Kazantsev Andrey Anatolyevich, Ph.D., Dr.Sc.,

director of Analytical center of IMI of MGIMO

**The growth of the threat of terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia: key factors**

Today post-Soviet Central Asian countries are facing problems caused by old security challenges and the emergence of completely new threats. These threats may hamper the future of secular statehoods in the region and present a serious obstacle to modernization.

One of the old security challenges is the aggravation of the situation in neighboring Afghanistan where crisis phenomena continue growing. The most dangerous threat is posed by the concentration of militants in northern Afghanistan on the border with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Security threats to Central Asia from radical Islamism in Afghanistan and some other Middle East countries are aggravated by numerous negative domestic factors that put the majority of countries in the region on the list of “fragile states.” These “fragile states” may easily turn into “failed states” that do not control their own territory.

Factors contributing to these states’ “fragility” are as follows.

First is the ***large-scale drug trafficking along the northern transportation route from Afghanistan to Russia.*** The latter is the main consumer of Afghan heroin in the world. Security experts know well that the proceeds from the drug trafficking are often used to fund terrorism and religious extremism. That this link exists became obvious during the Batken war: one of the IMU’s goals in invading Kyrgyzstan was to lay routes for heroin trafficking.

The second important factor contributing to the “fragility” of Central Asian countries is ***the extremely high rate of corruption*** there.

Corruption is closely linked with organized crime, especially drug trafficking, the proceeds from which may be used to finance terrorist groups. In addition, it sharply decreases the efficiency of government agencies in the fight against the threat of radical Islam. Also, the high level of corruption and ensuing social inequality are widely used by radical Islamists, including ISIS, as propaganda arguments against existing secular regimes.

The third significant factor which makes these states’ “fragile” is ***poverty.*** The growth of poverty is taking place against the backdrop of the emerging trend towards socio­economic “de-modernization.”

The fourth critical factor threatening the statehood of countries in the region is the existence of ***personalized sultanistic regimes ingrained in the clan systems*** that determine the intra-elite network configurations.

Fifth, there are ***serious interstate conflicts over water resources*** between countries located in the upper reaches of rivers (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and those lying in the lower reaches (Uzbekistan and less so Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan). These conflicts hinder cooperation, including joint struggle against security threats.

Sixth, ***clashing interests of powers involved in the New Great Game for influence in Central Asia (Russia, the United States, China, the EU, and some Islamic countries)*** may aggravate security threats or, at best, reduce to naught their support for regional countries in countering various challenges.