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Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Regional Approach to Counter Radical Islam

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At present, as part of the ongoing peace negotiations between the US and the Taliban, the latter have indicated that they are willing to cut their ties with international terrorist groups. However, it is unlikely that groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Katibat Imam Al Bukhari (KIB), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Hizbut Tahrir (HuT) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) would cease their operations in Afghanistan. In reality, a potentially full withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan might lead to further intensification of their militancy. All these groups have members in Central Asian states and are either directly involved in violence in Afghanistan or have announced their support to the Taliban. Repression in Central Asia has led to increased radicalization,² accelerating the recruitment of young nationals from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent, Kyrgyzstan, in the ranks of these violent groups.³ The future stability of both Afghanistan and Central Asian states are thus intertwined. These terrorist groups attract disgruntled youth from Central Asia while gaining visibility and funding through their operations in Afghanistan.

Envisaging ways for the Afghan government to initiate meaningful regional cooperation with Central Asian states to counter the spread of radical Islam and violent extremism is therefore imperative and an urgent need. This essay

1. Anne Jasim-Falher is the Founder and Managing Director of ATR Consulting in Afghanistan.

2. Lemon, Edward; Mironova, Vera; and Tobey, William. "Jihadists from Ex-Soviet Central Asia: Where Are They? Why Did They Radicalize? What Next?" *Russia Matters*, December 2018. <https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/Jihadists%20from%20Ex-Soviet%20Central%20Asia%20Research%20Paper.pdf>

3. *Ibid.*

assesses the extent to which radicalism and violent extremism are spreading in Central Asia (specifically in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and analyzes how Central Asian states are tackling this challenge. It then reviews existing regional cooperation initiatives that could constitute platforms for Central Asian states and Afghanistan to jointly tackle their common challenge.

Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Central Asia: A Brief Overview

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), the collapse of the USSR (1991), the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996-2001) all contributed to the rise of radical Islamic groups such as the IMU in Central Asia. In her review of terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia,⁴ Fiona Hill explains that as a direct consequence of the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the IMU became more discreet for a few years but rapidly restarted operations, including carrying out bombings in Tashkent and Bukhara⁵ and at the Tajik and Kyrgyz borders⁶ in 2006. The movement later gained military strength and international coverage through its engagement in the insurgency in Afghanistan,⁷ before they parted with the Taliban (2015) to join the ISKP. This shift led to a Taliban attack on the IMU leader in Afghanistan's Zabul province whose August 2015 killing preceded the decrease in the Movement's strength and visibility.⁸

Meanwhile, the KIB, which originated in Uzbekistan in October 2013, first operated in north Syria⁹ and swore allegiance to the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2014.¹⁰ The group has been actively supporting the insurgency in northern

4. Hill, Fiona. "Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability." The Brookings Institution, July 23, 2003. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20030723-1.pdf>

5. Saidazimova, Gulnoza. "Germany: Authorities Say Uzbekistan-Based Group Behind Terrorist Plot." Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, September 06, 2007. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1078560.html>

6. Ibid.

7. Binnie, Jeremy, and Wright, Joanna. "The Evolving Role of Uzbek-led Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan." Combating Terrorism Center, August 2019. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-evolving-role-of-uzbek-led-fighters-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

8. Umarov, Dr. Akram. "Radicalization: Reasons and contemporary threats in Uzbekistan." European Eye on Radicalization, January 16, 2019. Accessed on January 13, 2019. <https://eeradicalization.com/radicalization-reasons-and-contemporary-threats-in-uzbekistan/>

9. Gunaratna, Rohan, and Kam, Steganie. "Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific." Imperial College Press, 2016.

10. Paraszczuk, Joanna. "Main Uzbek Militant Faction in Syria swears loyalty to Taliban." Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, November 12, 2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-uzbek-militant-faction-syria-taliban/26686992.html>

Afghanistan, with recorded claims of attack in 2016 and 2017. Additionally, a recent analysis in the Long War Journal argued that the KIB recently began identifying itself on social media as the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – Katibat Imam al Bukhari,” a link to the official name used by the Taliban.¹¹ The KIB has also been linked to other Uzbek jihadist groups in Afghanistan, namely the IJU and the IMU.¹²

The relative success of the IMU and the KIB has been fueled by a political movement—the HuT, a global political movement which began in the UK and which has entrenched itself in Central Asia since the 1990s¹³—which has certainly laid the ground for violent extremism, even if it officially condemns violence. The movement has members across Central Asia, with estimates of numbers varying from 3,000 to 5,000 in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to 7,000 to 60,000 in Uzbekistan.¹⁴

Recent incidents involving nationals from one of the three countries considered under this study include nine attacks led by violent radicals against law enforcement agencies in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan,¹⁵ and at least three terrorist attacks in other countries, including in Russia (April 2017)¹⁶ and Turkey (June 2016¹⁷ and December 2017¹⁸), and the claimed presence of KIB fighting in Afghanistan.¹⁹ In addition, The Soufan

11. Weiss, Caleb. “Uzbek group shows spoils from Afghan base.” Long War Journal, January 25, 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/uzbek-group-shows-ambush-in-northern-afghanistan.php>

12. Ibid.

13. Hill, Fiona. “Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability.” The Brookings Institution, July 23, 2003. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20030723-1.pdf>

14. Baran, Zeyno. “Hizbut-Tahrir: Islam’s Political Insurgency.” The Nixon Center, December, 2004. http://www.bits.de/public/documents/US_Terrorist_Attacks/Hizbut-ahrirIslam’sPoliticalInsurgency.pdf

15. Lemon, Edward. “Kennan Cable No. 38: Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia.” Kennan Institute, December 18, 2018. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-38-talking-terrorism-central-asia>

16. Zahid, Noor, and Jedinia, Mehdi. “Concerns Mount Over Kyrgyzstan Being Breeding Ground for Terrorists.” Voice of America News, April 04, 2017. <https://www.voanews.com/a/concerns-mount-kyrgyzstan-breeding-ground-terrorists/3796276.html>

17. Calamur, Krishnadev, and Koren, Marina. “Who Was Behind the Attack on Istanbul Airport?” The Atlantic, June 30, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/istanbul-airport-attack/489200/>

18. “Istanbul Reina nightclub attack suspect captured.” BBC News, January 17, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38645787>

19. Weiss, Caleb. “Uzbek group shows spoils from Afghan base.” Long War Journal, September 20, 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/09/uzbek-group-shows-spoils-from-afghan-base.php>

Group²⁰ estimated that in 2018, the number of Central Asian fighters having joined the ISKP at around 4,000.²¹ While this number remains low, read in conjunction with the population of the region, it has points to a growing phenomenon.

Repression: A Perilous Approach to Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism

Barring Uzbekistan, which has recently (2016) changed its policy following a change of leadership, Central Asian states have overall opted for repression in reaction to the growing risk of radicalization and violent extremism. However, the root causes are multiple and complex, as highlighted by most analysts covering the region. Firstly, most jihadists of Central Asian origin recruited by the IS had been radicalized abroad, and more often in Russia.²² Secondly, Central Asians have increasingly been attracted back to their religious tradition—the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, a moderate interpretation of Islam. However, this renaissance of Islam has opened the doors to the spread of other interpretations of Islam as well, including the Salafist ideology.²³ The spread of radical Islam has been facilitated through the training of religious leaders (mostly from Tajikistan) in madrassas teaching extremist interpretations of Islam in Pakistan, Iran and Egypt.²⁴ Thirdly, unemployment, corruption and state repression have frustrated the youth who have, as a result, become more vulnerable to radical discourse.²⁵ Fourthly, the conflict in Afghanistan has acted as an aggravating factor,

20. “Islamist Extremism Central Asia”. The Soufan Group, April 18, 2018. <http://www.soufangroup.com/intelbrief-islamist-extremism-central-asia/>

21. Tynan, Deirdre. “Thousands from Central Asia Joining Islamic State.” International Crisis Group, January 21, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/thousands-central-asia-joining-islamic-state>

22. Umarov, Dr. Akram. “Radicalization: Reasons and contemporary threats in Uzbekistan.” European Eye on Radicalization, January 16, 2019. <https://eeradicalization.com/radicalization-reasons-and-contemporary-threats-in-uzbekistan/>

23. Evers, Frank; Klotzer, Jeannette; Seifert, Arne C., and Somfalvy, Esther. “Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia.” CORE Center for OSCE Research Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, April, 2018. https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/Working_Papers/CORE_WP30_en.pdf

24. Ergasheva, Zarina. “Tajikistan: Islamic Students Told to Come Home.” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, November 24, 2010. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajikistan-islamic-students-told-come-home>

25. Hill, Fiona. “Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability.” The Brookings Institution, July 23, 2003. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20030723-1.pdf>

which has allowed several groups (ISKP, IMU, KIB) to gain support from the well-organized Taliban,^{26 27} to increase funding (including through the control of drug trades routes) and gaining popularity.

Tajikistan has probably taken the most consistent and repressive approach to radicalization by simply forbidding independent exercise of religious faith. Beyond the many arrests, arbitrary detentions, cases of torture, and other human rights violations documented by Human Rights Watch,²⁸ Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon has in the name of secularism, also promoted numerous measures such as prohibiting men from sporting long beards,²⁹ and calling for the return of madrassa students studying abroad (2010).³⁰ In addition, he has forbidden the only moderate Islamic party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which had signed the agreements ending the Tajik civil war. The arrests of IRPT members³¹ have certainly contributed to increased radicalization³² as members are pushed to extreme alternative approaches.

Kyrgyzstan has enforced prison terms for possession of extremist materials in at least 258 cases documented by Human Rights Watch up to mid-2018.³³ Nonetheless, criminalization of the possession of extremist materials, some

26. Weiss, Caleb. "Uzbek group shows ambush in northern Afghanistan." *Long War Journal*, January 25, 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/09/uzbek-group-shows-spoils-from-afghan-base.php>

27. Azamy, Hekmatullah. "Will the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Trade the Taliban with ISIS?" *International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, Vol. 7, July 2015. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CTTA-July-2015.pdf>

28. "Tajikistan Events of 2017." *Human Rights Watch*, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/tajikistan#>

29. Evers, Frank; Klotzer, Jeannette; Seifert, Arne C., and Somfalvy, Esther. "Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia." *CORE Center for OSCE Research Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy*, April 2018. https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/Working_Papers/CORE_WP30_en.pdf

30. Ergasheva, Zarina. "Tajikistan: Islamic Students Told to Come Home." *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 24, 2010. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajikistan-islamic-students-told-come-home>

31. "Joint Letter to the EU Regarding the Human Rights Situation in Tajikistan." *Human Rights Watch*, July 23, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/23/joint-letter-eu-regarding-human-rights-situation-tajikistan>

32. Evers, Frank; Klotzer, Jeannette; Seifert, Arne C., and Somfalvy, Esther. "Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia." *CORE Center for OSCE Research Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy*, April 2018. https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/Working_Papers/CORE_WP30_en.pdf

33. "We Live in Constant Fear." *Human Rights Watch*, September 17, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/17/we-live-constant-fear/possession-extremist-material-kyrgyzstan>

activists believe, constitutes an excuse to persecute ethnic Uzbeks in the country.³⁴ Thus, this approach is assessed as counterproductive, alienating local communities, and contributing to attracting youth to extremist armed groups.³⁵

Uzbekistan, one of the world's most repressive regimes under the reign of late President Islam Karimov has begun opening up with the release of a number of political opponents, the review of the charges against people detained for possessing religious or "extremist" materials, the rehabilitation of people who regretted joining unregistered Islamic movements, and the removal of over 15,000 names from a "blacklist" of those suspected of being members of unregistered religious movements.³⁶ Yet, Human Rights Watch claims that a lot remains to be done.³⁷

It is difficult to ascertain the precise impact of such approaches, but data tends to indicate that repression has been more of an instigator of violent extremism than a means to contain it. As an alternative approach, a group of scholars from three Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) proposed a set of recommendations to be integrated in each country's national agenda, including the establishment of a framework regulating the relations between states and Islamic communities to be characterized by mutual respect and cooperation, as well as the modernization of religious education including through strengthening "the authority of the Hanafi School of law."³⁸

Interestingly, none of Central Asian countries have attempted to coordinate their efforts to counter radicalization (mostly emanating from internal factors) and violent extremism (fueled by a mix of internal, regional and global factors), even though all the mentioned terrorist groups have been

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. "Uzbekistan 2017/2018." Amnesty International, September 17, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/uzbekistan/report-uzbekistan/>

37. "You Can't See Them, but They're Always There." Human Rights Watch, March 28, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/03/28/you-cant-see-them-theyre-always-there/censorship-and-freedom-media-uzbekistan>

38. Evers, Frank; Klotzer, Jeannette; Seifert, Arne C., and Somfalvy, Esther. "Civilian Prevention of Radicalization in Central Asia." CORE Center for OSCE Research Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, April 2018. https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/Working_Papers/CORE_WP30_en.pdf

moving and operating across their borders and in Afghanistan. Governments of Central Asian states are even blamed for addressing these issues “in the overly narrow context of interior security.”³⁹

Harnessing Regional Cooperation Initiatives to Mitigate the Risk of Violent Extremism Across Central Asia and Afghanistan

Regional cooperation is first and foremost the realization of the political will of the countries’ leaderships to engage in a constructive dialogue and to implement measures that can serve common interests. Central Asian countries would thus need to first recognize that the issue of radicalization and violent extremism is more of a regional problem than a solely internal issue, before designing common strategies as a group, with Afghanistan. So far, disputes, mostly over borders, have damaged the relationship between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, posing further challenges to regional cooperation. Additionally, the three Central Asian countries tend to view Afghanistan as a main source of instability, where terrorist groups have gained strength, and show more interest in holding Afghanistan responsible for violent extremism than in envisaging common strategies.⁴⁰

However, platforms for dialogue on security cooperation exist, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Heart of Asia process and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Being only a member of the Heart of Asia process from this list, Afghanistan could use this process to initiate discussion on combating radicalization and violent extremism. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are members of all organizations (albeit Uzbekistan is not a member of the Heart of Asia process). As Russia is highly influential in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Russian dominated CSTO is often considered by these Central Asian states as a protection against external threats.

These organizations have offered little evidence that they could achieve anything beyond sharing their members’ differing views. Experts agree that

39. Ibid.

40. “Study on Security Cooperation in the Heart of Asia Region.” The Asia Foundation, November 07, 2016. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/study-security-cooperation-heart-asia-region/>

conflicting geopolitical interests paralyze decision-making processes.⁴¹ Yet, the SCO appears as the only organization with the potential to address the issue of radicalization. First, this is the only organization that regularly bring the issue of religious extremism, on its agenda. Second, with Beijing's One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, it is likely that the SCO might gain more political clout under Chinese leadership. Third, it has set up a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) which is aimed at facilitating cooperation on countering terrorism and violent extremism. RATS includes Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan among its members, and Afghanistan as an observer member.

Considering the difficulties of working through regional organizations where decision-making processes require consensus of all members, bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral formats can be more efficient for the present objective. Indeed, considering the approach used by Central Asian states so far, analyzing radicalization as an internal issue, Afghanistan should engage with any of these countries which are the most interested in cooperation, through bilateral discussions, before expanding it to the sub-regional level.

Conclusion

During his term as Afghanistan's President, Ashraf Ghani has placed a considerable emphasis on developing stronger diplomatic ties with neighboring countries, including the ones in Central Asia, and has succeeded in opening trade routes with vast potential between Afghanistan and its other neighbors as an alternative to trade with its eastern neighbor Pakistan, which regularly closes its borders to Afghanistan. These agreements should serve as confidence building measures to open dialogue on more sensitive issues including security cooperation with a focus on radicalization and violent extremism. Such cooperation could initially remain traditional through the sharing of information on terrorists, the exchange of intelligence or the co-management of borders. Such activities could be organized with the support of the OSCE, through platforms such as CSTO or during through bilateral or multilateral agreements.

The four countries, if they focus on their common heritage, could also develop some more innovative measures to foster security cooperation, including

41. Ibid.

through the strengthening of the Hanafi school of Islam, by organizing regional discussions and religious events with religious scholars. Finally, universities and think-tanks in the region could also join hands, through regional level research, to better understand the channels and the tools used for radicalization of youth in the region, and on the funding sources of groups that promote violence and extreme interpretations of Islam. Scholars could then organize policy relevant discussions to raise awareness among policymakers and devise common solutions.

Policy Recommendations

- Afghanistan should articulate objectives and a plan to tackle the influence and presence of radical groups in Afghanistan, not only by adopting a national approach but also integrating a regional perspective.
- Considering how the approach taken by most regional countries to tackle radicalization is mostly through repression, Afghanistan has a role to play in presenting a new paradigm which is yet to be developed but one that could build on studying Afghanistan's efforts to control radical religious education.
- Afghanistan should explore Central Asian countries' interests in cooperating on the issue of radicalization through bilateral, trilateral or quadrilateral formats. If such interest is confirmed and articulated, it is recommended that the group then build on the work done by RATS and contribute to shaping the RATS agenda, and ultimately the SCO's.
- Afghanistan should set up initiatives to promote dialogue and research on the issue of violent extremism, with universities and civil society organizations, including religious groups, in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The product of such cultural and academic cooperation should in turn feed into the agenda of the RATS and/or bilateral, trilateral or quadrilateral foras.