

## The Tashkent Conference is an important contribution to the consolidation of the efforts of the international community in the fight against terrorism



On March 3-4, 2022, Tashkent hosted a high-level international conference on the topic: “Regional cooperation of Central Asian countries within the framework of the Joint Action Plan for the Implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy”.

The conference, organized by the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan in partnership with the UN Counter-Terrorism Office and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, has become a landmark event on a global scale.

It made a significant contribution to consolidating the efforts of the world community in the fight against terrorism, demonstrated the importance of multilateral cooperation with common challenges and threats to international peace and security, brought the interaction of the countries of the region in the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) in Central Asia to a qualitatively new level.

The scale and high level of the event, which was held in a hybrid format, was confirmed by a solid composition of participants – more than 500 guests, including foreign ministers of the Central Asian states,

high-ranking officials of the UN, OSCE, UNRCCA, EU, SCO, CIS, Interpol, representatives of civil society and leading analytical centers of the countries of Central and South Asia, as well as heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Uzbekistan.

The inclusion in the agenda of all 4 pillars of the UN GCTS – elimination of conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, prevention and combating it, expanding the role of the UN and building states' capacity in this area, ensuring human rights and the rule of law in the context of the fight against terrorism – determined the complex and the comprehensive nature of the conference programme.

The Tashkent Forum has become a practical implementation of the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, put forward at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2020. The head of state from the high rostrum of the UN proposed to sum up the results of the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Joint Plan of Action (JPoA) on the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) in Central Asia, as well as to outline prospects for further cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Two important dates celebrated in 2021 made the event relevant – the 15th anniversary of the GCTS and the 10th anniversary of the JPoA. In 2006, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the only universal international document aimed at improving national policy, regional and international cooperation in countering terrorism.

In turn, in 2011 in Ashgabat, the Central Asian countries approved the Joint Action Plan for the implementation of the UN GCTS in Central Asia, which became the first framework program in international practice developed based on a regional approach for the implementation of the UN GCTS. Then Central Asia became the first region to start an integrated and comprehensive implementation of the UN GCTS.

Over the years of implementation of the UN counter-terrorism strategy in Central Asia, region's countries have achieved significant results. In particular, all states have created and continue to improve national systems of countering terrorism, including the development of a regulatory framework that covers all aspects of the fight against terrorism in accordance with the main pillars of the UN GCTS, as well as institutional mechanisms that ensure the prevention and fight against terrorism, development of international cooperation in this area.

An important step was the introduction and implementation in the region of the practice of strategic planning of state activity in the sphere of counter-terrorism, based on ensuring effective interaction and coordination of the activities of state bodies, institutions of civil society and the private sector in the pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

The Tashkent Conference is a logical continuation of the systematic efforts of the countries of the region to further develop coordinated cooperation in countering extremism and terrorism in Central Asia.

The key point of the conference was the address of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which attracted the keen interest of the expert community. The Uzbek leader outlined Uzbekistan's approaches in the fight against terrorism, put forward a number of relevant program proposals.

The Head of State emphasized that the distinctive feature of State's policy in this area is the implementation of a comprehensive, coherent and inclusive approach, combining law enforcement and preventive measures.

Active participation of civil society institutions in the implementation of the main directions of the UN GCTS, along with state bodies, significantly increase the effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures in the country.

At the same time, as Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted, the main priorities in this work are the creation of an

atmosphere of mutual understanding and the development of dialogue in society, the prevention of conflicts, spiritual and moral education. The main emphasis is placed on the elimination of conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. The head of state stressed that the fundamental basis for the fight against terrorism in Uzbekistan is the provision of human rights and freedoms, the rule of law.

In this context, it should be emphasized that countering extremism and terrorism is one of the priorities in ensuring the national security of the country. Uzbekistan consistently and unconditionally condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and advocates the adoption of collective efforts to combat terrorism. A national system for countering terrorism has been created in the republic, which includes an extensive regulatory and institutional framework for an effective counter-terrorism policy.

In July 2021, Uzbekistan adopted the National Strategy to counter extremism and terrorism for 2021-2026, aimed at pursuing an effective and coordinated state policy to counter extremism and terrorism, thereby ensuring national security, the rights and freedoms of citizens.

The high positions occupied by Uzbekistan in various world rankings are a clear indication of the correctness and effectiveness of government's measures. According to Gallup's "The Law and Order Index", Uzbekistan was among the top ten countries in terms of safety with 92 points out of 100. Meanwhile, according to the Global Index of Terrorism, our country is among the safest nations in the world.

Pursuing a measured peace-loving pragmatic and a consistent foreign policy, Uzbekistan actively cooperates on an equal and mutually beneficial basis with the international community in this direction. The Republic has signed 14 main universal international legal documents in the field of combating terrorism.

Nowadays our country is a member of a number of regional anti-terrorist structures, such as the CIS ATC, SCO RATS and others. For example, the establishment of the SCO RATS with its headquarters in Tashkent became a recognition of Uzbekistan's leading role in the fight against terrorism. Within the framework of the CIS, the "Program of cooperation of the CIS member-states in combating terrorism and other violent manifestations of extremism for 2020-2022" was adopted.

In countering terrorism, Uzbekistan pays special attention to partnership with the OSCE, which is supported by two-year joint cooperation programs in the military-political dimension. For example, within the framework of cooperation for 2021-2022, the key objectives are countering terrorism, ensuring cybersecurity and promoting to the fight against terrorist financing.

Given the transformation of international terrorism, Uzbekistan is also actively initiating various effective cooperation mechanisms dedicated to developing global counter-terrorism potential. A convincing example is this conference, during which the President of Uzbekistan put forward several proposals to continue the successful fight against terrorist threats, not only at the regional level but also at the global level.

In particular, in order to strengthen the mechanisms for constant monitoring and critical assessment of the implementation of the JPoA, coordination of interaction between the Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan advocated the opening of the UN Counter-Terrorism Office in our region. The office can act as a coordinator of the activities of other international and regional organizations operating in this area in the region. In particular, only in the UN system 18 institutions deal with certain issues of countering terrorism in Central Asia.

Observations of recent years have recorded the fact that the Internet has become a tool for spreading radical ideology. Extremists use the virtual space to recruit new members, raise funds, plan and carry out terrorist activities. Therefore, it is vital to unite the efforts of states in countering terrorism on the Internet.

For these purposes, Shavkat Mirziyoyev initiated the creation of the Central Asian unified electronic network on cyberterrorism within the Program on Cybersecurity and New Technologies, adopted in 2020. It

will contribute to the exchange of experience, data, research and best practices.

The Uzbek leader did not bypass the issues of rehabilitation and reintegration of persons returned from war zones. As we know, the countries of Central Asia were among the first to return their citizens from the war zones in the Middle East. In total, the states of the region repatriated more than 1.5 thousand people. In this regard, the issue of expanding cooperation between specialists from the countries of the region in solving emerging problems is of particular importance in the citizens' rehabilitation and reintegration process.

In order to improve programs in this area, as well as to develop proposals for combating terrorist propaganda in the Central Asian countries, Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed to create a regional Expert Council under the auspices of the UNOCT.

The Council will become an important platform for the exchange of information and experience, the development of joint approaches and methods on the de-radicalization of repatriates, as well as effective measures to combat the propaganda of terrorism.

Today, in many parts of the world, we observe an increase in inter-confessional and inter-ethnic contradictions and hatred. This leads to a rift in society and sometimes to clashes and conflicts on the national and religious grounds. Taking it into the account, the President of Uzbekistan paid special attention to promoting the ideas and principles of tolerance, interreligious and intercultural dialogue with the participation of all sectors of society, initiating a high-level conference "Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance" in Uzbekistan in 2023.

As we know, on December 12, 2018, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a special resolution "Education and Religious Tolerance", initiated by Uzbekistan. The conference will become a practical embodiment of the resolution's implementation, will allow representatives of government agencies, international organizations and civil society to identify promising areas for cooperation in solving topical problems. The platform will provide an opportunity to develop common approaches and effective measures to prevent radicalization processes in society, ensure prosperity and stability.

Of course, the most important condition for successful countering extremism and terrorism is an effective youth policy. Its relevance in the fight against terrorism is due to the replenishment of the ranks of radical organizations mainly at the expense of representatives of the younger generation, who are most susceptible to ideological influence.

With this in mind, the President of Uzbekistan proposed to convene in 2023 in Samarkand Youth Council of the Central and South Asia. It is intended to be an effective platform for the exchange of experience in creating favorable conditions for the self-realization of the younger generation and for developing its permanent immunity to the ideas of extremism and terrorism.

Speeches of the heads of international and regional organizations also attracted the special attention of the conference participants. In particular, UN Secretary General António Guterres stressed that the Tashkent conference demonstrates the political will of the Central Asian states to work together to prevent and combat the threat of terrorism. He highly appreciated the efforts of the countries of the region that adopted the JPoA on the implementation of the Global Strategy in Central Asia and gradually implemented it in close cooperation with the UN. According to him, the document was a vital tool for providing technical assistance in four pillars of the GCTS.

Speaking at the conference, UN Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov said that the regional countries have assumed "great responsibility in preventing the spread of terrorist threats to neighboring countries". According to Vladimir Voronkov, the Joint Action Plan is a mechanism through which it is possible to strengthen the complex multilateral cooperation in the region, which is necessary in such circumstances.

Addressing the participants of the event, the Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Ghada Wali, highly appreciated Central Asian countries' commitment to strengthen regional stability through response to challenges related to drugs, crime and terrorism.

She emphasized that joint efforts in the fight against terrorism are vital, as terrorism is a complex issue requiring comprehensive responses that focus primarily on engaging communities and youth, building social cohesion, and preventing radicalization leading to violent extremism.

An important outcome of the conference was the adoption by the heads of the foreign ministries of the region of an updated Joint Action Plan, developed on the basis of multilateral consultations and consensus. It defines strategic directions, as well as specific tasks, the fulfillment of which will make it possible to effectively counter the threats of international terrorism in the Central Asian space.

Regional countries have recognized the JPoA as a comprehensive, coherent and operational framework for joint efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism. Based on the JPoA implementation experience, the updated document took into account new threats and challenges, such as preventing the use of ICT for terrorist purposes, repatriation and reintegration of citizens returned from combat zones, etc.

In turn, the Tashkent Declaration adopted during the forum by the heads of the foreign ministries of the Central Asian countries confirmed the commitment of the regional states to cooperation within the framework of the new JPoA, the common desire to continue strengthening the regional dialogue, to take collective and individual measures to prevent and counter terrorism in Central Asia.

According to commentators, the Tashkent Declaration has become an integral part of the systemic and consistent measures of the Central Asian states to further develop cooperation in the field of combating terrorism, adopted following the high-level conferences in Ashgabat – the Ashgabat Final Declaration and JPoA on the implementation of the UN GCTS (2011) and Ashgabat Declaration on Countering Terrorism (2017), in Samarkand – the Samarkand Declaration on Increasing the Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism (2018) and Dushanbe – the Dushanbe Declaration following the results of the international conference “International and regional cooperation against terrorism and its sources of financing, including drug trafficking and organized crime” (2019).

An indicative outcome of the event was the unanimous opinion of the expert community, which recognized that the high-level international conference in Tashkent testified to the unity and cohesion of the Central Asian countries in countering common challenges and threats to security, the resolute disposition of the regional states to closely cooperate in the fight against all forms and manifestations of terrorism on the basis of a common strategic approach in order to ensure common and indivisible security.

The Tashkent platform provided an opportunity to agree on common principles and approaches to combating terrorism, taking into account the changing international socio-political and socio-economic environment. In the future, this will make it possible to coordinate efforts to combat new challenges and threats, as well as maintain high dynamics of interaction on key issues in the fight against terrorism and strengthen regional cooperation.

Finally, the Tashkent conference contributed in increasing the confidence of the international community to the Central Asian states as responsible actors of international relations, ready to bear joint responsibility for the sustainable development of the Central Asian region. It is an important condition for the further development of comprehensive cooperation between the Central Asian countries and international structures, which are key links in the fight against extremism and terrorism.

In general, the Tashkent Conference has become an important stage in uniting world community's efforts in countering terrorism as one of the most serious threats to peace and security, raising the interaction of Central Asian countries with international and regional organizations in combating terrorism to a qualitatively new level.

It is a kind of indicator of the high level of constructive interaction between Uzbekistan and the international community represented by the United Nations. At the same time, the personal participation of high-ranking representatives of international and regional organizations, foreign states and leading experts in the capital of Uzbekistan turned the event into an important dialogue platform at the global level.

The success of the conference testifies on the absolute support of the international community for large-scale reforms carried out by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev in various spheres of state and society, as well as the foreign policy of Tashkent, aimed primarily at turning Central Asia into a space of good neighborliness, stability, mutually beneficial cooperation, prosperity and sustainable development.

***By Akramjon Nematov,  
First Deputy Director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies  
under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan***

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