



**Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF)
United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA)**

***Recognizing and Responding to Radicalization that Can Lead to
Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia***
Almaty, Kazakhstan // 29-31 March 2016
Workshop Report*

What do we know about radicalization processes in Central Asia? How can government institutions and civil society groups work together to empower communities of young men and women across the region to fight radicalization that can lead to violent extremism and terrorism? How can we respond strategically to these challenges at the local, national, regional, international, and virtual levels?

To address these critical questions, UNRCCA and CTITF convened a three-day workshop entitled, *Recognizing and Responding to Radicalization that Can Lead to Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia*. Hosted by the Government of Kazakhstan and generously funded by the European Union, the workshop brought together government officials from Central Asia and Afghanistan, directors of public associations, international and regional organization officials, representatives of observer states, and experts on countering and preventing violent extremism.

The workshop addresses growing concerns in Central Asia with the radicalization of vulnerable individuals and their recruitment to terrorist networks. In organizing the workshop, UNRCCA and CTITF provided participants an opportunity to share experiences, strategies, and good practices in preventing radicalization that can lead to violent extremism among young men and women.

Although a lot is being done by all, the threat of radicalization and violent extremism demands that we do more, individually and in collaboration in the years ahead. We look forward to hearing from our Central Asian colleagues on how they see the strengths and challenges of their counter-radicalization programmes and their suggestions for moving forward together – Ambassador Petko Draganov, UNRCCA

This is the latest in a series of capacity-building workshops that are part of a project focused on implementing the Joint Plan of Action for Central Asia, adopted in November 2011, under the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. This report highlights key discussions and concludes with a number of specific recommendations. It begins with findings that brought the participants together across the three days:

* *Disclaimer: This report is an overview of the workshop proceedings and highlights select discussions. It does not necessarily represent the positions of UNRCCA, CTITF, Central Asian governments, or other participants and the organizations and governments they represent.*

- Our knowledge of radicalization processes in Central Asia is limited. We have more questions than answers. More research on the drivers of radicalization needs to be done.
- An effective response to radicalization must go beyond traditional security responses (e.g. military and police). Working with communities towards preventing radicalization is key.
- Governments should embrace partnerships with civil society and with international and regional organizations. In particular, trust between state and non-state actors should be developed to prevent the spread of radicalization that can lead to violent extremism.
- Any regional approach to counter-radicalization must be tailored to the local, provincial, national, and virtual level in each country. Public and civic associations may provide many answers on how to reach and empower communities against vulnerabilities to radicalization that can lead to violent extremism.

The Scope of Radicalization in Central Asia

What do we know about radicalization that can lead to violent extremism and terrorism in Central Asia? In answering this question, participants focused on youth, women, ethnic minorities and the circumstances under which individuals can alternately become agents of positive change or vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment in terrorist activities.

Participants discussed the threat that terrorism poses to the security of the region. Central Asian officials outlined several factors that are conducive to radicalization that can lead to violent extremism: poor social and economic conditions; religious motivations that are based on a false understanding of Islam; and characteristics that may predispose individuals to radicalization, such as the sense of adventure that appeals to some young people. Representatives from UN Women discussed additional factors such as low participation in decision making and decreasing access to education and the workplace, which may also affect



Workshop participants (Photo by Igor Sagun)

radicalization among women. They also noted that societies with gender equality are less vulnerable to violent extremism. At the same time, they emphasized that women cannot just be seen as victims or perpetrators of terrorism or passive beneficiaries of counter-radicalization initiatives; rather, they must be treated as agents of positive change who can play a critically important role in shaping government and community programmes to combat the root causes of violent extremism.

Many participants discussed the correlation between economic vulnerability, social exclusion, limited access to government services, and lack of social justice, which can aggravate feelings of marginalization, further isolate individuals from their states and communities, and make them more susceptible to violent extremist ideology. For example, an official from an observer country discussed a number of recent studies, which included findings that countries with a large youth bulge are less likely

than countries with a medium youth bulge to have violent extremism. Additionally, there is an inverse correlation between a person's perceptions of corruption in their country and the likelihood that they will support violent extremism. However, if that person experienced corruption directly, they are more likely to support violent extremism.

Practitioners and experts at the workshop noted that far more work needs to be done to understand what leads individuals down the path to radicalization and recruitment in violent extremist organizations. For example, many studies need to be done to understand the role of ideology versus the role of group and identity-based factors as drivers of violent extremism. An international organization representative reflected this dilemma commenting, "Do government counter-terrorism and CVE (countering violent extremism) policies prevent radicalization or do they isolate minorities and make them more susceptible to radicalization? I have many more questions than answers."

The workshop revealed different streams of thought on the issue of what causes an individual to get radicalized and there was consensus on the need for more data on the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism, not only among youth, women, and ethnic minorities but also within communities of migrants and prison populations. The discussion concluded with thought-provoking statements by Central Asian and international organization officials. A United Nations official cautioned singling out groups as vulnerable in order to avoid stigmatizing them and urged all countries and organizations to protect their commitments to human rights and the rule of law as they seek to counter radicalization and violent extremism. An official from Central Asia concluded starkly, "any individual can get radicalized."

Kazakhstan fully supports the implementation of the United Nations Counter-terrorism Strategy.

Targeted non-repressive methods are the most effective way to address radicalization and violent extremism. It is important to unite our efforts and build on the momentum and partnerships with international and regional organizations.

Participants from Kazakhstan, host country

Strategic Responses to Radicalization

The majority of the workshop focused on strategic responses to radicalization and violent extremism that governments, civic associations, international and regional organizations can take in partnership with each other. The key topics discussed included the empowerment of youth and women, violent extremist messaging online, crafting good practices and durable strategies to counter violent extremism, and promoting a stronger regional response to the challenge of terrorism.

Empowering Youth, Women, and Religious Leaders

Representatives from Central Asian countries discussed the programmes in their countries and the achievements and challenges along the way. In Kazakhstan there is an array of government initiatives including changes to national legislation to respond to the growing challenge of violent extremism. They also highlighted programs in partnership with civic society organizations and public associations that are designed to benefit and empower youth, women, and religious leaders. A key emphasis is on prevention and de-radicalization strategies, and this includes free counseling services for those who have become ensnared in extremist ideology. In Kyrgyzstan there is ongoing work with a large number of religious educational institutions whose goal is to educate and sensitize young people to the dangers of

radicalization. Likewise, in Tajikistan, the government has ramped up work with youth organizations while Turkmenistan adopted a national youth policy which is a key tool in the prevention of violent extremism.

Representatives from Central Asian civic organizations and public associations enriched the discussions as they outlined initiatives to strengthen and build trust with communities. In Kazakhstan, an initiative that initially aimed to train 50 young people to speak out against terrorism proved popular beyond expectations and ultimately trained more than 300. In Tajikistan resource centres have been set up nation-wide as a platform for women's engagement. And in Kyrgyzstan, a partnership across NGOs has produced videos of young religious scholars (*Ulema*) to educate the public and speak out against the manipulation and distortion of sacred Islamic texts by terror groups.

Participants also discussed the role of women religious leaders. In some parts of Central Asia, these leaders have great influence in their communities and play an increasingly important role in disseminating counter-radicalization messages, working with law enforcement in the prevention of violent extremism, and empowering devout women.

The problem in Central Asia is not a shortage of counter-radicalization programmes; rather, it is one of limited reach and gaps. One participant asked, "Who will protect those religious leaders who speak out against violent extremism?" Another participant echoed this dilemma and told the story of one woman who bravely spoke out and informed authorities about extremism in her community. Her actions elicited threats from locals, and she and her family were compelled to move from village to village when authorities were unable to guarantee her safety. Partnerships between state and society need to be strengthened to embolden more people to speak out against violent extremism and its ideology and protect those who do.

Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremist Messages Online

Traditional counter-radicalization programmes emphasize the role of mosques and community spaces. Yet, these are not the only places where radicalization may occur, and the virtual realm of the internet and social media has become a key arena in the fight against violent extremism.

One expert pointed out that Da'esh has many media outlets that are particularly slick in packaging extremist ideology to appeal to the young, who are as technologically savvy as they are disaffected by the lack of prosperity and purpose in their communities. In many instances, terrorist recruiters spend weeks if not months inculcating an extremist worldview and convincing a young person to fight on behalf of a terrorist group or recruit others into its fold.

Central Asian officials have responded to the challenge of radicalization and violent extremist ideology online with a variety of programmes. In Kazakhstan, a major focus for the government is monitoring the internet for extremist content and disseminating counter-narratives to fight the ideology of terrorism. According to several participants, Kazakhstan blocked 23,000 URLs in 2015, and both the Office of the Prosecutor General and the Muftiate monitor extremist websites. Tajikistan has taken measures to block extremist websites and messages that are being disseminated online. Kyrgyzstan's government offices—including the Anti-Terrorism Centre—maintain a website that posts useful counter-narrative content against extremist messaging, and Turkmenistan adopted a law on the internet that it believes can be deployed to counter the internet's use towards terrorism purposes. These are just a few examples of the broader work in process.

At the same time, many participants acknowledged that more needs to be done. Blocking extremist websites is only part of the solution and the process of blocking access to information on the internet must be done in accordance with states' obligations to promote and protect human rights. The effect of human rights violations in creating an environment conducive to radicalization must be borne in mind. As one United Nations expert cautioned, in the absence of a generally accepted definition of violent extremism and terrorism, states must be strategic in their approach to denying the use of the internet for terrorism purposes and not resort to general bans or blocking of the internet that erodes freedom of expression.

At the same time, Central Asian participants noted that partnerships between governments and public associations in the region include the creation of material and websites that host positive messaging. While supportive of such programmes, a number of participants admitted that it is not enough to create anti-extremist websites and wait for youth to access the material. One participant stated, "We are lagging very much behind the products our enemies are producing." Another acknowledged that counter-radicalization efforts are very top down and slow moving in contrast to terror groups that are bottom up in their approach to radicalization and recruitment. A participant representing an NGO illustrated the challenge by explaining that meticulously-produced videos of young *Ulema* reciting the Quran to promote positive and moderate messages registered a maximum of 500 views, a tiny viewership in the online realm.

To explore proactive, bottom-up ways to counter the use of the internet for terrorism purposes, the workshop included interactive presentations by the Executive Director of *Muflehun* who outlined key strategies in responding to terrorist messaging online and gave a glimpse into training programmes available for government officials and NGOs. First, the messenger is critical. Youth themselves are the most compelling messengers to fight extremism online, as their peers tend to trust them, yet it is not necessarily safe for them to do this. Second, it is important to provide alternatives, such as vocational opportunities or a cause to take up in service to their communities. Third, such messaging has to be tailored to the local context. A counter-radicalization message that resonates with individuals in one city may not resonate with youth in another city or in a rural area.

In considering how to create online intervention strategies and programmes, it is vital for government officials to be mindful of their comparative advantages. While governments may not be the best messengers for compelling counter-narratives, they are absolutely crucial in creating alternatives for youth. They can use public resources at their disposal to create programmes, jobs, and meaningful anti-extremist causes for youth. NGOs cannot do it themselves, there is necessarily a central role for the government.

Building Good National Strategies

All Central Asian states have counter-terrorism policies, but there is a need for more holistic strategies that prevent and counter violent extremism while addressing root causes of radicalization and upholding international human rights standards. It is important here to acknowledge that the lack of holistic strategies is a global issue and not just a Central Asian one. As experts at the workshop made clear, all states can do much more in this regard.

In the workshop's capacity-building sessions, experts from *Hedayah* discussed good practices that underlie powerful CVE strategies. Among these were several key points: A CVE strategy should limit the unintended consequences of counter-terrorism policies. It should be developed with the input of a forum that includes representatives from relevant state agencies and non-state actors and community representatives. It should lay out defined roles and responsibilities for government ministries,

departments, agencies, and municipal authorities with a clear chain of command. Governments should learn from the mistakes they make along the way and allow their CVE strategy to evolve with changing circumstances. As an expert explained, “a national strategy should be a document that listens to society.”

In service to Central Asian officials, UNRCCA translated into Russian Hedayah’s *Guidelines and Good Practices for Developing National CVE Strategies*. Additionally, the discussion on developing national strategies was enriched by presentations from Tajikistan’s officials and representatives from the OSCE. The OSCE and Tajikistan worked together to create a national strategy on violent extremism and radicalization that can lead to terrorism, which is currently being reviewed by the Government of Tajikistan. An OSCE representative shared a number of lessons that may help other countries in the region in their own efforts.

Towards a Stronger Regional Response

In bringing Central Asian officials and representatives of civic and public associations together with experts from international and regional organizations, the workshop fostered unique discussions on regional approaches. Some participants noted the growing number of Central Asian citizens who have travelled with their families and young children to Syria and Iraq join ISIL/Da’esh. The workshop was strengthened by the participation of officials from Afghanistan, who noted how important it is for their country to share the table at such discussions given the scale of suffering caused in the country by terrorist attacks. All welcomed greater regional cooperation across many sectors with the countries of Central Asia and regional and international organizations to counter the threat of terrorism.

As a representative from a regional organization demonstrated during workshop discussions, regional approaches are not only about multilateral diplomacy and memoranda of understanding but also about linking together ministries and agencies, associations, and spiritual leaders across national borders. Central Asian representatives described a regional initiative that has created a platform for scientists, public figures, and religious leaders in the region to discuss how to respond to radicalization. According to a Central Asian participant, such efforts could usefully be amplified by creating a common spiritual document against violent extremism that all religious leaders can use.

Towards the end of the guided discussions, officials from Central Asia expressed the desire to build on the momentum of the workshop. As one official explained, “After listening to my Central Asian colleagues, I see that we are doing the same thing. The challenges are identical yet we are acting disparately.” He and a number of participants called for more joint projects and other participants concluded the discussions with a number of recommendations for working together in the months and years ahead.

Recommendations for the Road Ahead

In order to build stronger partnerships and strengthen a coordinated response to radicalization that can lead to violent extremism, participants suggested a number of recommendations. Outlined below, these recommendations can guide us in the months and years ahead as we seek to deepen implementation of the Joint Plan of Action:

- *Sponsor knowledge creation, strengthen analysis and research networks:* Better research will answer what we don’t know about radicalization and lead to more informed programmes. It is crucial to do research to better analyze the conditions that drive radicalization in communities and

that pre-dispose vulnerable individuals to violent extremist ideology. Such research will also help governments design programmes that distinguish between non-violent radical ideas and radicalization that leads to violent extremism and terrorism. It can also help identify the strongest agents of change who can lead engagement with communities.

- *Establish youth movements in each country united against radicalization and terrorism:* Such movements can be linked to one another in regular multi-national meetings in Central Asia as a way to shore up regional responses to the prevention of violent extremism. To maximize the chances of success, youth leaders should be at the helm and the agenda should reflect bottom-up solutions to the challenges of radicalization.
- *Elevate women, youth, and agents of change as drivers of counter-radicalization policies:* Representatives of women and youth should have a seat at the table whenever counter-radicalization strategies are being devised. This will ensure that policies engage with the communities in a way that makes them maximally relevant, targeted, and improves their chances of success. Increasing the number of women in the security sector can also prove fruitful in building trust with communities.
- *Train more practitioners and spiritual leaders to do counter-radicalization work:* The workshop revealed that there is great appetite for community leaders to do counter-radicalization work. This means expanding training programmes and exchanges across Central Asia and Afghanistan. It also means ensuring that those at the frontlines of counter-radicalization work are protected enough to do their work effectively.
- *Foster more exchanges and regional cooperation among specialized agencies at the forefront of counter-radicalization work:* Many officials and security experts in relevant ministries and agencies in Central Asia and Afghanistan are eager to interact more regularly with their counterparts in neighboring countries.
- *International and regional organizations should assist Central Asian countries in developing national action plans on the prevention and countering of violent extremism:* International and regional organizations can support and encourage the development of strategies that are based on good practices, informed by the latest findings on radicalization processes, rooted in the Joint Plan of Action, and mindful of developments regarding the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.

Ultimately, Central Asian governments—in partnership with their civil society organizations and public associations—must take the lead in adopting sustainable and effective policies to respond to the challenges at hand. This entails building on the work that some states have made in developing national legislation to counterterrorism, working with civil society to combat violent extremist messaging and recruitment, and addressing the underlying issues that drive radicalization while strengthening engagement with the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. UNRCCA will continue its key coordinating role and support to Central Asian states in this regard.

About the Central Asia Counter-Terrorism Project:

In 2010-2011, the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) of the United Nations and the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA)—with financial support from the European Union and Norway—initiated a project to assist the Central Asian States in devising a regional plan of action to implement the four pillars of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The project culminated in the adoption of the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan along with a Joint Declaration made at a High-Level Meeting in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in November 2011. The workshop highlighted in this report is part of phase II of the project. Phase II was launched in September 2013 to support Central Asian states to implement the JPOA. Previous workshops under phase II focused on capacity-building activities for the media, border management authorities, and religious leaders as it relates to their work on counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism. To learn more about the project, read about past activities, and access key documents please visit <http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=11511&language=en-US>

Funded by the European Union

