

Counter-Radicalization Policies in Central Asia

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

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In 2011, four Central Asian states signed a Joint Plan of Action in Ashgabat pledging to work together to counter radicalization and terrorism in the region. Since then, Central Asia's states have [fared far better](#) than other world regions in avoiding or suppressing terrorism; indeed, the recent attacks in Bishkek and Kazakhstan are a reminder of how rare deadly terrorist attacks are in Central Asia in comparison to Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the United States. And yet, most observers suggest that Central Asia's governments are [doing poorly](#) in countering growing radicalization across the region.

Central Asian officials insist that sustainable counter-terrorism policies must include partnerships with local communities and civil associations, but such insistence is rarely followed up with holistic programs to prevent extremism that can lead to violence and terrorism. This failure has less to do with weak state capacity or political unwillingness to work with communities; rather, it is rooted in ignorance of the drivers and extent of radicalization.

Central Asian officials remain both ignorant of radicalization movements within their own territories and its root causes. This knowledge gap has consequences for policymakers who sponsor programs designed to prevent radicalization in that region (and beyond). Closing this gap would help them retool existing initiatives in ways that strengthen counter-radicalization programs.

The Good: An Appetite for Cooperation

In recent years, Central Asian states have demonstrated greater interest and willingness to cooperate with one another on counter-terrorism. In November 2011, representatives of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan came together in Ashgabat to sign a [Joint Plan of Action](#) for the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-

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Terrorism Strategy. This plan of action followed months of high-level meetings, and the signatories agreed to undertake forty measures designed to prevent terrorism and address conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

In many ways, the plan's numerous measures are unrealistic. According to one component, the signatories will:

“specifically target...national strategies on youth, women, returning migrants and other vulnerable groups in initiatives for education, sustainable human development, social justice, including fighting poverty, and social inclusion in order to reduce their marginalization and vulnerability to violent extremism and recruitment by terrorists.”

Another section commits the signatories to:

“engage civil society and research institutions to raise public awareness of... national and regional counter-terrorism strategies, tap into local expertise to assist...in implementation, receive feedback on the effectiveness of...counter-terrorism policies, and facilitate two-way information sharing with the public.”

These and other measures would ultimately require Central Asian states to undergo major makeovers of their coercive mechanisms as well as social and economic policies and attitudes toward their citizens. In short, it would require them to look more like European states.

The good news is that—despite the lofty goals of the above plans—Central Asian states have become more engaged with one another and the international community in counter-terrorism issues. Even Uzbekistan, which did not sign the Joint Plan of Action and follows a go-it-alone approach to security, is shadowing many of the measures.

More importantly, since signing the plan, Central Asian officials have come to recognize that they need to go beyond hard security measures. At a [high-level meeting](#) on radicalization that can lead to violent extremism in March 2016, Central Asian officials admitted that better engagement is needed with communities and public associations to prevent radicalization in the region and to de-radicalize those who had internalized violent extremist ideology.

A representative from Kazakhstan present at the meeting explained that such approaches have to be more proactive and intensive in reaching out to communities and that “we can't just do pamphlets” about the evils of terrorism. An official from Kyrgyzstan spoke about efforts by the prosecutor-general's office to create a website with useful narratives to counter extremist narratives ISIS is using to recruit young men

and women to its ranks. At the same time, Central Asian officials and NGO representatives present at the meeting admitted that such measures are passive and insufficient: It can take months to hammer out the language and format of such anti-extremist messaging, while ISIS churns out glitzier public relations material in a matter of hours. The high-level meeting ended with consensus that governments and societies across Central Asia must strengthen their collaboration to empower vulnerable communities to resist radicalization.

One further indicator of a shift in thinking across the region to counter-terrorism is the Secretary-General's [Plan of Action](#) for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE), which was released in late 2015. The plan of action encourages all states to develop holistic PVE strategies. It also calls on governments to recognize that their own policies may intensify radicalization:

“Nothing can justify violent extremism but we must also acknowledge that it does not arise in a vacuum. Narratives of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored and aspirations are being crushed.”

The response to the Secretary-General's plan has been muted in Central Asia with officials neither openly rejecting nor ignoring the PVE, despite its major attention to rights. Central Asian officials seem keen to expand collaboration with public and civil associations, while side-stepping the language of human rights.

The Bad: In the Dark on Radicalization

Any progress in Central Asia on the adoption of a more holistic approach to counter terrorism requires a solid understanding of the roots and extent of radicalization in the region. Yet studies of radicalization are few and far between and have several limitations:

- 1) they are often based on the extrapolation of patchy data leading to contradictory conclusions;
- 2) in the absence of data, they focus on describing or analyzing counter-radicalization programs; or
- 3) they are more interested in debating one another than in addressing the root causes of the phenomenon.

Consider the following studies commissioned by international organizations: One 2012 [study](#) based on extensive polling and focus groups in Tajikistan presented statistics concerning people's perceptions of the causes of radicalization and the extent of their familiarity with extremist groups. The study revealed that people tend to learn more

about extremist groups from friends and family than from religious establishments or mosques. Another internal UN study on Kyrgyzstan in 2015 warned about unfettered mosque construction in Osh oblast and cited the lack of religious and theological competence among law-enforcement agencies. While the first study underplayed the role of religion, the second study ascribed to religious sites a central role in radicalization processes.

A larger number of studies focus on government counter-radicalization programs and their chances at success. While some studies are exceptionally researched and highly analytical, such as Noah Tucker's [series of articles](#) published by the Central Asia Program on official initiatives to counter the narratives and ideology of violent extremist networks, most publications ultimately side-step the issue of how deep and broad radicalization is in the region. Moreover, scholars and experts seem more interested in debunking other studies than in providing better data themselves. One such recent example is the [lengthy rejoinder](#) by Heathershaw and Montgomery to International Crisis Group (ICG) reports, entitled "The Myth of Post-Soviet Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics." Heathershaw and Montgomery attack a series of claims that Islamization and radicalization are the same, that authoritarianism and poverty cause radicalization and that underground Muslim groups are necessarily radical. They fault radicalization studies for using scant and unreliable data and reading too much into isolated incidents. However thought provoking, they do not leave us with an alternate picture of where radicalization begins and ends in the region.

The lack of reliable data and knowledge creates a serious policy problem: while Central Asian officials laud the virtues of holistic policies, in the absence of solid data they fall back on what they know best. For example, they continue to favor hard counter-terrorism measures to punish or prevent terrorism rather than broader measures that might stem or slow the tide of radicalization. Tajikistan's authorities have been particularly aggressive at using the police and prosecutorial systems of the country to jail people they have labelled as radical, including members of non-violent opposition groups. By the first quarter of 2016, Tajik officials reported numbers of terrorist and extremism-related crimes that exceeded those of the entire previous year—a trend that is likely more attributable to intensified policing and hard measures than of an increase in violent extremism. This outcome has taken place despite the multi-year effort of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to assist Tajikistan in drafting a comprehensive counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism strategy. An internal report recently slammed the draft strategy for being too top-down, too focused on repression and violating freedom of religion and association.

Although it would be right to blame Tajikistan for its heavy-handedness, the international community and international organizations must share the blame in pushing Tajikistan to adopt policies that require a major makeover of its institutions and that do not operate with a clear theory of the drivers of radicalization. When asked why

youth in Tajikistan are particularly vulnerable to radicalization, an OSCE representative provided an answer that is all-encompassing, including: unemployment, poverty, labor migration, a lack of access to religion, poor religious education, an ideological vacuum, a perceived lack of future opportunities, and a lack of social engagement. These conditions can easily describe a large proportion of the youth in the developing and developed world alike, and yet Belgium's Muslims are eighteen times more likely to go to Syria or Iraq as foreign terrorist fighters than are Tajik citizens.

Given the multitude of unproven possible causes, Central Asian authorities tend to favor uncomplicated policies. For instance, many states remain heavily invested in the religious dimension of violent extremism, and they have deployed religious leaders to counter the narratives of ISIS, despite evidence indicating that religious leaders are not effective messengers. As Scott Atran [explained](#) at a UN briefing on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) in November 2015, radicalization rarely occurs in mosques and 80 percent of FTFs have no religious education. It is hard to see what imams and religious leaders can do to prevent radicalization, especially if religion is not a motivating force. Counter-radicalization programs in Kyrgyzstan are learning this the hard way as they see little return on their investments in moderate religious messaging. As one NGO leader who works closely with state organizations explained to me, internet videos of young religious leaders reciting the Quran and spreading moderate messages have struggled to hit 500 views, despite taking months and substantial funds to produce.

The Ugly: Just Spend It Down

International organizations and donor states have jumped on the counter-radicalization bandwagon spending millions of dollars to encourage Central Asian states to adopt more comprehensive, preventative approaches to radicalization and counter-terrorism. Unfortunately, such international programs have been ineffectual, competitive, and even counterproductive.

For several years, the European Union has funded UN initiatives in Central Asia that were designed to implement the various measures of the Ashgabat declaration. The initiatives were little more than disconnected "talk shops" on what religious leaders, media, or border management actors can do to further regional counter-terrorism initiatives. Religious leaders attended workshops and made predictable statements on the need to protect Islam from being manipulated by violent extremists; media representatives were brought together for two days of quasi-training to learn how to better report on terrorism; and representatives of border control institutions attended a separate event where they outlined the challenges managing borders without any connection to counter-terrorism.

These events produced wordy reports replete with self-evident statements and recommendations while resulting in zero follow up. A 2016 event on recognizing and

responding to radicalization that took place in Almaty was not much different. As a UN official in charge of implementing the event told me, “Let’s not get ambitious. We need a well-choreographed event where people will come, say some nice things and go home.” Such indifference is particularly egregious at a time when European taxpayers, who have suffered major terror attacks on their own soil, could put counter-terrorism funds to better use domestically.

Fixing the Approaches

There is genuine interest in Central Asia for a more comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism. However, the approach that is being offered up by the UN or Western donors may not necessarily win out. Russia and China have become more actively involved in the region and are offering Central Asia different roadmaps for countering violent extremism. Chinese officials speak about the success their model has had in suppressing terrorist incidents in Xinjiang. While they describe their approach as one that includes deep engagement with communities, in reality much of it hinges on flooding communities with police forces. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) offers a promising youth-oriented approach to counter-radicalization for member states through the work of its Anti-Terrorism Center, but in the Russian Federation itself the soft measures of the Medvedev era have long been supplanted by President Vladimir Putin’s heavy use of police and the justice system, as well as a paramilitary approach in frontier areas like the Northern Caucasus. As an ICG expert [explains](#), this approach has had immediate results, reducing terror incidents by 50 percent, even as it threatens to increase grievances and societal radicalization that can lead to much greater violence in the long term.

Central Asian officials are more likely to be wooed by initiatives that prevent or decrease terror incidents immediately rather than long-term programs that require painful reforms and styles of societal engagement with which they are not entirely comfortable. Yet there is hope because well-placed, high-level officials and technocrats seem convinced of the need for a preventative approach. For this outlook to prevail, the international community—in particular the UN and Western donors—must take several measures:

- Engage with Russia, the CIS, China, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on countering-radicalization and not just counter-terrorism policies. While Russia and China may not find the approaches of the UN or Western actors like the United States, EU, and OSCE entirely favorable, it would be useful to have them agree with “do no harm” policies to the latter’s approaches as they pursue their own initiatives.
- Sponsor studies on the causes and extent of radicalization in Central Asia and ensure their translation to/from English and Russian to ensure they reach all

relevant policymakers. The focus of such studies needs to be on reliable data and dynamics of regional radicalization processes rather than debates on definitions.

- Fund task forces and working groups in each country to implement discrete, evidence-based elements of the PVE strategy, not bloated workshops dominated by international officials who lecture and talk over Central Asian representatives.

Measures such as the above can go a long way in addressing knowledge gaps in radicalization processes across Central Asia and lead to a more coordinated and effective implementation of PVE and counter-terrorism initiatives. Without such knowledge, the initiatives will miss the opportunity to make the most of a rare opportunity for meaningful cooperation across the region.

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