

# Regional Responses to Radicalization in Afghanistan

## Obstacles, Opportunities and an Agenda for Action

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ISBN: 978-82-7288-670-6 (online)

Design: Medicineheads.com





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This PRIO Paper forms part of the project 'Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective', funded by the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While the first phase of the project (2009–2013) led to the preparation of four comprehensive papers (a general overview and framework plus subsequent papers devoted to each of the three regions), this paper is the result of the second phase, aiming to refine the policy implications of the initial study and make those available to broader audiences.

**Acknowledgment:** The author would like to thank Kristian Berg Harpviken, Director of PRIO, for his meticulous reading and commenting on various drafts, and Halvor Berggrav for his editorial assistance. Much gratitude is extended to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support of this research.

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ISBN 978-82-7288-670-6 (online)

Cover design: [www.medicineheads.com](http://www.medicineheads.com)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The establishment of the Vilayat-e Khorasan front of Daesh in Afghanistan has worried neighboring countries, because – unlike the Afghan Taliban, whose ambitions were limited to Afghan territory – Daesh seems to have its eyes on conquering territory beyond present day frontiers. Even if unable to conquer land, its physical and ideological influence could potentially reach marginalized populations throughout the region and attract fighters from outside.

While collaboration on meeting a common threat would be the preferred path, the dominant national security narratives in each of the countries neighboring Afghanistan are painting Daesh as an external phenomenon, leading to mutual blame. Instead of blaming the existence of radical groups such as Daesh solely on foreign ideology, support or funding, a more productive discourse would start from a recognition that Daesh is not just as an external political entity, but a social phenomenon that has domestic root causes. As such, it should not be so much Daesh as a global terrorist organization, as it should be “Daeshism” as the reflection of a domestic radicalization process of concern to all the countries of the region.

If political interests explain the ambitions of leaders, motivations of the rank and file should be sought around social, psychological, and economic factors. Factors that explain the success of recruitment of Daesh in Afghanistan include ideological leanings and extremist religious zeal; poverty and unemployment; lack of education, including of functional Islamic education; Social acceptability within particular groups, and psychological trauma. Recruitment from China and Pakistan also follows similar patterns. In Central Asia, more region-specific factors include political grievances resulting from a crackdown on dissent, and indignity of discrimination experienced by labor migrants in Russia and the lack of a viable identity. The condition that unites all the countries of the region is unbalanced development and widening urban–rural gaps, which leave populations relegated and vulnerable.

Existing responses to radicalization that can lead to violent extremism are of two categories: counter-measures and preventive ones. Shifting the focus from shortsighted counter-extremism to longer-term prevention requires making a distinction between the leaders, who are seeking political gains, and those who fight for a variety of psychological and socio-economic reasons. Counter-measures, with their pros and cons, include the use of military force, which can create backlash; border controls, an important but insufficient tool; the use of intelligence, data gathering, data analysis and data sharing, all in need of proper coordination; the enactment of proper legislation, and monitoring the Internet and social media for illegal and violent content. Preventive measures include working with religious institutions, including educational ones, in order to propagate peaceful messages without restricting religious freedom (which could potentially encourage resistance); and raising public awareness on the dangers of radicalization. The most important step starts from understanding the motivations that drive people and groups to radicalization and targeting the grievances, through provision of employment opportunities, social support, improved religious and secular education and inter-faith and intra-faith dialogue.

Multilateralism is increasingly proving necessary to combat what is decidedly a transnational phenomenon. International and regional organizations operating in the region have a variety of instruments, normative acts and technical assistance programs that can support these processes.

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A new wave of radicalized groups in Afghanistan and the surrounding region has raised the flag of Daesh – right next to other globally oriented violent extremists such as Al-Qaeda and locally focused ones such as the Afghan Taliban. What is the nature of this new extremism? Do states of the region perceive this exclusively as an externally imposed threat, or is there an acknowledgement that many of the drivers of radicalization remain domestic? What is the potential for expanding a coordinated regional response, potentially to become a platform for strengthening regional cooperation?

The establishment of the Vilayat-e Khorasan front of Daesh in Afghanistan has worried neighboring countries, because – unlike the Afghan Taliban, whose ambitions to rule were domestic and non-expansive – Daesh seems to have its eyes on conquering territory beyond present day frontiers. The natural panacea to defeating extremist groups in the region would thus be for the states to collaborate. However, as this paper argues, the dominant national security narratives in each of these countries, including in Afghanistan, paints Daesh as an *external* phenomenon. Rather than working together to meet a common threat, regional countries are engaged in a mutual blame game with negative effect on trust and cooperation.

Instead of blaming the existence of radical groups such as Daesh solely on foreign support, foreign ideology like salafism, or on foreign funding, a more productive security discourse would start from a recognition that Daesh is not just as an external political entity, but a social phenomenon that has domestic root causes. As such, it should not be so much Daesh as a global terrorist organization, as it should be “Daeshism” as the reflection of a domestic radicalization process of concern to all the countries of the region. By reshaping their discourse, regional countries would be able to forge a more cooperative *démarche*, while at the same time recognizing and preventing the spread of radicalization at home.

This paper sets out to examine the threat of and responses to Daesh in the region. It starts with a discussion of how regional states view the phenomenon of radicalization in their midst, before moving on to show how the threat is primarily seen as an external one, denying of its domestic sources. Domestic factors that contribute to radicalization are explored, and finally the analysis turns to the pros and cons of existing prevention and response strategies.

### **From the Heart of Asia to the Eye of Khorasan**

Much of the diplomacy around the Istanbul Process, since its launch in November 2011, has tried to project the benefits of common prosperity in the region if Afghanistan were stabilized.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the so-called Heart of Asia has become the seat of a new front of Daesh outside of the Middle East, and regional countries are understandably anxious, as this latest group of militants has an eye on them. Afghanistan has historically drawn in foreign militant groups, taking advantage of the chaos of invasions and civil wars: The mujahideen, then Al-Qaeda, followed by the Taliban, set the scene for the latest group, an offshoot of Daesh in the Middle East.

At various meetings and interviews, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has been quoted as declaring that “Al-Qaeda was terrorism version 1, ISIS is version 6”.<sup>2</sup> Since December 2014, fighters identifying themselves as Daesh have been gathering in different parts of the country, first in Helmand, then in Badakhshan and Kunduz, and by January 2016, they had established the *Wilayat-e Khorasan* (Province of Khorasan) in Kunar and Nangarhar. Whether Daesh groups in Afghanistan have operational or financial ties to the Islamic State’s (IS) home base in Syria, or are merely

<sup>1</sup> Harpviken, Kristian Berg & Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh. *A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity*. London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press. forthcoming 2016

<sup>2</sup> Ashraf Ghani in Interview with RT news, ‘Al-Qaeda was terrorism version 1, ISIS is version 6’ – Afghan President Ghani to RT’, July 11, 2015. Available <https://www.rt.com/news/273244-ghani-afghanistan-isis-terrorism/>

inspired by the group and uses its name to generate attention, remains unclear. In Nangarhar province, Daesh is supposedly made up of former members of the Afghan Taliban who have become disillusioned by the revelations of the death of their leader Mullah Omar two years earlier and were subsequently recruited by Pakistani Taliban. In Kunar province, the organization allegedly consists of Arabs and seems to have local support from old Salafis who have had a presence there since the 1950s. In the north, it is Central Asian fighters such as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), evacuated from their sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by the Pakistani army, who have pledged allegiance to Daesh.

Regardless of formality of ties to IS, the appellation of the Wilayat-e Khorasan for the seat of their front in Afghanistan is a calculated choice. The term *Khorasan-e bozorg* (great Khorasan) is associated with a cultural and linguistic space encompassing Persian speaking Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Its capture by Daesh consequently echoes the historic region of the Persian Empire that had been conquered by the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th century, becoming home to the rule of the Arabs over non-Arabs in the Islamic Empire.

The entry of Daesh in the region has decidedly worried Afghanistan's neighbors. Unlike the Taliban, which had no ambition to rule over territory beyond Afghanistan, Daesh seems to have its eyes on a larger area to the north of the Amu Darya in Central Asia, over the Durand Line in Pakistan and even into Iran and China. Even if it is unable to take territory, its influence, physical or ideological, could potentially reach disenfranchised and marginalized populations throughout the region. It could also attract fighters outside the region, and be source of inspiration for existing insurgency groups. The potential entry of Daesh into the region is furthermore worrying for the potential for sectarian (Shia-Sunni) or intra-Sunni ideological (Hanafi/Deobandi versus Salafi) violence, something that has never taken full hold in the region (in contrast to several countries in the Middle East). Unlike the Taliban, which largely avoided anti-Shia violence, Daesh subscribes to the more austere Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam and is prepared to apply ultra violent means to achieve its goals.

For all these reasons, the neighbors of Afghanistan have been wary of the presence of insurgents on their borders. China fears the spread of radicalism to its restive Uyghur population in Xinjiang province, and Central Asian countries are cautious about the potential return of an estimated 2,500 citizens that have been recruited from the region to join the ranks of Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), which had moved their insurgency outside of Central Asia in recent years – joining the Taliban in Afghanistan and training camps in Pakistan – could be invigorated by the presence of Daesh in the region. Iran, increasingly warming up to the idea of co-existence with the Taliban in its neighborhood, is decidedly hostile to the presence of any offshoots of a Sunni Takfiri group that has been violently anti-Shia and anti-Iranian in the Middle East. Neighboring countries are also concerned that, in the case of a Daesh takeover in Afghanistan, they would have a humanitarian crisis at their doorstep with the forced movement of refugees. Countries that have a stake in the stability of Afghanistan for the transit of oil, gas and electricity in the region are also concerned about the potential threat to the stability of economic infrastructure such as roads, bridges and pipelines.

### **Daesh as an External Enemy: Cooperation among Skeptics**

While Daesh has gained presence in Afghanistan, and continues its recruitment from Central Asia, Pakistan and China, considerable anxiety is building up in regional countries, where the elites are in denial about the domestic root causes of radicalization. The dominant narrative within the security apparatus in states of the region is of Daesh as an 'external phenomenon', tied to sectarian and great power politics in the Middle East, hence supposedly detached from the reality of the

region. Speculations run as to whether the primary interest of Daesh in the region is economic (controlling the drug trade, energy routes etc.), geopolitical (weakening and threatening Russia, Iran and China), ideological (establishing a Salafi inspired modern caliphate), or sectarian (creating a rift between the Sunnis and Shias of the region).

In Iran, where radicalization is neither seen nor recognized as a domestic concern, most queries are about finding out who is responsible for the creation of Daesh in the first place. Much of the blame is placed on the USA for its invasion of Iraq, which destabilized the region and triggered ethnic and sectarian conflicts; or on Saudi Arabia, which allegedly funds the Sunni Daesh fundamentalists propagating an extreme version of the Kingdom's own Salafi ideology. The discourse within Central Asian security circles is about monetary incentives behind the recruitment of migrant workers in Russia, while there is very little attention to potential ideological sympathies. Central Asian governments, echoing Russia's position, are concerned with the sources of funding that sustain Daesh, including, in addition to oil sales and extortion, the allegedly \$1 billion made annually on Afghan heroin trafficked through Daesh-controlled territory.<sup>3</sup> The Pakistani government, which in the past may have mentored (or used) terrorist groups attacking the interests of other states (Lashkar-e Taiba against India, the various Mujahideen groups against the Soviet Union, the Taliban against the Russian and Iranian backed Mujahideen, etc.), is also now finding it more opportune to paint its own enemies as foreign. Islamabad claimed, for example, that the January 2016 attack on Bacha Khan University in Khyber Pakhtunwa province was orchestrated by militants in Afghanistan with support from intelligence in India and Afghanistan (both of which denied any involvement).

Afghanistan's Khorasan branch of Daesh has decidedly created more mistrust between states. President Ghani, not only at the World Economic Forum in Davos, but also in his subsequent interview on BBC claimed that Daesh was not an Afghan phenomenon and that, with their high degree of resilience, alienated by the atrocities committed by Daesh, the Afghan people would "bury them".<sup>4</sup> By portraying the threat as external, the Afghan government tries to kill a number of birds with one stone. First, it appeals to the USA for continued support, financial and military, for its struggle against a sworn enemy of the West. Second, the discourse puts a wedge between the Taliban, a local movement with whom the Afghan government could potentially find common language and eventually share power, and foreign enemies they would fight together. Third, the insistence on the 'foreign' adjective hints at the continued meddling of neighbors in Afghan affairs and the use of Afghan soil for proxy wars (between India and Pakistan for example, or between Iran and Saudi Arabia).

Denial of the domestic conditions of radicalization that have allowed for a phenomenon such as Daesh (or other militants before it) to take root, has materialized in a mutual blame game which demolishes all trust between states and hampers the chances for cooperation to defeat militancy in the first place. Mutual trust, the quintessential ingredient for cooperation on countering radicalism, terrorism and violent extremism, is low in a region where states have frequently used non-state actors to further their national interests. India and Pakistan accuse each other of using militant groups to target each other's interests on Afghan soil. Iran and Saudi Arabia do the same in the Middle East, where the phenomenon of Daesh has reinforced divisions rather than having served as an impetus for cooperation. In Syria, Daesh has become a point of contention between the USA and its allies on the one hand, and a Russia–Iran alliance on the other. Reactions to Daesh have also manifested as mistrust between states, with mutual accusations of double standards between

<sup>3</sup> FSKN head Viktor Ivanov quoted on RT News, 'High finance: ISIS generates up to \$1bn annually from trafficking Afghan heroin', 6 March 2015. Available <https://www.rt.com/news/238369-isis-drug-money-trafficking/>

<sup>4</sup> Ashraf Ghani in interview with Lyse Doucet, 'IS in Afghanistan: We will bury them, says President Ghani', BBC, 25 January 2016. Available <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35395782>

Russia and the United States, and the renewal of a Sunni–Shia strife between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

On the one hand, regional politicians and statesmen paint Daesh as a common enemy, a non-state actor which can only be defeated through regional cooperation among states. On the other hand, however, the official security discourses on countering violent extremism and terrorism in these countries tend to blame other states for using non-state entities as proxies for their national interests. This paradox is created primarily because Daesh is seen solely as a political entity within a state-based system, instead of being seen for what it also is: a social movement that responds to ineffective states.

To classify Daesh as a purely external phenomenon is counter-productive for a number of reasons. For one, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly the provenance and delimitation of the different groups that are known under the loose name of Daesh today. Motivations are also at flux, with groups merging and separating strategically according to changing local interests. Furthermore, to identify countries behind Daesh not only converts queries into conspiracy theories, but is also an impossible task: A number of countries may directly or indirectly have been involved in the creation and funding of Daesh. Many other ones, including those of the region, are directly or indirectly benefiting from its presence. Most importantly, seeing Daesh as purely an external phenomenon constitutes outright denial, ignoring the point that the movement represents a symbol for the attraction of radicalization. “Daeshism”, in effect, is a condition that exists in most countries and societies.

### **The Neglected Domestic Element: A Name that Hides a Trend**

In Afghanistan, the new alleged presence of Daesh is a continuation of the decades of wars, with different groups neutralizing each other (Taliban fighting the Mujahideen in the 1990s, Daesh apparently fighting the Taliban in some parts, mostly in the South, while the two are allegedly supporting each other in other parts, such as in the North). While tribal conflicts and political interests, including those of foreign states and groups, may explain the *raison d'être* of Daesh as a new avenue for insurgency in Afghanistan, these factors do not fully explain why the ranks of this group are becoming swelled with new recruits. If political interests explain the ambitions of leaders, motivations of the rank and file should be sought around social, psychological, and economic factors. Daesh, after all, is not just a political movement tied to regional and geo-political interests, but a social movement with domestic roots.

Disillusionment with the Taliban partly explains the success of recruitment of Daesh in Afghanistan. Other factors that draw attention to the attraction of radicalization both in Afghanistan and in the other countries from where recruitment is taking place (Pakistan, China, Central Asia etc.) include:

- Ideological leanings and extremist religious zeal, with Takfiri ideology propagating one's religious beliefs as the only way, fostered in some unofficial madrasas, in mosques, prisons and informal social networks.
- Poverty and unemployment, which combine to create idleness and grievances, making promises of monetary remuneration by recruiters especially attractive.
- Marginalization through illiteracy and lack of education, while the lack of functional Islamic education makes potential recruits vulnerable to propaganda and wrong interpretations of Islam.
- Social acceptability within particular groups, including peer pressure and admiration for charismatic leaders.

- Psychological trauma, including reactions to the widespread loss of family members, in a region where insurgents are met with indiscriminate force causing so-called collateral damage in the form of the death of innocents civilians.

In Central Asia, the same socio-economic grievances that facilitate recruitment are at play, but a few additional region-specific factors include:

- Political grievances and reaction to political pressures, including oppression or repressive government policies, violation of community's rights, pressure on religion (even of moderate groups), discrimination, injustice and, forcible resettlement of populations.
- Indignity arising from experiences of discrimination, dishonor and marginalization which Central Asian workers feel as illegal labor migrants in Russia.
- Transition identity vacuum arising from the demise of top down (outside in) socialism and the failure of nationalism to take root as an attractive alternative ideology.
- Limited religious knowledge at a time when many Central Asian turned to Islam for identity. The more the states tried to suppress the thirst for Islamic education, the more the ground became prepared for the propaganda of underground clergy, many of which came from abroad preaching Salafism, which is markedly different from the Hanafi tradition of the region).

In other countries of the region, political radicalization is localized and specific to a geographic area where different political groups have separatist demands. Examples include the Jundullah, a Sunni separatist group operating in the Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran, Muslim separatist group East Turkistan Islamic Movement and their influence over Uyghur populations living in Xinxiang in China, as well as Chechens and other groups in the North Caucasus in Russia.

One condition that unites all the countries of the region and puts them at risks is the challenge of unbalanced development. All the countries surrounding Afghanistan are undergoing a process of rapid change that is creating tension between modernizers and traditionalists, between those who strive to take society forward by means of technology, education and modern values, and those who resist change. At the same time, rapid urbanization and opportunities in cities have widened the urban-rural gap, leaving pockets of deeply poor and politically marginalized populations in the countryside. These populations become highly vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups.

## Responses to Radicalization

Approaches to defeating radicalization and violent extremism can be divided into two categories: either countering its consequences as a phenomenon or preventing it from coming about in the first place. The dominant responses are in the former category, that of counter-terrorism: identifying extremists and their political ambitions, targeting (politically, legally or militarily) individuals and groups engaged in violent extremism, curbing the financing that sustains their efforts, and preventing their travel across borders. While these types of measures are necessary in order to confront already mobilized extremists, long-term success depends on prevention. An over-focus on countermeasures and, in particular, on military response to insurgency as a political and geopolitical tool, does not address the social and economic root causes that feed the problem in the first case. Shifting the perspective from counter-extremism to prevention requires focusing not only on leaders, who are seeking political gains, but also those who fight for a variety of psychological and socio-economic reasons.

While the counter-measures seek to control the potential damage that radicalized individuals can instigate, they are not sufficient to prevent future radicalization. Furthermore, they could also potentially exacerbate radicalization if they are indiscriminate, overly restrictive or imply drastic

limitations on freedom of religion and expression. The key to the future lies in preventing radicalization in the first place. As UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon noted in his remarks to the Security Council High Level Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters on 24 September 2014:

Over the longer-term, the biggest threat to terrorists is not the power of missiles – it is the politics of inclusion. It's peaceful societies and respect for human rights. It's education, jobs and real opportunity. It's leaders who listen to their people and uphold the rule of law. Missiles may kill terrorists. But good governance kills terrorism.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now turn to a brief review of the key types of responses to radicalism that exist in the region, distinguishing, in line with the discussion above, between counter-measures and preventive ones.

### Counter-measures

- The use of *military force* against radical groups may bring quick results for eliminating training sites, sending a threatening message, or killing suspected terrorists. Unfortunately, it is also likely to create backlash and victimization and therefore serve at cross-purposes to prevention measures. The neighborhood has ample evidence of increased radicalization as a result of military campaigns, such as the reaction to drone attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan and in Afghanistan.
- *Border controls*, to prevent the trespassing of radical groups and individuals, is high on the agenda in the region. To be successful, border control requires enhanced cooperation not only between law enforcement agencies within countries, but also between countries within and beyond the region. Securing borders goes past mere interdiction and demands first and foremost political will for cooperation. Ultimately, a successful border control policy should also assume a developmental approach, involving the communities living in the border areas, and ensuring that interdiction is conducted within the rule of law.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, border controls is an important but insufficient tool. After all, radicalism involves indoctrination and ideology, which is not stopped by physical borders.
- The use of *intelligence, data gathering, data analysis and data sharing* are perhaps essential tools for recognizing and countering radicalization. Again, however, caution is necessary, as over-surveillance would be to the detriment of basic freedoms (of movement, of speech, of religion, etc.). Risk assessment and intelligence is effective only if data is shared among relevant officials across regional countries in real time. However, the existence of a multitude of different databases and channels of communication in the region hamper coordination and cooperation. Law enforcement officials in the region can begin cooperation and exchange of data at the bilateral level, but their efforts can only be enhanced by cooperating multilaterally within the region. This could be facilitated by drawing on established institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) or the United Nations.
- The enactment of *proper legislation* is key. While Afghanistan and its neighbors have legislation against terrorism, these legal frameworks need to be reviewed and adapted to new realities. One such issue is the interdicting of citizens from traveling abroad to

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<sup>5</sup> Available <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8040>

<sup>6</sup> Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Kasimsho Iskandarov and Abdul Ahad Mohammadi, *Strangers Across the Amu River: Community Perceptions Along the Tajik-Afghan Borders*, Working Paper Number 4, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Open Society Institute, October 2015.

become a foreign fighter, following UN Security Council resolution 2178 on this issue, passed in fall of 2014. But while proper legislation is necessary, its enactment is often challenged by the lacks of institutional capacity and harmonized definitions of key concepts such as terrorism, terrorist acts, and radicalization. Legislative frameworks need to be strengthened, harmonized across states, adequately implemented and monitored from a human rights and religious freedom perspective.

- *Monitoring the Internet* and social media for content that spreads radical narratives and propaganda or conducts recruitment for violent actions constitute major parts of counter-radicalization policies. A full blockage of social media and websites, however, is both problematic and ineffective. If sites are closed, their moderators would simply move to other sites, making it harder to trace and monitor the activities. Monitoring the Internet also requires technologies, as well as new laws and surveillance practices that do not impede on freedoms. While restricting the internet may not be effective, there is much that should be done by regional governments together with media outlets and journalists in terms of cooperation in the development of counter-narratives and awareness-raising for the public. The Internet should be propped up as a platform for dialogue and rational solutions.

### Preventive Measures

- Where radicalization is suspected, *interdiction of sites of religious education or assembly* is a frequent preventive measure used by the regional countries, focusing on government-established limitations on Islamic education or assembly (e.g. control of Madrasa curriculum, Friday sermons by official state-sponsored religious leaders, financing of mosques and clergy, and government publications on ‘proper’ religious values). Yet, the success of these programs has not been measured with any degree of reliability. Furthermore, while these measures seek to control the potentially radical and incorrect messaging that Muslims receive, they could potentially encourage resistance if they are experienced as overly restrictive or if they come with drastic limitations on freedom of religion and expression.
- Above all, however, it is important, to *understand the motivations* that drive people and groups to radicalization. This would require examining jointly the sources and drivers of radicalization in the region and thinking jointly on what can be done to combat it. It would also mean a continuous exchange of best practices in preventing and dealing with radicalization at the national level, for adoption by others with similar challenges and capabilities. Prevention, therefore, requires a broad approach: knowledge of the motivations that lead people to be recruited into marginal, violent extremist organizations; and awareness-raising and the promotion of a culture of peace, dialogue and tolerance via traditional and social media as well as through the education system. A variety of approaches and strategies should be developed, such as involving religious leaders, educating young people about religion, and working with families, schools, mosques and prisons. Cooperation with community religious leaders is also key in order to raise awareness about peaceful religious principles and to counter extremist narratives.
- Once motivations are understood, long-term strategies against radicalization should *address the grievances* that radicals – or those vulnerable to radicalization – refer to as justifying their resistance. This would include the countering of discrimination in society and job markets, and encouraging more representative government. Regional governments also need to pay more attention to the quality of the education systems in general in order to provide opportunities for youth and to prevent them from seeking

alternative ways of life. The education systems need to be thoroughly modernized to respond to the needs of growing labor markets.

- Any long term approach rests on *raising public awareness*, through actively preparing and disseminating messages for young people, prison inmates, migrant workers, and others, for example in the form of lectures and televised interviews with former terrorists on the dangers of radicalization and of joining terrorist organizations. As the experiences of Central Asian countries show, a lack of religious education makes youth particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation and to the spreading of ideas that incite intolerance and hatred.
- Finally, one of the most important strategies for the prevention of further radicalization is *dialogue*, within and between both faiths and ethnicities. Being an assault on thoughts, radicalization requires a response in terms of thoughts. As religious radicalization is happening within Islam, more dialogue and public exchange is necessary in order to expose the viewpoints of different branches and interpretations of Islam on matters such as peace, economy, human rights, governance, and violence. A healthy debate about the role of religion in society is necessary, be that in secular states like the Central Asian republics, Russia, China or in Islamic Republics such as Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Exchanges need to be organized between Sunni clergy, with a view to develop counter narratives. They could also exchange curriculum for madrasas and share knowledge about what can be taught in these religious schools. Specialized trainings could be organized for different groups who may be exposed to the problem and could play a role in prevention, such as journalists, religious leaders, community leaders, prison guards and law enforcement authorities.

### The role of international and regional organizations

While most countries of the region largely engage on bilateral cooperation – such as extradition treaties and police and intelligence exchanges – to fight what is fundamentally a transnational phenomenon, multilateralism is gaining ground in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism in the region. In November 2011, Central Asian countries adopted a Joint Plan of Action for the implementation of the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia with the help of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA).<sup>7</sup> The same year, Afghanistan and its neighbors also set out to cooperate through the Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process, which includes counter terrorism as one of its Confidence Building Measures (CBMs).<sup>8</sup> The final communiqué of the last Ministerial Meeting of the Istanbul Process held in Islamabad in December 2015 called on common action to fight extremism and terrorism with the help of regional organizations,<sup>9</sup> as did the Declaration of the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building (CICA) the year before.<sup>10</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RCTS), based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan have also been increasingly engaged in fighting what China, the organization’s initiator, calls the three evils: Terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. The potential enlargement of the SCO to include India and Pakistan (and possibly Iran), and the observer role of Afghanistan can help the organization become an important regional player in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism.

<sup>7</sup> Available [http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Portals/unrcca/Counter-Terrorism/outputs/matrix/Final\\_matrix\\_en.pdf](http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Portals/unrcca/Counter-Terrorism/outputs/matrix/Final_matrix_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Available <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/counter-terrorism-cbm/>

<sup>9</sup> Available <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/1300-hrs-Final-Islamabad-Declaration-9-Dec-2015.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Available [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t1160961.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1160961.shtml)

Regional and international organizations can particularly be helpful to Afghanistan and its neighbors in a number of ways:

- First of all, they can contribute to *knowledge creation*, including commissioning studies on the sources and drivers of radicalization in the region, establishing a roster of experts, and organizing exchanges of best practices in prevention through tolerance, dialogue, support to ethnic groups and socio-economic development of disenfranchised regions.
- Relatedly, they could develop and deliver *specialized training* programs for journalists, Imams and religious leaders, community leaders, prison guards and law enforcement authorities.
- Third, they may organize *exchanges* and cooperation between religious leaders, journalists and civil society representatives, with a particular focus on the youth. Women's NGOs and community leaders should also be involved as they could play an essential role in influencing youth.
- Fourth, organizations can support the updating and *harmonization of legislation* in the region, particularly elements related to foreign fighters, counter-terrorism, counter-extremism and radicalization.
- Fifth, knowledge on preventing *the use of the internet* for recruitment and radicalization (technically and legally) should be developed, and systematically exchanged. This could include developing counter narratives.
- Finally, organizations can support the preparation of *national action plans* modeled on the UN's Plan of Action for Countering Violent Terrorism (2015).<sup>11</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The challenge of violent extremism in Afghanistan is large – as it is in countries of the wider neighborhood – and seems to be undergoing steady growth. The phenomenon is genuinely transnational, and requires a coordinated *multilateral* response, but this is made difficult by the tendency of individual countries to see radicalization as imposed by other states, rather than as a reflection of domestic conditions. This paper makes a distinction between counter-measures (to already existent extremists) and preventive measures (for potential long-term recruits), drawing attention to the tendency of the regional countries to focus more on the former – to the detriment of the latter's longer term effects. Along with a potential multilateral approach or indeed prior to, there should be political commitment to seek the *domestic* roots and conditions that allow for violent extremism and radicalization to happen instead of blaming the phenomena as purely external. The good news is that a menu of responses is already available, ready for adoption; just as there are functioning regional institutions present to form the basis for genuinely regional initiatives.

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<sup>11</sup> Available <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=A/70/674>

