extremist and terrorist organizations. During Operation “Mehr” (“Mercy”), 534 women and children were returned to Uzbekistan from various filtration camps, including the Al-Khol camp. The article also considers the issues of social rehabilitation and deradicalization of repatriates. The rehabilitation process is divided into four categories: legal rehabilitation, social rehabilitation, psychological rehabilitation, and theological rehabilitation.

Key words: *social rehabilitation, deradicalization, resocialization, repatriates, adherents of extremist movements.*

For many years Uzbekistan, like other countries of the world, has been directly confronted with the challenges of radical religious extremism and terrorism.

The spread of destructive ideas of religious radicalism and extremism in society, especially among young people, leads to severe consequences. There is an undermining of the secular foundations and principles of the state, a breakdown of cultural and national values, a loss of civic identity, and a split in civil society on religious grounds begins.

The process of radicalization leads to the fact that supporters of extremist religious movements, especially neophytes, are ready to commit violent actions against citizens, society, and the state, in whose person they see the main enemies on the way to realizing their utopian "ideas."

As a result, thousands of citizens of the country fell under the influence of the destructive ideas of religious fundamentalists and radicals and ended up in the ranks of terrorist organizations, took part in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria.¹

A large part of them died during the hostilities. Some of them are detained by law enforcement agencies and some are continuing to fight for various terrorist groups or are in special filtration camps in Syria.

At the same time, today a serious problem for the state and society is the processes of returning the rest of the adherents and members of extremist and terrorist organizations, as well as their families to Uzbekistan.

The UN constantly expresses its deep concern over the problem of resolving the issue with adherents of radical movements who have accumulated in the camps of Syria and Iraq.

The UN estimates that the total number of persons held in all detention centers and centers for displaced persons in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic is more than 100,000. More than 60,000 of these people are women and children housed in the "Al-Hol" camp.²

The UN has entrusted states with the responsibility for the return of their citizens from conflict zones: "they stressed that concerned States should repatriate their nationals who wish to return, on a voluntary basis,

¹ «Узбекские боевики: от Афганистана до Сирии», интернет издание «Радио Азаттык» <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/boeviki-iz-uzbekistana-syria-ig/27859628.html>, «Сколько выходцев из стран бывшего СССР воюют на стороне террористов», интернет издание «Спутник Узбекистан», <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20171026/vyhodcy-iz-sssr-na-storone-terroristov-6666975.html>

² UN news. «UNICEF urges repatriation of all children in Syria’s Al-Hol camp following deadly fire», <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085982>

from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic as a matter of priority, in accordance with international law, including international human rights law, humanitarian law and refugee law, where applicable, and with the consent of relevant Governments for any activities to be undertaken in territories under their control. The rights of affected individuals, including women and children, need to be upheld and essential services provided."³

So, since 2018, Kazakhstan has returned about 600 citizens of the republic from Syria and Iraq as part of the implementation of the multi-stage operation "Zhusan". Since 2017, 274 children have been returned to Russia from the Middle East, including 122 from Iraq, 152 from Syria.⁴

Taking into account the emerging problem, Uzbekistan, realizing responsibility for its citizens who for various reasons ended up in the ranks of the militants, has been conducting Operation "Mehr" (Mercy) since 2019 to return home its citizens who have found themselves in the ranks of terrorist and extremist organizations and who are in various filtration camps in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In total, 531 women and children were returned to Uzbekistan from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan within 5 stages of the operation from 2019 to 2021.

During the implementation of this operation, some serious questions arose in Uzbekistan, as well as in other countries. What kind of policy should be applied concerning returnees? Who are they - victims or accomplices of terrorism? The UN does not an answer this question and, in the absence of generalized experience, invites states to deal with this problem independently.

The government understands that most of our citizens who are in the ranks of terrorist groups have committed various crimes, especially men.

Therefore, taking into account the interests of national security and according to the principle of humanism, the government of Uzbekistan decided to return home only women and children who are more exposed to the threat of violence and the most defenseless.

After the return of our citizens from the conflict zone, their de-radicalization and resocialization, the return to ordinary life became an important task. Religious radicals are zombie people and victims of extremist propaganda. They suffered physical, mental, and moral trauma.

Therefore, the social rehabilitation of supporters of extremist movements who have returned from the conflict zone is a complex process that includes legal, social, psychological, and theological components.

One of the main tasks is the resocialization of these persons, their return to society as its full members, free from the ideology of violence and extremism.

When solving the issue of social rehabilitation of these citizens, some issues arose, the first and most difficult of which was their legal legalization.

The women and children who returned did not have any documents. When entering ISIS territory, their passports and any identity documents were taken and burned. Civil legalization, registration and issuance of documents to their children, most often born of different husbands, without registration at the place of birth, caused many legal conflicts under national legislation.

³ Eleventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh).

<https://undocs.org/ru/S/2020/774>

⁴ А.Арефьев, «Возвращение граждан из зон террористической активности: гуманизм vs безопасность», <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/vozvrashchenie-grazhdan-iz-zon-terroristicheskoy-aktivnosti-gumanizm-vs-bezopasnost>

Despite the complexity, in Uzbekistan this problem was solved within two months. Passports were restored to these women, and birth certificates were handed over to their children. Their citizenship was also restored.

It is important to understand that all these women violated the laws, not only national but also international. Earlier, criminal cases were initiated against the repatriates under various articles of the Criminal Code, and they were put on the wanted list. When they returned to their homeland, they were very afraid of criminal responsibility, they were afraid that they would go to prison. Because of this, they did not want to come.

These women said that they had fake passports made in Turkey or Russia to cross the border into Syria and Iraq. It is also known that some women took part in the hostilities. Are there such among those returned? Under national law, they could receive up to 20 years in prison or even life imprisonment. A difficult situation arose before the law enforcement agencies. If they committed these crimes in Uzbekistan, they should have been prosecuted.

At the same time, some of the repatriates did it deliberately, and some - out of delusion.

As a result, all of them were interrogated in the presence of lawyers. The repatriates voluntarily wrote confessions to the crimes they had committed and then letters to the president asking for clemency. A pardon and amnesty mechanism has already been developed and is operating in Uzbekistan. Then the courts rendered decisions on them. Some were pardoned with release from any responsibility. Others were brought to responsibility not related to imprisonment. They are now at home.⁵

Another important challenge is the question of reformatting the aggressive beliefs that were inspired by the radical propaganda before this illegal immigration and especially after it. Deradicalization of consciousness is the most demanding part of working with repatriates. At the same time, it is clear that it is hard to solve this problem only by counter-propaganda measures. This is a long process in which not only theologians should be involved. Representatives of civil society (mahalla), scientists, psychologists, and other specialists can play a role here.

The government took an active part in the process of social rehabilitation of the repatriates. Initially, repatriates are accommodated in special health camps, where psychologists, theologians work with them, medical examination and treatment of patients is carried out. After all, the repatriates and their children did not have the opportunity to receive qualified medical care.

After resolving all legal and legal procedures related to the restoration of passports and documents, the government provided financial support to the repatriates. For those who did not have permanent places of residence, the state allocated houses on the basis of loans or rented housing. They were given money for primary needs, helped to arrange pensions and benefits. Provided assistance to those who wanted to do business.

One of the most difficult areas was working with children. The question arose - how to work with children, more precisely with adolescents, who have already completed their primary education in the "schools" of such banned organizations as ISIS? They managed to instill completely aggressive versions of Islamic ideology, instead of playing games. They were taught to assemble and disassemble machine guns, and some of

⁵ News agency "Podrobno.uz". https://podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/oni-boyalis-cto-v-uzbekistane-ikh-posadyat-v-tyurmu-na-20-let-ekspert-o-vozvrashchenii-uzbekistanok/?sphrase_id=2165469

them to shoot. Who will these skills work for in the future? At the same time, these children have already seen the horrors of the "sacred" war.

Now the government is working on the social rehabilitation of children. Psychologists work with them, they got access to preschool and school education. The work is aimed at restoring childhood to these young victims of extremism.

Thus, Uzbekistan has already acquired a certain experience in social rehabilitation and deradicalization of persons who returned from the conflict zone. This experience is primary and is constantly improving.

Summing up the experience gained by Uzbekistan, the following directions for deradicalization and resocialization of such persons can be distinguished:

1. Legal rehabilitation (assistance in the restoration of documents, legal assistance, the application of acts of pardon and punishment not related to imprisonment).
2. Social rehabilitation (medical assistance, the return of children to the educational process, the involvement of repatriates in public life, the provision of housing and work, access to loans and funding).
3. Psychological rehabilitation (providing psychological assistance to repatriates and their children to return to ordinary life).
4. Theological rehabilitation (the work of Islamic theologians to change the extremist views of repatriates and de-radicalize their religious consciousness).

According to experts, there is another important problem that has not yet been discussed in the expert community: this is the problem of people who have independently returned from the conflict zone. Some questions arise, and above all legal ones: is it possible to extend the same amnesty or benefits to them as to the repatriated? What legal conflicts arise here? The number of such persons may be equal to the total number of those repatriated under state programs.⁶

It is too early to talk about the effectiveness of the measures taken to deradicalize and re-socialize the returnees. Time will tell how much they were able to abandon extremist ideas and beliefs, but we hope for a positive result and the government is doing everything to achieve it. Indeed, according to various estimates, hundreds of our citizens remain in the Syrian camps who want to return home.

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⁶ «Детям, возвращенных из лагерей ИГИЛ, успели внушить агрессивные версии исламской идеологии – эксперт», <http://muslim.uz/index.php/rus/novosti-2018/item/25465>

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