Perceptions and Reality:

Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia and Afghanistan

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Almaty 2019

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Executive Summary

Central Asian approach to counter extremism and terrorism have led to a significant level of securitization, challenging political rights and civil liberties. While strengthening the legitimate use of force to ensure domestic security is necessary, current states' efforts make it difficult to build strategic partnerships in countering violent extremism and terrorism. More importantly, Central Asian counterterrorism cooperation is limited in its capacity and resources as there is no synchronized policy towards combating terrorism and Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, a 40-year war has completely erased the boundaries between counterterrorism and peace enforcement. Peace is essential to the country's reconciliation and reconstruction, so as counterterrorism, if effective and result-oriented, will lead to peace that everyone has become hungry for. In reality, it is very difficult to divide those two parts with international presence and their different approaches to build peace and combat terrorism in Afghanistan.

This paper tries to address the questions that have not been answered properly by both Afghan and Central Asian counterterrorism community. They include understanding of extremism and terrorism, counterterrorism strategies and goals, enemies, terrorist organizations, and level of the threat.

Whereas this broad approach to tackle counterterrorism can be doubtful, it is the only way to explore the specific limits of counterterrorism cooperation in a broader region without highlighting and bringing the discussions to importance of peace, big infrastructure projects, regional connectivity that is working properly as desired, and international geopolitical confrontation among the United States, China and Russia in the region.

The paper rather seeks to explore the understanding of terrorism, existing narratives and mutual perceptions (or misperceptions) regarding counterterrorism in a post-Taliban Afghanistan and Central Asia, which are facing common insurgency groups and the threat will stay there. Finally, the paper discusses the need to develop whole-of-society approach to combat terrorism through practical counterterrorism cross-border cooperation and enhancing track two diplomacy to understand what is working and what is not, who poses an immediate threat and how it will be addressed to build resilient to radical ideology societies and nations in the long run.

Content

Introduction

Violent extremism and terrorism (VET) in Central Asian countries and Afghanistan have been significantly politicized and securitized, yet at the same time unexplored. As these six nations have been trying to adequately combat terrorism, each of them has gained an experience with both successes and failures that they can share to perform better. Addressing key narratives, drivers of radicalization and existing policies and learning from each other will help break stereotypes and build strategic partnership for regional stability and prosperity in the long run.

Even though Afghanistan has been suffering from the war on terror much longer than its Central Asian counterparts, the six countries have accumulated much more in common than they can even expect while countering violent extremism and terrorism.

Combating violent extremism and terrorism plays crucial role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. However, little is known about the Afghan counterterrorism efforts in Central Asia and vice versa. As the topic is highly politicized and securitized, it is unclear what is the state-of-the art when it comes to counter VET, who is fighting against who, who is an enemy and what the country has achieved so far. Basically, this paper as an attempt to understand how Central Asian countries and Afghanistan perceive each other when it comes to countering violent extremism and terrorism, how counterterrorism cooperation is maintained, what is the nature of the threat and how it influences common and different approaches in counterterrorism, and finally what lessons can be learnt and whether there is a room for regional opportunities to perform better. This paper is based on a series of in-depth interviews that were conducted on a Chatham house rule with the Afghan senior officials at the President's Office, national security agencies, line ministries and civil society representatives.

Violent Extremism and Terrorism: From Understanding to Policy Making

According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), created by the Australian Institute for Economic and Peace, [1]the countries of Central Asia enjoys relatively stable situation with a low level of terrorism threat, while Afghanistan is endlessly striving for peace. Whereas this index considers the number of terrorist attacks, casualties and injures, as well as the level of property damage, caused by a terrorist incident, it is worth mentioning that the calculations include only incidents that were reported, excluding prevention of a terrorist attack.

Country	Ranking	Index
Afghanistan	2	9.441
India	8	7.534
Iran	53	3.714
Kazakhstan	67	2.96
Kyrgyzstan	79	1.989
Pakistan	5	8.4
Tajikistan	72	2.427
Turkmenistan	130	0
Uzbekistan	125	0.077

Chart 1. Central Asia-South Asia GTI positions[2]

With the existing problem of free flow of information (or lack of access to information) in both Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, an actual threat of both violent extremism and terrorism is usually biased and manipulated by both local governments and non-regional actors, thus cannot be completely reliable. Among key indicators that were developed to examine Central Asian countries' and Afghanistan's approaches in counterterrorism, five main criteria have been selected to better understand the nature of the threat, its impact on national security and citizens' well-being, as well as counterterrorism efforts

Vague Terminology and Language

The definition of extremism and terrorism has been lacking in Afghanistan. While the Afghan security services, government officials and experts generally agree the definition of terrorism is unclear, they all believe extremism is not that deep as a phenomenon as terrorism and is always overshadowed by the latter. As a result, much is known about the role of the United States in its global war on terror, and much less is illustrated about domestic CVE/T agenda, their discussion on freedom fighters vs terrorists.

Terrorism in Afghanistan has local, regional and trans-regional dimensions, and the Afghan government is not able to counter it alone". In addition, terrorism in Afghanistan is "a lethal tactic employed by specific terrorist groups with full backing of a state for political purposes and raison d'état."[3]

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1. Institute for Economics and Peace, accessed September 1, 2018, http://economicsandpeace.org/

2. "Global Terrorism Index 2017. Measuring the Impact and Understanding of Terrorism," Institute for Economics and Peace, Australia, IEP Report 55, November 2017, 10-11.

3. Aimal Faizi, "In Afghanistan, time to fight the political dimensions of terrorism," *The Hill,* October 16, 2015, http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/257174-in-afghanistan-time-to-fight-the-political-dimensions-of

Unlike Afghanistan, Central Asian countries developed their terminology through the adoption of specific legislation[4] in 1999-early 2000s. Whereas the definitions are very vague and overlapping,[5] the national laws greatly emulate the Russian counterterrorism legislation, describing "the seizure of power and violent constitutional change, violation of public security, and intimidation of people" as an act of extremism and terrorism.

Another important issue is the fact that countering extremism and terrorism is also overshadowed by peace. On the one hand, focusing on peace is desirable, and all efforts of the international community have been put to bring peace in Afghanistan. On the other, no solid outcomes have come out of the peace talks, as "talking about talks makes nothing to real peace." By linking peace to counterinsurgency, the Afghan government is trying to consolidate international community in fighting foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) in the country, e.g. ISIS, IMU, East Turkistan Islamic Movement, Haqqani network, Indian Mujahideen, Al-Qaeda, and others.

Afghanistan does not have their own official list of terrorist organizations. Instead, they use the U.S. Department of State FTOs.[6] More interestingly, neither the United States, nor Afghanistan seems to be aware of how many terrorist organizations or insurgency groups operate in the country. The number is between 12 and 22, as the calculations are made for the Af/Pak region, and seemingly the White House has a different from the State Department FTOs list.[7] Overall, it can be presented in three main categories that include (1) the *Taliban*, a more nationalistic movement without objectives beyond Afghanistan, (2) Al-Qaeda remains firm (attack on Ghazni reminded AQ is still there) and (3) ISIS, which is shadowy and no one really know what it is but the threat is real.

Yet, the situation with Taliban looks quite ambiguously. Firstly, the Pakistan Taliban (Tehrik-I Taliban of Pakistan) is on the U.S. terror list, unlike the Afghan Taliban. Secondly, Taliban is banned in all Central Asian states and Russia, as well as in Collective Security Treaty Organization and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Thirdly, the United Nations accepts that the Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace talks should include Taliban. Finally, the United States is undecisive whether to designate Taliban as a terrorist organization or not so that not to threaten the U.S.-Afghan relations and peace talks.[8] As a result, when a nation is not able to understand and recognize an enemy, it is difficult to genuinely combat terrorism without bringing clarity.

Radicalization: The Same 'Old' Story

Counterterrorism community agrees in a sense that process of radicalization is very diverse phenomenon, so are the roots of terrorism, which go beyond simple economic grievances. In case of Afghanistan, radicalization has become a "kind of revenge", an ideological war, where political environment continues to feed and support extremism. Weak and corrupted government, social injustice and lack of rule of law, poor

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4. Laws on Countering Extremism and Terrorism were adopted in Kazakhstan (1999, 2005), Kyrgyzstan (1999), Tajikistan (1999), Uzbekistan (2000) and Turkmenistan (2003). The texts are available online both in Russian and local languages.

5. Anna Gussarova, "Countering Extremism vs Freedom of Online Expression: The Case of Kazakhstan," The Central Asia Program, George Washington University, Paper 201, January 2018, http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Gussarova-CAP-Fellows-Paper-January-2018.pdf.

6. U.S. Department of State, Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Bureau for Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, Foreign Terrorists Organizations, accessed September 2, 2018, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm

7. Glenn Kesler, "Trump's incorrect claim that 20 'U.S.-designated' terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/08/22/trumps-incorrect-claim-that-20-u-s-designated-terror-groups-operate-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4453acd524c2

8. Masood Farivar, "Why Isn't Afghan Taliban on US List of Foreign Terror Groups?" *Voice of America*, February 20, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-us-list-foreign-terror-groups/3732453.html

level of education in Madrasas, unemployment and illiteracy (around 75 percent of the Afghan population is uneducated), unfriendly migrant environment, domestic violence, poverty and gender inequality, and presence of international forces are among most vivid drivers of radicalization in the country, basically increasing Afghanistan vulnerabilities and fragility in the long run.

As a result, the three groups are of a greater concern when it comes to deradicalization. They include youth, women and children. The state fails to provide security and justice, Madrassas provide a limited education which leaves their students particularly vulnerable to extremist narratives. For the past years the process of radicalization has become massive and uncontrolled, many young Afghans left the country either to study in Pakistan, or to seek an asylum[9] in the neighboring countries as well as the countries of the European Union, some joined extremist and terrorist groups, while others - most enthusiastic and open-minded young people - launched local grassroot peacebuilding projects, including initiatives on countering violent extremism.

The process of radicalization in Central Asian societies have its peculiarities as well, yet most of the research has been covering migrants in Russia and marginalized youth. With a growing number of foreign fighters from Central Asia, who committed terrorist attacks across Europe and the United States,[10] different projects have been implemented to understand the roots and motivation of those radicalized in the region. As in Kabul, this research marked a growing number of reasons why people of different age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, education, social and economic welfare decided to join insurgency groups and terrorist organizations.

It is going beyond any doubt that understanding radicalization is a necessary tool to counter violent extremism and terrorism, however it is more important to realize what could have been done to prevent those people from traveling to training camps and joining militants, thus targeting recruitment. Here all six nations want to succeed with deradicalization but with a one-day pill that will cure the decease immediately. There is a general consent that deradicalization is an ongoing labor- and time-consuming effort yet cannot be achieved just through a series of lectures for imprisoned, a higher wage for imams, or a low-income job for unemployed. Instead it requires a long-term commitment to invest both administrative and financial resources in human capital, communities and inclusion. Currently, only international donors, such as foreign governments, organizations and think tanks such as OSCE, the United Nations, the Royal United Services Institute and United States Institute of Peace are greatly contributing to a project-based deradicalization and counterterrorism-related research and activities. Limited capacity of the current corrupted governments with weak institutions makes it difficult to address the core of radicalization.

Narratives, Images and Perceptions

The perceptions and understanding of Afghanistan by Central Asian countries has been influenced and formed by the long history of war and the presence of international forces in the country. In a digitalized world, whereas terrorists are spreading chaos, multimedia companies along with social media platforms significantly amplifies the "war effect" with a more violent content. In comparison to Syria, where international community is trying to facilitate humanitarian crisis, Afghanistan has never received so much attention. All attempts to bring peace or initiate peace talks in Kabul have resulted in almost 40 years of war, which is far from its ending.

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9. Belquis Ahmadi, Sadaf Lakhani, "The Afghan refugee crisis in 2016," *USIP Peace Brief* 220, February 27, 2017, https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/afghan-refugee-crisis-2016

10. Thomas F. Lynch III, Michael Bouffard, Kelsey King, and Graham Vickowski, "The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia: Implications for U.S. Counterterrorism Policy," *Strategic Perspectives* 21, Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National and Strategic Studies, National Defense University, October 2016, http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-21.pdf

When it comes to existing narratives vis-a-vis Central Asia, the perceptions and understanding of Afghanistan by Central Asian countries has been influenced and formed by the Russian narratives, created during the Soviet war, and supported until nowadays by Putin Administration. The Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev during CSTO summit in Astana on May 24, 2018 reported "15,000-20,000 fighters in Northern Afghanistan, and 7,000 terrorists in neighboring Tajikistan provinces,"[11] which also amplifies the risk of terrorists' penetration to other non-CSTO countries of Central Asia such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

When it comes to geography and history, the Afghans believe they have more commonalities with Central Asians than with South Asians. Firstly, Afghanistan wants Central Asia to accept it as a part of their society and region. Secondly, Central Asian countries should realize Afghanistan is both in need and a need for the region. And thirdly, Afghanistan is not a problem but rather a package with solutions to regional challenges. By working with Afghanistan, Central Asian relations, Turkmen-Uzbek and Turkmen-Tajik interaction that was contested in the past, is now slowly improving.

At the same time, Afghanistan does not have a clear understanding of Central Asia as well. The Afghan government is exploring the venues to boost cooperation within the region, its Ministry for Foreign Affairs prioritizes Central Asia as a region to learn from and build connections with for the future development not since the nations shared common history, culture and traditions in the past.

This approach has a right to exist, even though the U.S. concept of bringing South and Central Asia together with Afghanistan as a core is not very popular among Central Asians. An Afghan agenda of Central Asian nations is influenced by peace rhetoric, major Kazakh-Afghan interaction is linked to fixing humanitarian crisis, such as educating youth and empowering women.[12] Less in known about the volume of border trade, traveling statistics and business opportunities among Central Asian countries and northern Afghanistan, yet daily cross-border interaction is there frequent with border shut down occasionally.

Human Rights, Civil Society and Media in Counterterrorism Efforts

There is a huge difference of the word 'stability' among the six nations. In Afghanistan stability means strong democracy, political participation and regular elections, both parliamentary and presidential, while in Central Asia it is one of the goals of the elite-centric system to keep the status quo, as democracy brings chaos. However, one can argue whether democracy is too early for a country that has been suffering from an almost 40-year war or not, whether it is there, or this is just a symbolic element of international presence in the country. Yet, when it comes to effective measures to counter terrorism, it is always an issue of balancing between providing security and promoting human rights, it is about inclusion of civil society, non-governmental institutions and private sector as well as use of media in countering propaganda and fighting online recruitment as a best example of whole of society approach to counter violent extremism and terrorism.

Besides all six nations are 'not free' or 'partly free' in the case of Kyrgyzstan,[13] human rights have always been politicized and securitized, when it comes to counterterrorism. Obviously, counterterrorism is

11. "Patrushev: Na tadzhiksko-afganskoy granitse nakhodyatsa okolo 7 tysaych boevikov," *Sputnik Tajikistan*, May 24, 2018, https://ru.sputnik-tj.com/world/20180524/1025664703/odkb-tajikistan-afganistan-granitsa-ugroza.

12. Anna Gussarova, "The Prisoner's Dilemma in Central Asia and the Afghanistan Factor," Central Asia Bureau for Analytical Reporting, June 6, 2016, https://cabar.asia/en/the-prisoner-s-dilemma-in-central-asia-and-the-afghanistan-factor/

13. "Freedom in the World 2018," Democracy in Crisis, Freedom House, accessed September 2, 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf

a prerogative of the state and the government has a monopoly to deal with these issues. Traditionally, civil activism in this part of the world has other 'more important' or 'relevant' duties than countering violent extremism and terrorism through building resilient communities. In this regard, international donors and institutions often occupy that niche and support non-state actors to initiate local projects on CVE/T. Neither institutions in civil society, nor think tanks can work on countering violent extremism and terrorism without foreign or state funds. As a result, it is usually a project-based type of activity with desired (feasible) results rather than a long-term strategy.

Strengthening the legitimate use of force to ensure domestic security is necessary, yet the Central Asian governments' current approach also demonstrates a major shift in the balance between citizens' civil liberties and security. In Central Asia, where political rights and civil liberties have been limited for the sake of stability, freedom of (online) expression, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of religion, social media has been also manipulated by the governments. People across the region started to get arrested for posting, sharing or 'liking' "politically, nationally or religiously incorrect" or sensitive content on social media on the plea of countering extremism.[14] At the same time, significantly less has been discussed and achieved so far by all Central Asian states to prevent terrorist use of the internet and use of the internet for terrorist purposes without a proper 'human rights' bell from OSCE, the UN and other institutions.

When it comes to media, social media platforms, the situation is very disturbing in the region, but not in Afghanistan. One can argue the country currently enjoys independent journalism and freedom on social media in a greater degree in comparison to Central Asian nations. Even though there is a huge variety of media in Afghanistan, most TV is affiliated with the government, while social media is not controlled by the government and is a place for young Afghans hungry for change.[15] On the other hand, the impact of inciting hatred online (hate speech), no internet and mobile network regulation, lack of cyber security and illiteracy make the Afghan society even more vulnerable.

Whereas Central Asian countries are performing better in some cases, they are still facing same terrorism-related security challenges. Independent alternative media environment has been lacking in Central Asia. For instance, the Kazakh government regularly invests billions of tenge in mass media to promote its informational policy, thus controlling the whole media in the country.[16] And seemingly it should be easier to have both administrative and financial resources to build communication in counterterrorism, prevent online recruitment and counter terrorist narratives. However, Kazakhstan along with other Central Asian states must work harder on those issues as social media can be very effective in monitoring and building digital resilience instead of simply introducing internet censorship.[17]

Freedom of religion is also challenged when it comes to countering religious extremism and terrorism. Whereas all six nations generally agree that repression of Islam is a bad example and it will not work in Central Asia, minor technical issues are common for the region. They include unregistered madrassas, poor knowledge of religion, unprofessional teachers and professors, state financial support to imams and others. Along with these important issues that must be addressed in each nation's counterterrorism efforts, the concept of being Muslim has been revised in both Afghanistan and Central Asia. On the one hand, there is a trend to respect traditions, norms and culture, being a good Muslim or even a 'more Mus-

14. Anna Gussarova, "Online svoboda v Kazakhstane: Prestuplenie i nakazanie," Central Asia Analytical Network, January 10, 2018, http://caa-network.org/archives/11200

15. "Social Media in Afghanistan: Users and Engagement," USAID Associate Cooperative Agreement Number 306-A-14-00001 (Afghan Civic Engagement Program) implemented by Counterpart International, Altai Consulting, Internews, Ocotber 2017, accessed September 6, 2018, https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Internews_Afghanistan_SocialMediaAssessment_Altai_2017-12.PDF

16. "V 2015 godu SMI vydeleno pochti 43 milliarda tenge goszakaza", *Forbes*, September 15, 2015, https://forbes.kz/massmedia/v_2015_smi_kazahstana_vyideleno_pochti_43_mlrd_tenge_goszakaza/.

17. Dina Baidilgayeva, "Internet censorship in Kazakhstan: More persuasive than you may think," March 26, 2018, https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/dina-baidildayeva/internet-censorship-in-kazakhstan

lim'. On the other hand, it is not clear what the redlines are for being a 'good Muslim', a 'more Muslim' or a 'free style Muslim'. As a result, rise of conservatism in the world results in 'punishing not Muslims', labeling Islam and using religion by many state and non-state actors to consolidate the power. These debates influence counterterrorism efforts, making it difficult for a secular state (Central Asian countries are secular, while Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic[18]) to balance freedom of religion and maintain national security.

Counterterrorism Strategy

As counterterrorism efforts greatly depend on the level of threat, Afghanistan and five Central Asian countries have achieved certain results of what is working and what is not. Whereas Central Asian states have a relatively low terrorism threat, it helps the governments build legislation, national action plans and programs, as well as establish security dialogue in the region and outside. In case of Afghanistan, the country has been drafting the strategy on countering violent extremism and terrorism for the past two-three years.

On strategic level, the Afghan counterterrorism policy can be measured in three key documents (1) National Security Strategy, (2) National Security Policy and (3) Counterinsurgency (translates from local language as Countering National Threats), which provide Intelligence Office - the National Directorate of Security (NDS) - a monopoly on countering violent extremism and terrorism. As a key agency that is in charge of confronting the Taliban, it "faces crucial gaps in intelligence collection and analysis, as well as a strong leadership, agency's human-intelligence presence across Afghanistan is insufficient and weak, its surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities are deficient, and its sabotage activities are negligible." [19]Along with existing gaps in policy level, poor coordination within a joint intelligence sharing center and lacking resources, NDS has been managed to establish a classified counterterrorism branch that was also fighting corruption, analyzing intel reports during presidential elections in 2014 and dealing with 63 security threats on a daily basis. Other ministries, involved in counterterrorism efforts, include the National Security Agency of Afghanistan (NSA), the Ministry of Defense (MoD), and the Interior Ministry (MoI). The Afghan police is the primary target of the terrorists, as a result the number of casualties among policemen is much higher in comparison to other security agencies.

Whereas high level relations among security agencies of Central Asian countries and Afghanistan are evolving (the Kazakh National Security Committee Director Karim Massimov and the Uzbek MFA Abdulaziz Kamilov recently visited Kabul for negotiations), more technical cooperation daily is needed. On terrorism specifically, cross border cooperation is limited in its capacity and resources. There is a consent among Afghan government and security officials that terrorist organizations are very connected, as their members travel throughout the broader OSCE region, get educated and execute attacks, while neither government of the six nations, nor the security agencies are so connected in counterterrorism as the demand is not there yet. As terrorist groups from China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are quite active and sheltered in Afghanistan, there is a need to build stronger cross-border security cooperation, information sharing, to prevent them from travelling across the region and committing terrorist attacks.

Regional Dynamics and Capacity for Counterterrorism Cooperation

As Afghanistan is addressing violent extremism and terrorism (VET) primarily as an economic problem,

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18. Article One of the the Constitution of Afghanistan, January 26, 2004, accessed September 4, 2018, http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/TheConstitution.pdf

19. Javid Ahmad, "The Major Flaws in Afghanistan's Intelligence War," *The National Interest*, February 12, 2018, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-major-flaws-afghanistans-intelligence-war-24472

the country is exploring economic opportunities and venues in a broader region. Building resilient society and connecting to bigger infrastructure projects, namely CASA-1000 and TAPI(C) with China joining the pipeline project,[20] as well as benefiting from the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have become the Afghan top priority to enhance bilateral and multilateral relations and prevent the spread of extremism across the country.

Conceptually, there is an idea to transform the existing C5+1 initiative into C6 (Central Asia and Afghanistan), thus linking and connecting the six nations. Actually, the preamble of the Tashkent Declaration on Afghanistan clearly states that "peace and security in Afghanistan are essential for ensuring stability and prosperity in the region and bringing an end to the many years of violence and suffering of the Afghan people. Therefore, we recognize that a political settlement that is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, supported by close regional counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics cooperation, and regional economic cooperation and connectivity are key to the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan and the entire region."[21] There is a general consent that the more the countries get connected regionally, the secure the region will be. Now it is the right time to start doing something that could lead to a more connected Central Asia and Afghanistan. As it was mentioned in a previous chapter, counterterrorism is overshadowed by peace, as a result several steps should be undertaken by each Central Asian country in bringing peace in Afghanistan and make counterterrorism and counterinsurgency effective. To start with, it will be necessary to understand whether the Taliban represents an immediate threat to the region or not, how real is a threat and how to deal with regional terrorist organizations, as now ISIS is prioritized in comparison to other groups that have been there over the past 20 years.

For instance, in 2011 the Taliban warned Kazakhstan on entering the Afghan war and asked to abstain from sending troops to the NATO-led operations in the country to avoid severe consequences.[22] What was the real outcome of that decision and how it influenced the threat of terrorism in Kazakhstan? This will require an in-depth analysis of the current status quo and understanding of the Taliban structure and eco-system. In addition, it will take time and political will to change the current "terrorist" label of the Taliban, which is banned in many countries and regional organizations. But it will be impossible to answer those questions without regional cooperation network that has failed to get established.

When it comes to other terrorist groups, Afghanistan has been highlighting the presence of Central Asian ones without clear understanding of the threat and how to approach it. "The Central Asian countries seriously fear that the Taliban's dominant role in the intra-Afghan war can inspire the jihadists from the Fergana Valley into terrorist attacks in their homeland… But the governments do not have military, political and economic levers to pressure the Taliban so that it refuses patronage over Uzbek and Uyghur Salafi-jihadi groups."[23]

For Kazakhstan in comparison to other Central Asian nations that border Afghanistan, it is important to invest in Afghan human capital to prevent radicalization by supporting youth and women and advocate for peace in the United Nations Security Council. The Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev allocated USD $50 million to provide free higher education to 1,000 Afghan students.[24] As a follow up, EU High Represen-

20. Drazen Jorgic, "China interested in joining TAPI pipeline project: Pakistan official," Reuters, August 8, 2018, https://in.reuters.com/article/pakistan-china-tapi/china-interested-in-joining-tapi-pipeline-project-pakistan-official-idINKBN1KT17S

21. Declaration of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Connectivity, March 28, 2018, http://uza.uz/en/politics/declaration-of-the-tashkent-conference-on-afghanistan-peace--28-03-2018

22. Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Taliban warns Muslim Kazakhstan on entering Afghan war," Reuters, May 22, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-kazakhstan-taliban/taliban-warns-muslim-kazakhstan-on-entering-afghan-war-idUSTRE74L0K920110522

23. Uran Botobekov, "Central Asian Jihadists Under Al Qaeda's And Taliban's Strategic Ties – Analysis," Eurasia Review, August 24, 2018, https://www.eurasiareview.com/24082018-central-asian-jihadists-under-al-qaedas-and-talibans-strategic-ties-analysis/

24. "Kazakhstan calls on CA neighbors to help Afghanistan develop together," Kazinform, September 5, 2018, https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-calls-on-ca-neighbors-to-help-afghanistan-develop-together_a3379946

tative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini during a regional conference on empowering Afghan women in Astana announced a new USD $2.3 million program that will train and educate Afghan women in Central Asia. This program, to be executed by the EU, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan will contribute to "empowering women economically and making them more independent."[25]

There is a dilemma in Afghanistan-Central Asian security cooperation. On one hand, there are less disputes among Afghanistan and Central Asian countries in comparison to other countries and regions in the world. On the other, current can be characterized as fragile relations that are based on necessity, favor and/or pleasure. From the MFA perspective, there is required shift in Afghan foreign policy, where current administration puts a lot on boosting relations with Central Asian states and learning from their experience.

On the technical level, enhancing cooperation in fighting transnational organized crime and border management could become a new tangible component of the regional counterterrorism efforts. Currently, the situation with border police is complicated as they are not using the same language, thus making cross-border counterterrorism cooperation even more difficult. In addition, Afghanistan has security cooperation agreements and security protocols with many South Asian countries, with Iran and Pakistan, Asia-Pacific states, including Australia, but not with Central Asian governments. Yet, there is huge potential to establish security framework and then develop technical cooperation among security services. From Afghanistan perspective, it is crucial to establish cross-border cooperation in countering violent extremism and terrorism with Central Asian countries. In this regard, the EU BOMCA program[26] can greatly contribute to develop cross-border cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries to boost security interaction, facilitate trade, fight against illegal trafficking and terrorist financing (drugs in the Northern and mining in the Eastern provinces as two main resources for terrorism financing in Afghanistan). In addition, Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan[27] and Uzbekistan[28] have established a well-calibrated counterterrorism strategy that can be shared with the Afghan government.

Bringing peace to Afghanistan has also a big and influential international dimension, where interests and positions of the world and regional powers have met, and everyone uses an 'Afghan card' to strengthen its positions to achieve certain political goals. The effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts has been relatively low as they have been substituted by the peace talks with Taliban, which failed to end the war.

The United States, which have been leading the global war on terror since 2001, want to establish a strong sustainable democracy in Afghanistan. Whereas Iran fears the American growing presence in Afghanistan, Russia uses an 'Afghan card' to consolidate Central Asian countries and counter balance a Greater Central Asia partnership for Afghanistan and its South Asian neighbors, a U.S. integration initiative. India-Pakistan tensions also negatively influence cooperation with Afghanistan on security matters. Finally, China is seeking military presence in Afghanistan in the Wakhan corridor, where at least 500 Chinese troops will train their Afghan counterparts to fight terrorists (incl. Uighurs) and protect the BRI infrastructure. [29]

25. Elya Altynsarina, "Conference on empowerment of Afghan women secures €2 million education pledge, calls for enhanced application of international norms," The Astana Times, September 7, 2018, https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/conference-on-empowerment-of-afghan-women-secures-e2-million-education-pledge-calls-for-enhanced-application-of-international-norms/

26. The official website of the Border Management Program in Central Asia, The European Union, accessed September 10, 2018, https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/programme/background

27. Kazakhstan recently adopted National Program on Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism until 2022.

28. Uzbekistan has good relations with the U.S. and Russia; Tashkent can play an intermediary role in Afghan peace talks.

29. Michael Martina, Ben Farmer, "China denies setting up military base in Afghanistan," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 30, 2018, https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/china-to-set-up-military-base-of-500-troops-in-afghanistan-20180830-p500mc.html

Finally, regional security strategy under the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and OSCE leadership could also greatly contribute to establish a joint plan for counterterrorism. The Central Asia Joint Action Plan is the first regional framework designed to address the threat of terrorism through a common approach, based on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.[30] For instance, highlighting the importance of establishing policy partnerships at the expert-analytical level and deepening ties among researchers in the region, the Director for Political Affairs at UNAMA, Scott Smith, noticed, "Afghans are increasingly interested in and capable of conducting analytical research on their country. We see a real necessity to build on the potential in the region in this field."[31]

Conclusions and recommendations

Whereas the Afghan government has been at war for 40 years, it has managed to establish a counterterrorism system that eventually failed to succeed. When we can omit the Taliban and rather use 'freedom fighters' instead of 'terrorists' or vice versa, then it will be necessary to re-assess the security services' capacity to perform counterterrorism functions. As for now very little is known and explored in this direction without focusing exclusively on Taliban, its history and eco-system. When nature of insurgency is unclear, it is difficult to build strategic partnership with the neighbors to counter common security challenges. As a result, very little has been done on the technical level, e.g. meaning the cooperation of intelligence services that is happening only in case of emergency.

When it comes to regional security framework, counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Central Asia has more similarities than differences in terms of participating stakeholders and existing challenges, weak government and institutions, poor economic development and corruption, civil society participation and research opportunities. In terms of strategic calculations, the six nations want other countries and institutions to get involved in counterterrorism due to limited resources and capacity. From the Afghan perspective, the region does not have a synchronized foreign policy towards Afghanistan, it is divided more than united. Currently the countries of Central Asia are only ready to act rather as a mediator in solving humanitarian crisis than a neighbor, which is ready to accept into community and take responsibilities.

Regional cooperation is getting momentum again and increasing interest, coming from the countries of region with the support of international donors should greatly contribute to the stability and well-being of Afghanistan. However, bringing peace to Afghanistan is generally connected to a 3-lack problem - lack of clarity (there is no clear picture of who your enemy is), lack of commitment (both from international donors and the Afghan government) and lack of vision (how peace talks can be incorporated in building an image of Afghanistan which international community wants it to be and the Afghan society and government want it to become in the long-run). Interestingly, most publications, reports, articles and in-depth interviews that have built a basis for this publication try to explain current state of affairs with the help of history, while almost no one actually focuses on the future development goals and what Afghanistan the Afghans want to have and to live in 2040 or in a post-Taliban Afghanistan.

In view of the in-depth interviews, case studies, and comparative overview of different approaches to counterterrorism, a set of recommendations is needed to help Afghanistan and Central Asian countries build substantial regional cooperation in countering violent extremism and terrorism.

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30. The Joint Plan of Action, United Nations Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, accessed September 11, 2018, https://unrcca.unmissions.org/joint-plan-action

31. "OSCE and UN jointly support strengthening of ties between Central Asian states and Afghanistan," *Akipress*, July 14, 2018, https://akipress.com/news:608781/

Establish a Working Group on Technical Cooperation for Border Management

In-depth interviews with the Afghan security services have proven the necessity to initiative counterter-rorism cross-border cooperation on a regular basis. Currently the Afghan border police and intelligence agency are facing significant challenges Information sharing (intel reports, databases, fingerprints and border crossing) have to be carried out regularly to have a better understanding of the threat, monitor the situation and be ready to react accordingly. This working group can meet regularly at least twice a year in each country on a rotation basis. A joint intelligence sharing center can be later established, based on further assessment and results.

Besides bilateral cross-border cooperation, which has been very poor and occasional, regional mecha-nism is key to provide sustainable border management. The EU Border Management Program in Central Asia could become a starting point to bring border agencies of the six nations together. The upcoming EU Strategy towards Central Asia should also tackle cross-border cooperation with Afghanistan as an essen-tial to maintain stability and security in a broader region.

Introduce a C6 counterterrorism project

Whereas current C5+1 counterterrorism project[32] (under the auspices of the USIP) aims to promote best practices and regional approaches to counter terrorism and foreign terrorist flows, addressing radicaliza-tion by community engagement and counter-messaging is seen as one of the key priorities to tackle these important issues. These aspects are also of importance to the Afghan counterterrorism efforts as well, as it can be seen from the comparative analysis mentioned above.

It is crucial to provide policy makers with substantial evidence-based policy options when it comes to a whole-of-society approach to combating violent extremism and terrorism in the long run. One of the upco-ming meetings of the counterterrorism working group can take place in Kabul, or the Afghan colleagues can be invited to attend an event in 2019. In addition, a joint top table exercise,[33] using whole-of-society approach in tailored scenarios which examines the process of radicalization and foreign terrorist fighters, evaluates domestic counterterrorism readiness and promotes regional and global dialogue on sharing best and worst practices under the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Regional Dialogue could be-come one of the baby steps for building tangible Afghanistan-Central Asia counterterrorism cooperation.

Develop Track Two diplomacy (Afghanistan-Central Asia)

Along with governmental level, it is necessary to introduce and support cooperation among non-state ac-tors in countering violent extremism and terrorism. Regular exchange of views among prominent experts, academia and think tanks, exchange public policy programs and professional trainings in long term per-spective will result in raising awareness and better understanding of each other's security concerns and capacity for regional cooperation. Currently OSCE and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan are trying to strengthen ties among Central Asian and Afghan analysts, researchers, and experts to esta-blish policy partnerships and networks.[34]

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32. C5+1 Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of State, September 22, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274386.htm

33. CTWG FTF TTX, Partnership for Peace Consortium, accessed September 11, 2018, https://www.pfp-consortium.org/index.php/events/246-ctwg-ftf-ttx-event-2

34. "OSCE and UN jointly support strengthening of ties between Central Asian states and Afghanistan," *Akipress*, July 14, 2018, https://akipress.com/news:608781/

One of the eight pillars of positive peace is good relations with neighbors. However, when the old narratives influence current state of affairs and hamper regional cooperation, the easiest way to get connected is to talk to your neighbors and learn from them. So many things have changed in Afghanistan over the past 10 years but people in Central Asia still believe in their old memories and narratives, created either by Soviets, or by terrorists. It is the right time to correct each other's perceptions and deliver evidence-based fact-checking journalism. In counterterrorism, it will be important to work together on the Code of Ethics when reporting on terrorist attacks and terrorism-related news.[35]

Launch a comprehensive online hate speech prevention project

Grassroots initiatives, backed by local communities and NGOs, could support the country's counter-extremism efforts without sacrificing freedom of online expression and freedom of speech. In this regard, grassroots literacy campaigns should become a key strategy for counter-messaging would both help people use social media responsibly and make it easier for journalists to do their job professionally. Ideally, hate speech codes would help people respect freedom of speech. More importantly, social media platforms can serve as a platform for increasing users' literacy regarding extremism and terrorism legislation. Finally, it is necessary to understand who should be empowered to safely navigate social media and help the government prevent the spread of extremism. Raising citizens' awareness and educating them is the best way to achieve these goals.

35. Anna Gussarova, "Countering Extremism vs Freedom of Online Expression: The Case of Kazakhstan," The Central Asia Program, George Washington University, Paper 201, January 2018, http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Gussarova-CAP-Fellows-Paper-January-2018.pdf.