



**Towards the Implementation of the Joint Plan of Action for the
UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia
Dialogue with Religious Leaders and Institutions in Support of their Role in the Prevention
and Resolution of Conflicts and in Countering Extremism in Central Asia
November 20, 21 and 22, 2013
Almaty, Kazakhstan**

Summary Report¹

Disclaimer

This report summarizes discussions by participants in the Almaty Workshop, and in no way represents the views or analysis of either UNRCCA, CTITF or any other participating organization. Examples mentioned in the report were provided by participants during their discussions or speeches.

Under Pillar I of the Joint Plan of Action (JPoA) for the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism (CT) Strategy in Central Asia (CA), which was agreed upon in November 2011, Central Asian countries resolved “to support the institutionalization of dialogue, in order to promote inter-faith dialogue and prevent disinformation that could lead to radicalization.” They also resolved “to provide support for religious institutions, as needed, operating within the framework of existing legislation, through specialized training courses and exchanges with other countries beyond the region.” They agreed that tolerance, dialogue between Governments and religious groups and religious education are effective ways of tackling extremism.

These commitments were the basis of a regional workshop organized on November 20-22, 2013 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, as part of Phase II of the CTITF and UNRCCA project “Towards a Comprehensive Implementation of the Joint Plan of Action for Central Asia Under the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013-2016).” The workshop brought together representatives of religious and security establishments in order to discuss their role in the prevention of conflicts and extremism. The event was funded by the Multi-Year Appeal of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and was organized by UNRCCA and CTITF with DPA’s Middle East and West Asia Division (MEWAD) and Policy and Mediation Division (PMD).

¹ This Report has been compiled by Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, CTITF/UNRCCA Consultant of the Project, with inputs from Jomart Ormonbekov (UNRCCA Kyrgyzstan), Nodir Khudayberganov (UNRCCA Uzbekistan), Bakhit Abdildina (UNRCCA Kazakhstan) and Anja Hanisch (UNRCCA intern). Further inputs were provided by Susanne Giendl (UNRCCA), Suman Pradhan and Muhammad Rafiuddin Shah (CTITF), Brian Pozun (DPA) and Alice Chow (DPA/MSU), as well as by all participants of the Almaty Workshop.

The workshop was designed with three objectives:

- 1) To share experiences among representatives of religious and security institutions in Central Asia and Afghanistan on challenges, opportunities and good practices in preventing radicalization, extremism and conflicts.
- 2) To start a process of dialogue between representatives of religious institutions and relevant Government officials involved in law enforcement (i.e., national security committees) on common areas of concern around themes identified in Pillar I of the JPoA, including: a) mechanisms for institutionalizing dialogue, b) strengthening the legislative basis, c) countering extremism through education and d) promoting a culture of tolerance.
- 3) To build the skills of participants in mediation, conflict resolution and the prevention of extremism through a day of training using lectures, exercises, case studies and experience-sharing from the region and from other parts of the world.

Participation

A total of 45 people participated in the workshop, including:

- From CA countries: representatives from the security establishments, Muftiats, State Agencies for Religious Affairs and Ministries of Foreign Affairs: 5 from Kazakhstan, 4 from Tajikistan, 2 from Kyrgyzstan and 2 from Turkmenistan.
- From observer countries: 2 representatives from Afghanistan (one religious scholar expert in reconciliation and one representative of the National Directorate of Security).
- From regional organizations: representatives from CICA, CSTO, EU, ISESCO, OIC, OSCE and RCTS/SCO.
- From international organizations: representatives of OHCHR, UNAMA, UN/DPI, UNODC, UN WOMEN and the host organizations (CTITF, UNRCCA, DPA/MEWAD and DPA/PMD).
- Experts/trainers from the UK, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Messages

- Participants of the Almaty workshop emphasized on the need to intensify focus on preventive measures to complement security and legal approaches to countering the potential of violent extremism and terrorism in Central Asia.
- They expressed concerns for the way that religion is being incorrectly used for political purposes to recruit the youth for extremist, radical and violent movements. Participants argued for the freedom of religion as an important right that should not be suppressed. Lack of knowledge about the true principles of main religions in the region makes the youth particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation and to the spreading of ideas that incite hatred.

- Prevention therefore requires a broad approach: 1) **cooperation** with religious leaders who are close to communities in order to raise awareness about the true religious principles and counter extremist narratives; 2) **knowledge** to understand the motivations that leads people to be recruited in marginal, violent extremist organizations; and 3) **awareness raising and the promotion of a culture of peace, dialogue and tolerance** via the mass media, the education system, the Internet, etc.
- Islamic concepts of peacebuilding provide a wealth of tools that can be used for mediation, conflict resolution and prevention of extremism. The Quran has many Surahs that preach diversity and unity, coexistence, tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, the sacredness of life, human rights and non-violence. As such, the Quran can be used as a source of knowledge against disinformation or partial interpretations. Other traditions such as Hadiths and traditions of ancestors can be used to counter propaganda that misinterprets Islam.
- A variety of approaches and strategies, from involving religious leaders/Imams, educating young people in their religion, working with families, schools, mosques and prisons etc., should be developed and enhanced. These include strategies directly working on the question of ideology and religious education, as well as approaches providing socio-economic opportunities, such as employment possibilities, education, social programs for marginalized youth, etc..

Theme 1: Countering extremism through institutionalization of intra-religious dialogues

- Concrete steps are needed to institutionalize at least three types of dialogue at the national and regional levels: 1) One between religious leaders (intra-faith) on how to cooperate on promoting adequate religious education; 2) Second between the state politicians and religious leaders to address the root causes of extremism, violent radicalization and terrorism; 3) Third, one between religious leaders and security officials on how to prevent violent extremism and radicalization.
- Dialogue needs to start slowly on concrete agendas and then be built up to becoming institutionalized once trust and mutual respect is established.
- In any dialogue, issues of human rights and gender concerns should feature prominently.
- The media must be used actively to propagate informed messages about countering extremist ideology, violent radicalization and terrorism.
- Joint efforts among Central Asian countries could include the creation of a region-wide council of religious leaders for preventing extremism.

Theme 2: Countering extremism through legal instruments

- Legislative frameworks need to be strengthened, harmonized, adequately implemented and monitored, including from the human rights perspective.
- All counter terrorism laws and laws on religion should abide by all international human rights standards.
- Prosecution/punishment measures should be accompanied as much as possible by well thought-out preventive measures, such as dialogue, education, awareness raising etc.

Specific attention should be paid to work with extremist prisoners. Furthermore, special programs need to focus on migrants and their families who may become vulnerable to radicalization in other countries.

Theme 3: Countering extremism through education

- Governments need to pay more attention to the quality of the education systems in CA countries is general in order to provide opportunities for the youth and prevent them to seek alternative education.
- New legislation and strategies need to be developed to include religion as a subject (history, world religions etc.) religion in school curriculum. Students also need to learn more about the history of religions in the region.
- Appropriate legislation needs to be worked out to provide opportunity for state and non-state sponsored religious education opportunities. This will prevent people to send their children to other countries for such an education and return home with radical ideology.
- Civil society should be encouraged to work on assessing/monitoring non-formal religious educational institutions, contribute to the development of standards based on respect for human rights and be involved in curriculum development.
- Religious education in CA countries needs to be harmonized and curriculums modernized across the region.

Theme 4: Countering hate speech and promoting a culture of tolerance

- States should invest in raising the capacity of religious leaders and religious institutions ;
- Regular training courses for improving qualification and skills, as well as dialogue platforms for the Central Asian Imams should be ensured.
- The capacity of civil society actors and women's groups should be strengthened for them to play key roles and meaningfully contribute to promoting dialogue for tolerance.
- More contacts are needed between countries within Central Asia to share their experiences, training materials and programs for tolerance a regular basis.

Next steps and types of activities proposed

Participants reiterated the importance of exchanges of information across the region, both through formal institutionalization and informally through capacity building projects/trainings/events. Although these dialogues could be facilitated across countries in regional fora, the methods, actors, and modalities for follow up should be ensured at the national level. A working group at the regional level could be created in order to pursue the development of analysis and methodologies and the institutionalization of such dialogues.

Training and capacity building:

- Identification of potential trainers among community leaders and development of training modules in Russian and local languages based on existing materials and empirical knowledge of the region.
- Capacity building for religious leaders on how to counter and prevent extremism.

Knowledge development and dissemination:

- Analysis and publication of best practices on countering extremism and terrorism.
- Analysis of what motivates the youth (both young men and women) of the region to join extremist groups.
- Standardization of religious education (programs, curriculum etc.) and improvement of the overall quality of education.

Institutionalization of dialogue and exchanges at the regional and national levels:

- Establishment of an inter-regional religious council or a similar platform for regular exchanges among religious leaders at the national and regional levels.
- Regular meetings similar to the Almaty meeting at the national levels, bringing together representatives of religious and security institutions.

Awareness raising:

- Standardization of religious education (programs, curriculum etc.) and improvement of the overall quality of education.
- Elaboration of a gender sensitive public awareness strategy to prevent extremism.
- Training for journalists on responsible reporting around questions of religion and extremism. Support to the development of a communication strategy for media outlets to advocate on the prevention of extremism and the promotion of the culture of peace.

DAY 1: COUNTRY INFORMATION and EXPERIENCES

On day one, organizers and country delegates gave an update on the implementation of the JPoA in their countries and made remarks about their experiences and challenges in preventing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism through cooperation with religious communities. The following points and recommendations were made by country representatives:

There have not been any inter-religious conflicts within the region. At the same time, however, the potential for intra-religious conflicts is high, as sectarian groups have started to operate within the region, some seeking to undermine the secular nature of the States. While there has been a surge of interest in Islam, the level of education and knowledge about Islam and other religions in the region remains generally low, increasing vulnerability to misinterpretation and thus to the spreading of ideas that incite hatred.

Since facing domestic terrorist incidents in 2011-2012, **Kazakhstan** has reinforced law enforcement agencies and acted to reform existing legislation. In 2013, the country approved a State program on fighting religious extremism and terrorism for the period of 2013-2017 that focuses for the first time on preventive mechanisms through targeted information gathering, cooperation with civil society, etc. The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SBMK) has launched a program to promote traditional Islam and religious values, with a special focus on the youth. It has further taken steps to strengthen local religious communities: a) by recruiting highly qualified theologians and inviting religious experts from other countries to provide training for

local experts; and b) by using media and electronic media to protect young people from radical ideologies.

The Government in **Kyrgyzstan** is similarly worried about the spread of Jihadi ideology. The activities of a number of organizations have been banned: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, the Ahmadiya, Tabligi Jamaat (davatchi) and other Salafi movements such as the Akromiya, Jund al – Khilafah and the Al Takfirwal-Hijra. A representative of the National Security Committee lamented that the current liberal legislation have aided in the indoctrination and recruitment of the youth. The legislative framework too could not stand up to the powerful financial capacity of recruiters to lobby and incite through the systematic use of the media, recruitment of professional lawyers, activists etc.

Due to its geographic location on the border of Afghanistan, **Tajikistan** remains vulnerable as a target for fundamentalist groups. While much of the financing for extremist activities may come from abroad, a representative of the Tajikistan State Committee for National Security mentioned that conditions for radicalization also exist within CA states, including domestic conflicts, rising nationalist/extremist rhetoric, socio-economic hardships, unemployment and lack of opportunities for the youth. Extremism could be curtailed only through a combination of hard security responses and effective preventive measures, including cooperation with religious leaders given their proximity with communities. A representative of the Council of Ulemas put emphasis on the separation between Islam and the way political institutions are using religion to advance their agendas. While the Tajik Constitution and respective national laws ensure religious freedom and belief, calling for religious violence and hatred, as well as the spread and dissemination of extremist literature are strictly prohibited. Tajik representatives claimed that their example of cooperation between the State and religious leaders to solve conflict (such as during the civil war) and prevent future ones through open dialogue could be replicated by others.

A representative of the Ministry of National Security of **Turkmenistan** pointed to the need to consolidate the approach of governments and religious institutions in order to prevent the spread of extremism in the region. Turkmenistan has adopted a variety of approaches to prevention. Given that the youth are most vulnerable to radicalization, the Government encourages education and sports as means to divert from extremist ideas. Cooperation with the clergy is also key. State officials display their piety as model for others. Religious holidays are celebrated at the State level and the Government finances the Hajj of many people per year.

Observers from **Afghanistan** shared their opinions as to why religious leaders could incite people to violence: Reaction to feeling disrespected, responsibility taken by populations to implement law and order if governments fail to do so, effectively functioning as shadow government to enforce rules and as jury to provide justice in case the State is inefficient or corrupt. When religious institutions and political parties are suppressed, claimed the representative of an Afghan NGO, they may revert to violence in order to assert themselves. Today, in Afghanistan, dialogue, inclusion, justice, economic development and good governance are the only solutions for peace.

DAY 2: DIALOGUE on COOPERATION to COUNTER EXTREMISM

Main messages

Discussions on day two concentrated on some of the key areas that were identified by the experts who gathered in Bratislava during deliberations for Pillar I of the UN Global CT Strategy in Central Asia in December 2010, namely 1) mechanisms for institutionalizing dialogue, 2) strengthening the legislative basis, 3) countering extremism through education and 4) promoting a culture of tolerance.

Deliberations concentrated on the need to intensify a focus on preventive measures to complement hard security ones in countering violent acts of extremism. Efforts against radicalization should focus on involving the public in the process, improving religious education and offering warnings about the dangers of radical ideologies. More awareness raising is needed, especially among the rural youth. Violent narratives should be countered via civil society, mass media, the Internet, etc.

Prevention also requires knowledge: It is important to understand why radicalization happens, who is most vulnerable and how recruitment takes place. Afghan officials and religious leaders have a lot of experiences that could be shared with their Central Asian counterparts in countering extremism, especially among rural communities.

Participants stressed that terrorism should not be associated with any particular religion. They noted that it was not religion per se but the misuse of religion for political purposes that creates misunderstandings and abuses. Participants repeatedly argued against the misuse of Islam for political purposes and called for awareness raising about the true and peaceful principles of Islam. Freedom of religion is an important right that should not be suppressed, lest it lead to unwanted reactions.

Overall, the message of day two was that there is a need to enhance confidence-building measures by restoring balance between human rights and security, between freedom of religion and the responsibilities of the State, between respect for tradition and opening up to innovations and modernity, etc.

Theme 1: Countering extremism through institutionalization of inter-religious and intra-religious dialogues

Before the institutionalization of dialogue takes place (whether inter- or intra-faith, or between religious leaders and security apparatus), a number of preliminary conditions are necessary, including political will, trust, knowledge and commonality of message.

Political will for dialogue is the first condition. Without will at the highest level on all sides, no dialogue can be sustained even if it is started.

- ✓ The Tajik delegation gave the example of the will to launch an inter-Tajik dialogue to solve the civil war that ended in the Peace Accords of 1997. The Accords were then promoted in mosques by religious leaders who supported the political solution. A National Reconciliation Commission was set up in 1997, which was dissolved in 2000 when a new parliament was elected. In the meantime, the dialogue on religious issues was continued informally.
- ✓ The Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) provided an example of one of its initiatives in Iraq to start a dialogue between Sunni and Shiite communities. The dialogue led to a declaration signed and subsequently put in front of every mosque in Iraq, stating that violence is not part of Islam.
- ✓ In Kyrgyzstan, an Inter-Religious Council was set up which now conducts talks on cooperation between Orthodox Christians and Muslims.

Political will eventually needs to lead to **trust** in order to make dialogue sustainable. Trust, argued participants, should be built not only between representatives of religious institutions and security organs, but also within these institutions among different schools of thought and actors.

- ✓ In the Tajik example, when dialogue on religious issues was started, no one was initially convinced it could be successful. Trust had to be built gradually, which required that all participants be treated equally and discussions be open and transparent.

Dialogue needs to be built on the basis of **knowledge**. CA countries have developed diverse approaches to combating violent extremism, which warrant an in-depth study. Similarly, the different tactics, messages and strengths of different extremist groups need to be scrutinized in order to target preventive tactics. Lack of knowledge about the new, mostly foreign, Islamic practices that have been introduced into the region hampers efforts to curb the spread of extremist ideas. Participants warned that the type of Islam that is being imposed on the region is different from local Hanafi traditions.

- ✓ In Tajikistan, recommendations are given to Imams on which issues they should preach during Friday prayers. In Soviet times, there was one important official school (Qaziat) which educated disciples. While the former students are now getting old, they remain important resources for dialogue.
- ✓ An Afghan participant saw no problem in the fact that religious leaders were of different opinions. Instead, the problem was with attempts to stifle dialogue in society by taking away the opportunity for people to voice their opinions.
- ✓ Women activists have a lot of knowledge about religious and traditional practices among communities and have to be included in dialogues. In the Ferghana Valley, for example, early marriages are not registered by the state but only by religious institutions. Early marriages lead to women staying illiterate and thus more easily manipulated by extremists. This is especially problematic given that women end up being the only breadwinners due to massive labour migration.

Finally, participants agreed that institutionalization of dialogue needs to be sustained through **coordination of the various approaches**. There is often a discord between how religious leaders/institutions and security institutions tackle the question of extremism and radicalization. Commonality of message will ensure that dialogue takes place.

- ✓ A Kyrgyz participant mentioned that religious institutions among themselves need some consensus. There is a lack of a unified approach as to how to prevent extremism in Islam. Public agencies, national organizations, security agencies, etc. also need to engage more in coordination and in joint identification of problems.
- ✓ Participants argued for the need to develop common approaches at the national level and then to take them up to the regional level.
- ✓ A Kyrgyz participant noted the problem of lack of coordination: the Tabligh-iJamaat was announced illegal in all countries except in Kyrgyzstan, resulting in a situation where the movement gathered force in Kyrgyzstan.

Recommendations:

- In order to build on knowledge and trust, Confidence Building Measures need to be launched between religious leaders themselves (for inter- and intra-religious dialogue) and between them and security institutions at the national and regional levels.
- Dialogue needs to start slowly on concrete agendas and then built up to becoming institutionalized once trust and mutual respect is established.
- Women activists and youth are excellent networks that can be used in order to mediate between different groups within communities.
- The media must be used actively to propagate informed messages about countering extremist ideology, violent radicalization and terrorism.
- More cross-Central Asia meetings need to be organized and institutionalized among Muftiats and religious councils.
- Central Asian countries should coordinate their approaches to countering terrorism and extremist ideology, including within existing institutions and mechanisms (CSTO, SCO etc). Joint efforts could include the creation of a sustained process of dialogue among religious leaders, which could be institutionalized through a region-wide council of religious leaders for the promotion of peace and cooperation on preventing extremism.

Theme 2: Countering extremism through legal instruments: Designing and implementing prevention programmes and religious laws while guaranteeing fundamental freedoms

In all Constitutions of Central Asian countries, religion is separated from the state, while specific laws on religion recognize the right of individuals of different religions to practice, associate and speak freely. At the same time, however, participants of the Almaty meeting spoke about dilemmas in the development of adequate legislative frameworks.

First of all, they recognized the tension that could exist in introducing legislation for security purposes (countering extremism, terrorism etc.) and the need to ensure that these laws and measures abide by human rights standards and humanitarian laws. Specific laws and policies to regulate religious activities and organizations also need to be made compatible with international human rights standards and not contradict the Constitutions of respective states. The first requirement for developing adequate legislation is to balance between the needs of security and those of human rights and democracy, bearing in mind that emergency situations cannot ignore human rights and its fundamental principles.

- ✓ In Kazakhstan, a new Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations came into force in October 2011, the preamble of which recalls that the Constitution of Kazakhstan

and the country's international commitments guarantee the right to freedom of conscious and belief. Kazakhstan sees its law as an effort to protect those commitments by establishing clear framework and safeguards against those who that abuse religion for personal gain or to spread radicalism, extremism and intolerance. However, the law has also been criticized for its attempts to control the activities of religious organizations to which the Kazakh Government has provided justifications to the contrary.

General counter-terrorism laws that are too broad leave too much space for incorrect interpretations. Laws need to abide by the principle of legality, meaning that they have to be clear about what constitutes the crime. In many CA legislative frameworks, the crime of terrorism lacks concrete definitions and the law is therefore interpreted too widely and vaguely.

- ✓ In the Kazakh case, the new Law on Counter Terrorism stipulates different prosecution procedures between possessing radical religious literature and disseminating it.

Finally, participants recognized that laws were not enough and preventive measures needed to be introduced alongside the legislative framework. Strict punishments could backfire. For example, penitentiary systems are not always effective in dealing with extremists during their prison term. Punishment measures should be as balanced as possible with de-radicalization one. Some good practices from the region include the separation of extremists in different detention facilities as well as education and propaganda programs to de-radicalize prisoners.

- ✓ In Kazakhstan, the prevention of terrorism is conducted by the Anti-terrorist Commission, also in prisons, in close cooperation with Muftiat. However, what is lacking is preventive legislation and measures around extremism propaganda in the penitentiary system.
- ✓ In Tajikistan, informational campaigns are being conducted in prisons to counter propaganda. However, the situation remains complicated.
- ✓ An Afghan participant mentioned that 8 years of experience toughening the legislation did not seem to bear as many fruits as the dialogue that was launched with the Ulema to counter negative propaganda in mosques. What also worked were education programs launched in mosques in Kabul by the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs. In Kandahar, a local radio station (Voice of Islam) has been instrumental in circulating alternative, more positive, ideas about Islam.

Recommendations

- The legislative frameworks need to be strengthened, including amendments in the Criminal Code to ensure the criminalization of terrorism/extremism related crimes. At the same times, counter terrorism laws and religion laws should abide by all international human rights standards.
- Legislative frameworks are not enough: the most important step is the adequate implementation of national legislation in accordance with international law.
- There is a need to unify the measures of prosecution, clarify the definitions of what constitutes the crime in counter terrorism legislation, and harmonize legislation on countering terrorism and extremism in the entire region.
- Given that punishment can create more aggression, prosecution/punishment measures should be accompanied as much as possible by well thought out preventive measures, such as dialogue, education, awareness raising etc..

- Specific attention should be paid to work with extremist prisoners so as to rehabilitate them for an eventual return into society, and migrants who could become exposed to radical ideas abroad.

Theme 3: Countering extremism through education: What role for formal and informal religious education in Central Asian societies? What content for religious education?

Discussions during session three revealed two different dilemmas: First, whether to prohibit/control religious education or to open it up so that it becomes more tolerant and more modern; Second, to focus first on improving the education system as a whole before or after reforming religious education in the republics. Prohibitionist approaches or prioritization bear no fruit: Instead, focus should be on both improving the overall education system in general and religious education in particular.

Marked weaknesses in the quality of education systems in Central Asia have three consequences: 1) They do not prepare young people for the job market, leading ultimately to outmigration of unskilled workers with all vulnerabilities that ensue; 1) They become sites of recruitment by extremists; 2) They force young people away from secular national institutions to alternative education in madrasahs abroad.

Adequate and proper religious education as a complement to general education (and not as an alternative) is a welcome opportunity for young people to become familiar with ethics, values and the traditions of their ancestors. Lack of sufficient awareness about religion, especially among the youth, actually increases vulnerabilities to propaganda and manipulation by extremists groups. However, participants argued that religious education needs to be modernized, depoliticized and reformed. The qualification of Imams increased so that they could deliver the peaceful messages of religion.

Participants noted that where the Government is able to exert a degree of control over the content of such religious schools or education, good religious education can play an important role in transmitting values of Islam, which are tolerance and peace. If it is not controlled, religious education can be used instead to spread all sorts of ideas that are foreign to Central Asian culture. The quality of religious education also matters and Imams should be made aware of latest religious literature that is infiltrating into the region.

- ✓ In Kazakhstan, the Government has initiated spiritual education working groups to carry out awareness raising lectures and trainings throughout the country.
- ✓ A Kyrgyz participant lamented that the Muslim Board in Kyrgyzstan is failing to encourage mosques to include and teach modern, scientific disciplines. At the same time, diplomas obtained in Madrasahs are not recognized by Government agencies, causing problems of employment for graduates.
- ✓ In Tajikistan, one pressing issue is the problem of religious education abroad and in unregistered establishments. To regulate this problem, study abroad is permitted only after graduation from an official education institution within Tajikistan. Foreign institutions hosting Tajik youth should also sign agreements with state institutions.

- ✓ Government schools in Turkmenistan cover issues related to religion through disciplines such as ethics. Work is underway for the Government to enact specific laws to respond to the needs of the youth.
- ✓ In Afghanistan, unlike in Central Asia, there is a need to promote more secular, modern education instead of the religious education, which most youth have received in recent decades. Afghan madrasahs are increasingly developing modern disciplines alongside religious education.
- ✓ Experts called attention to the importance of women's religious education. The trend in the number of women getting recruited by extremists is increasing in the region. Poverty, insecurity, illiteracy, lack of opportunities, being widows of extremists, or wives of labour migrants are the main factors influencing decisions to become involved with extremist groups. Single women/mothers are especially vulnerable targets for extremist groups because of their financial difficulties. In some cases, their children go to non-formal religious schools as education is offered free of charge. Some parents also prefer to educate their daughters in religious establishments instead of in low quality universities. There is a perception among traditional parts of society that a girl educated in religious schools would have better chances of getting married due to perceptions about her chastity and spiritual upbringing. UN Women, which has made extensive use of the media to raise public awareness on rights-based principles of Islam, has observed that women were especially interested in radio programmes dedicated to issues of religious education with a particular focus on their rights within marriages, responsibilities of men and women in the family, preventing divorces and violence, raising children, etc.

Recommendations

- Governments need to pay more attention to the quality of the education systems in CA countries is general. Education needs to be adapted in order to immunize the youth against extremist ideas and opportunities.
- New legislation and strategies need to be developed to include religion in school curriculum. The laws on education should be amended to take into consideration the role of religious education.
- Students also need to learn more about the history of religions in the region.
- Appropriate legislation needs to be worked out to provide opportunity for state and non-state sponsored religious education opportunities. This will prevent people to send their children to other countries for such an education and return home with radical ideology.
- Religious education in CA countries needs to be harmonized and curriculums modernized across the region. As much as possible, it is important to provide education opportunities within the region in order to avoid potential radicalization in foreign institutions.
- As much as possible, the role of governments of the region should be strengthened in order to invest in the education system and promote correct positive religious education. Organizing state regulation and centralized administration require proper funding. Donors can be sought for funding projects to deliver balanced religious and modern education.

Theme 4: Countering hate speech and promoting a culture of tolerance: What role for religious institutions and leaders?

Discussions in this session went beyond the question of tolerance within religion to broader problems of discrimination in Central Asian societies vis-à-vis women and ethnic groups. It became clear that inclusion, respect for universal human rights and tolerance are important cultures to be promoted in the region, not only to deal with ills within societies but as a mode of communication between countries.

Governments have a key role in preventing inter-ethnic and inter-religious disharmony and promoting greater tolerance. Some countries, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have created specific institutions, People's Assembly, dedicated specifically to promoting such harmony.

Religious leaders, because of their close contacts with communities, can play a key role in mediating in conflicts among families, communities etc.. They are present in most life cycle events (i.e. weddings, divorce, funerals, etc.) where they can propagate for diversity, tolerance and anti discrimination. They need to show through example: Hence their own levels of education, qualification and personal ethics are important. At the same time, the political and economic independence of religious leaders should be ensured, less they could become the trumpets of other, often destructive forces. The quality of education of religious leaders is also very important. For example, women religious leaders tend to be poorly educated in the region. Although they are informal leaders, their role in propagating tolerance is important as they have considerable influence over households through other women and family rituals.

Other actors that could play a key role as mediators in conflicts and in the education of values of tolerance among communities are women and civil society actors. However, we should bear in mind that women are not only symbols of tolerance. As a survey carried out in Kyrgyzstan about the events of 2010 has shown, they can also be instigators of conflict.

Finally, participants argued that in our globalized world, tolerance is an important part of harmonious communication and interaction between nations. Contacts among Central Asian countries are needed on matters of religion. Courses and methodologies that have been developed within the region have to be shared and disseminated.

Recommendations:

- States should invest in raising the capacity of religious leaders and religious institutions in order to empower them to be effectively involved in mediation, identifying risk of conflicts, managing and resolving conflicts as well as prevention of extremism
- Regular training courses for improving qualification and skills, as well as dialogue platforms for the Central Asian Imams should be ensured. This includes work with informal religious women leaders who play important roles in conducting family rituals and providing religious education for girls.
- The capacity of civil society actors and women's groups should be strengthened for them to play key roles in promoting dialogue for peace and tolerance.
- More contacts are needed between countries within Central Asia to share their experiences, training materials and programs for tolerance, methodologies, etc. on a regular basis.

Wrap up and discussions on next steps:

- Countering extremism requires a broad approach, not only through strengthening laws, but also improving the quality of education in general (and religious education in particular), as well as using the media and other systems to promote a culture of dialogue and tolerance. It starts by understanding the motivations that lead people to be recruited in marginal, violent extremist organizations.
- Concrete steps are needed to institutionalize at least two types of dialogue in the region: 1) One between religious leaders (intra-faith) on how to cooperate on promoting adequate religious education, and 2) another between religious leaders and security officials on how to prevent violent extremism and radicalization.
- In any dialogue, issues of human rights and gender concerns should feature prominently. The guidelines provided by the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Counter-Terrorism as well as Security Council Resolutions related to Women, Peace and Security (such as SC Resolution 1325) could be guiding principles.
- Participants reiterated many times the importance of such exchanges of information across the region, both through formal institutionalization and informally through capacity building projects/trainings/events.
- Although these dialogues could be facilitated across countries in regional fora, the methods, actors, and modalities for follow up should be ensured at the national level.
- For a regional dialogue, countries such as Uzbekistan and Russia should be brought in as they also suffer from the consequences of radicalization and violent extremism that is linked to other countries of the region. Bilateral discussions should be encouraged if a regional approach is not possible.
- A working group at the regional level should be created in order to pursue the development of analysis and methodologies and the institutionalization of such dialogues.
- The experiences of regional organizations active in Central Asian region should be used proactively:
 - OSCE has been the main actor involved in organizing initiatives and dialogues on the role of religion and counter-terrorism/radicalization through its VERLT approach. It has implemented a variety of projects and dialogues through its vast network of field offices in every CA republic.
 - CSTO encourages the development of “social diplomacy”, with the establishment of technical working groups to develop guidelines and dialogues at high levels.
 - The Regional Counter Terrorism Structure (RCST) of the SCO recommends the consolidation of the potential of the anti-terrorism initiatives of all CA countries under the auspices of the CA JPoA.
 - The OIC would like to see the recommendations from regional consultations be brought down to the national level where follow up can be ensured.

DAY THREE: TRAINING on the ROLE of RELIGIOUS LEADERS in CONFLICT PREVENTION and RESOLUTION

The purpose of the training day, led by three experts and supported by the Mediation Support Unit of UN DPA, was to:

- ◆ Present a theoretical general framework of mediation and peacebuilding;
- ◆ Reflect on the role of religious leaders in mediation and dialogue;
- ◆ Discuss the participants' own experiences in mediating conflicts/crises, and see how these can be applied to on-going conflicts;
- ◆ Assist religious leaders in the development of more effective and practical mediation skills applied to their current practice.

The following themes were discussed using lectures, case studies and group exercises:

- Concepts of peace and peacemaking in Islam;
- Applying Islamic concepts of peace and peace-making to counter extremism and resolve conflicts;
- Case studies of religious leaders preventing extremism and resolving conflicts around the world and in Central Asia (with a focus on Tajikistan);
- Dialogue and mediation as tools to promote conflict prevention and resolution: 1) an interest-based approach, and 2) skills building;

Some conclusions:

Peacemaking is an integral part of Islam, as the term “Islam” means “peace and submission”. It is a call to unity, justice and tolerance. It prohibits immoral life but also allows for everybody to take their own moral decisions, which means everybody is responsible for his/ her actions. Islamic concepts of peacebuilding provide a wealth of tools that can be used for mediation, conflict resolution and prevention of extremism.

The Quran has many Surahs that preach diversity and unity, coexistence, tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, the sacredness of life and non-violence. As such, the Quran can be used as a source of knowledge against disinformation or partial interpretations. Other traditions such as Hadiths and traditions of ancestors can be used to counter propaganda that misinterprets Islam. Islamic peacemaking is a teaching and tradition that has the potential to transcend divisions, as it makes the connection between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ peace from a spiritual perspective.

A variety of approaches and strategies, from involving religious leaders/Imams, educating young people in traditions of Islam, working with families, schools, mosques and prisons etc., should be developed and enhanced. These strategies include both those directly working on the question of ideology and religious education, as well as providing socio-economic opportunities, such as employment possibilities, education, social programs for marginalized youth, etc..

Detailed and specific knowledge of the evolution of extremist ideologies (such as, for example, those appealing to young people going to fight in Syria and elsewhere) need to be explored further by religious leaders and security organizations. The motivations of young people should also be better understood. These can include other factors apart from ideological affinity, such as, for example: financial incentives; social exclusion in their daily lives; thrill or adventure

seeking; feeling of having an objective in an otherwise aimless life; possibility to fulfil male gender roles/stereotypes, etc..

Next steps identified by participants

At the end of the three day workshop, participants made a full set of recommendations for follow up which included both policy level initiatives and capacity building projects.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

Training and capacity building:

- Identification of potential trainers among community leaders (religious leaders, scholars, activists etc.).
- Development of training modules in Russian based on existing materials and empirical knowledge of the region.
- Capacity building for religious leaders on how to counter and prevent extremism.

Knowledge development and dissemination:

- Analysis and publication of best practices on countering extremism and terrorism.
- Analysis of what motivates the youth (both men and women) of the region to join extremist groups.
- Standardization of religious education (programs, curriculum etc.) and improvement of the overall quality of education.

Institutionalization of dialogue and exchanges at the regional and national levels:

- Establishment of an inter-regional religious council or a similar platform for regular exchanges among religious leaders at the national and regional levels.
- Regular meetings similar to the Almaty meeting at the national levels, bringing together representatives of religious and security institutions.

Awareness raising:

- Standardization of religious education (programs, curriculum etc.) and improvement of the overall quality of education.
- Elaboration of a public awareness strategy to prevent extremism.
- Training for journalists on responsible reporting around questions of religion and extremism.

ACTORS' RESPONSIBILITIES

Security institutions:

- To develop rehabilitation programmes for former fighters to integrate them into a peaceful life.
- To understand the needs of youth (specifically young men and young women) and their gender specific motivations to join extremists.

Religious institutions:

- To increase knowledge in the field of laws and practices in preventing extremism.
- To receive and then further impart training in conflict prevention, terrorism prevention and counter-radicalization.

- To ensure increased qualification of religious leaders on all levels to counter extremist rhetoric
- To work on improving the quality of imparted religious education
- To create platforms for exchanges of experiences within Central Asia.

Governments:

- To implement the four pillars of the CA JPoA.
- To publish best practices on combating extremism and terrorism.
- To establish an Inter-Religious Council for leaders of different confessions to prevent and resolve conflicts and promote peace.
- To strengthen the capacity of relevant religious and security organizations to prevent extremism.
- To create a unified religious education system and standards and to mainstream within official curricula.
- To elaborate a strategy for public awareness in extremism prevention and organize trainings for journalists on prevention and support their further networking.
- To provide psychological, social and economic support for victims of violent extremism and terrorism.
- To ensure women's participation and contribution to a dialogue with religious leaders to promote peace and security from women's perspectives and needs.

International and Regional Organizations:

- To create a CA wide regional platform for youth and civil society organizations, including women and human rights organizations, to cooperate around countering extremism.
- To analyse International Organizations' activities in the field of extremism prevention to avoid duplication and ensure perspectives for further coordinated work.
- To monitor human rights and gender quality standards in initiatives to counter extremism and terrorism.
- To continue to build capacity for the implementation of all pillars of the CA JPoA.