

Kazak Authorities Seek Return of Syria Fighters

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Footage appearing to show Kazaks with hard-line Islamist rebels causes shockwaves back home.

The authorities in Kazakstan want to secure the return of a group of men believed to be fighting alongside Syrian rebels, as well as wives and children seen in a jihadist video. But public opinion is divided on what should happen to them if they agree to come back.

Some experts say the only way to get them back is to guarantee them immunity from prosecution, but others say it would be a mistake to extend leniency to anyone advocating militant extremism.

The video, posted on Youtube last month, had a voiceover in Arabic and carried the logo of a major Islamist militia, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. It consisted of footage apparently shot inside Syria and showing a group of combatants and family members, including small children. A number of men spoke in Kazak about why they had come to take part in the jihad.

Addressing the Kazak parliament, the deputy head of the Committee for National Security (KNB), Nurgali Bilisbekov, said, "I assume this particular video was produced for propaganda purposes, and was not made by our citizens."

Zamir Karajanov, a political analyst based in Almaty, cautions that the provenance of the footage is hard to check.

"At the moment, it isn't completely clear who these people are," he said. "It is difficult to say whether the video is genuine or staged. We see an inner courtyard protected by stone walls, which could be anywhere, not necessarily in Syria."

Some of those seen in the video have been identified, either by relatives in Kazakstan contacting the media, or when journalists have traced their parents. Some are said to hail from Shymkent in southern Kazakstan, others from the centrally-located city of Jezkazgan.

A source in the security services told the Radiotochka news site that there were about 190 Kazak nationals fighting in Syria.

The head of the KNB's counter-terrorism unit, Kendebay Adambekov, told KTK television that officials were in contact with relatives of those individuals who had been identified in an effort to get them to return.

As for what would happen to them, Adambekov said, "Separate decisions will be made in each individual case and in the case of each family."

Karajanov says the government is well aware that simply transplanting the group back to Kazakstan could be risky.

"They have been in contact with terrorists abroad and established links with them, and they might act on their orders, only now in Kazakstan," he said.

Karajanov said that if the authorities wanted to prosecute them, the only possible charges would have to come under legislation banning the spread of extremist ideas, since any military action was taking place on foreign soil.

The head of the Union of Muslims of Kazakstan, Murat Telibekov, told IWPR he would like to see an amnesty for members of the group, who he believed had been brainwashed and tricked into going off to Syria.

Without such assurances, he said, it was unlikely they would come voluntarily.

"I believe that on returning, these people will be subjected to harsh repression, and most will probably end up in prison," he said.

"It may be that some of the jihadists who have gone to Syria would like to come back, but they are afraid they will be jailed or persecuted."

Andrei Grishin, who works for the Kazakstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, told IWPR it was hard to judge whether such fears were justified.

He noted that Kazak nationals who were returned to the country after being held by the United States in Guantanamo Bay "continue to be under surveillance but have not been persecuted".

At the same time, Grishin said there was no guarantee the same would apply in this different set of circumstances.

“Each individual will therefore have to decide for himself whether to return home by weighing up the pro and cons,” he added.

Grishin said that if the authorities were considering an amnesty, this should not be indiscriminate.

“I am not in favour of an amnesty for all. Each case should be treated on an individual basis,” he said.

The fact that the video showed wives and children as well as male combatants caused a stir back home.

Tolgonai Umbetalieva, director of the Central Asia Fund for Democracy Development, says it looks as though the departure of whole family units from Kazakhstan was carefully planned rather than spontaneous.

“The presence of their families will make it more difficult to return them to Kazakhstan. First, there is less motivation for them to return. Second, they won’t need to worry about their families being left on their own with no money,” she said.

Telibekov said that when young people were drawn towards radical Islam, it was because of a combination of factors – unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and a sense of alienation from a government perceived both as corrupt and as hostile to practicing Muslims.

Karajanov added that the impending withdrawal of NATO-led forces from Afghanistan could create added security risks for nearby states like Kazakhstan, where he said “the danger of religious extremism is not perceived but real”.

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