



Korshinos Center for socio-political studies

Islamist Radicalization in Tajikistan:

An Assessment of Current Trends

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Foreword.

Until recently, the international community has focused mainly on terrorism as a major security threat, neglecting to investigate thoroughly and to address the elements which foster the emergence of this phenomenon. Indeed, no one was born a terrorist. But some people follow their own specific path which leads them to becoming terrorists. In view of recent security developments in Tajikistan as well as of the future withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan, identifying and tackling the factors that encourage people to follow this path has become an ever more pressing priority.

Pursuant to OSCE MC Decision 10/08 and in line with its own specific mandate, the OSCE Office in Tajikistan supported and funded the present research, thanks to a generous contribution from the Government of Denmark. In addition to pointing out several factors that seem to facilitate the occurrence of Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism (VERLT) in Tajikistan, this report offers insights into possible ways to address these phenomena from a preventive perspective. Hopefully, this survey will therefore contribute to pave the way for a more comprehensive response to VERLT in Tajikistan, complementing the traditional law enforcement approach.

I would like to express my appreciation for the staff of the Center for Strategic Research under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan who dedicated time to review extensively the present report and offered very valuable advice and remarks.

Finally, it is worth underlining that the survey was conducted by local researchers from Korshinos Institute, under the direct supervision of the report's author, Michael Taarnby, a renowned international expert in the field of terrorism, extremism and radicalization. Therefore this report should be regarded as a significant supplement to the researches of numerous local and regional authors whose works in this area may also guide efforts to counter these phenomena.

Ambassador Ivar Vikki, Head of the OSCE Office in Tajikistan.

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Terminology

Much has been written on the topic of radicalization over the past decade, however, some confusion about the terminology being applied remains in this field of study. In order to eliminate misunderstandings in this report a few key terms will be defined.

Islamism describes the use of religion in a political context in order to fundamentally change the power structures. As an example, the Hizb ut-Tahrir is certainly a religiously motivated group, but its objectives evolve around a restructuring of the political order.

Jihadism describes the idea that political and religious changes will not emerge from participation through normal political channels but have to be brought about by use of force. A terrorist group like al-Qaeda for instance does not concern itself with elections or mainstream political participation, but has opted for armed conflict and does not seek a negotiated compromise or dialogue.

Extremism describes a range of ideas and ideologies that support far-reaching changes in society, which are aimed to the abolition of the established legitimate legal order and which may involve the use of illegitimate methods. Extremists are not necessarily violent, although some are, but they share identical views which all evolve around a complete reordering of society and low tolerance for dissenting views.

Radicalization is the term used to describe the process of gradual changes in views and behavior of people who are becoming extremists. These changes include the acceptance of radical views and ideologies, sympathy towards extreme measures to solve perceived problems and they increasingly come to see the world in black and white with little or no room for dialogue. At the end stage of the radicalization process the individual will perceive him- or herself as a member of a radical movement or group.

Salafism, is derived from the Arabic word Salaf, meaning the “original ones” or the “pious ancestors”. This refers to a branch within Islam, in which the followers of Salafism strive to practice as their beliefs modeled after the times of the Prophet Muhammad. Salafism does not constitute a single entity, but can roughly be divided into separate segments; a pietistic, a politically active and the Salafi Jihadi orientation. These different orientations basically agree on a common set of religious interpretations; however they disagree in terms of how Muslims should act upon these ideas. In the Tajik context, the term Salafiyya is applied with little distinction towards the differences mentioned. In this report, Salafism will be used to describe general ideological topics, while Salafiyya refers to a Tajik movement of Salafis.

Introduction

Effective policies and actions to prevent terrorism require a better understanding of the dynamics and trends of Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism (VERLT) globally and locally.

The scarcity of reliable data for an objective and current assessment of VERLT in Central Asia poses a significant security challenge for regional policymakers and practitioners; the gap in knowledge of existing and likely extremism scenarios in the region is substantial. Several indicators show that the potential of spillover of instability from Afghanistan and Pakistan into Central Asia is real, but its assessment cannot depend on anecdotal, unsubstantiated evidence or guesswork.

In December 2008 the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted Decision no. 10/08 on “Further Promoting the OSCE’s Action in Countering Terrorism”, which encouraged participating States to continue to exchange ideas and national best practices about their measures to counter violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism as well as to enhance their co-operation with civil society.

In March 2009, the OSCE Office in Tajikistan (OiT), at the request of the Tajik national authorities and with an extra-budgetary donor pledge from Denmark, set up a Country Assessment Team (CAT) of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization experts to perform an assessment of the requirements needed as well as an evaluation of modalities to set up a VERLT prevention project in the country. The team met with relevant stakeholders of the Tajik government, the international diplomatic and development community, international and local NGOs, think tanks and other civil society representatives. Within ten days the modalities, substance and stages of the project were identified, and shortly thereafter the pilot phase was ready for implementation.

The experts recommended a two-year project with programmatic vocation, covering a field data collection phase to empirically assess drivers and trends of VERLT throughout the country; a training phase with a series of modules addressing the gaps revealed by the data, enhancing collaboration between the population, governmental, international and civil society actors contacts developed through the data collection and training phases; and finally, the drafting and implementation of a national strategy and action plan to prevent VERLT in Tajikistan.

The Country Assessment Team’s first fieldwork effort and the subsequent data collection confirmed the assessment that Tajikistan is vulnerable to violent extremism emanating from destabilizing elements within the country or coming from abroad. The porous Southern border with

Afghanistan presents an easier entry point into the region than through other Central Asian neighboring states; structural deficits in governance, youth unemployment and other real or perceived grievances provide a welcoming environment for extremist narratives of victimization and empowerment; and decades of enforced atheism have left the population vulnerable to manipulated interpretations of legitimate traditional beliefs.

The OSCE Office in Tajikistan is well placed to develop such a topical, yet sensitive, project for the following reasons: the Organization possesses a political mandate to address VERLT; it has a presence throughout the country, and maintains a network of contacts and relationships with civil society, local and national government, and the international community.

Research Objective and Methodology

The findings and recommendations of this report are based on a range of different sources and methodologies. In spite of the comprehensiveness of this report it should not be taken as the final word; the topic is too complex and much more work is needed. However, several key issues have been identified through the research process that merits further investigation and these will be outlined subsequently.

From the outset, the object of this research has been to provide an overview of the situation that is accessible not only to experts, practitioners and stakeholders, but also to the general public. Throughout our discussions with a very diverse range of people in Tajikistan there was always an expressed desire to see the outcome of the project and to be able to learn more about trends of radicalization.

At the expense of providing highly detailed information and numerous tables, this project and the ensuing report intends to highlight some of the most critical factors driving radicalization. The possibility of identifying critical issues in the Tajik context received priority, and this objective has been achieved and from this perspective the project has been successful. As it will be shown in a later section, education has been raised as a topic which needs much more attention in the future. It is precisely concrete insights like this that can and hopefully will lead to specific action in Tajikistan.

In order to learn more about radicalization in Tajikistan different sources and scientific methodologies have been utilized throughout the project, and they will briefly be described here in general terms.

First of all, the available literature on the topic has been consulted, however when compared to available material on other countries, Tajikistan seems to have been neglected except for the continued interest of a few specialists. Some of the literature has been problematic in the sense that recognized experts on radicalization and terrorism have written about current events in Tajikistan with little knowledge about the country, its history, the political scene or the local culture. This has occasionally resulted in sweeping generalizations, such as the expressed fear of an imminent rise of domestic terrorism which has been based on incomplete evidence and assumptions. That being said, many books, journal articles and other written sources have provided highly valuable insights to the project and they are referenced throughout the report with due credit to the authors.

Several dozen interviews have been conducted between March 2009 and November 2010 with primary stakeholders and knowledgeable individuals. This diverse group of people has in some way or other been involved in current issues related to radicalization and they have generously provided their views, personal experiences and factual information of value to the research team. Among the people interviewed were representatives from governmental institutions and ministries, the research community in Dushanbe, NGOs, religious institutions, youth organizations, foreign diplomats, and staff members of international organizations present in the country. Every person interviewed during the project spoke freely and was granted anonymity, and the research team is very grateful for their assistance and support during the project.

In spite of the valuable information obtained through the interviews, it became evident during the early stages of the project that there was a considerable amount of conflicting information and insufficient data available in order to support firm conclusions on radicalization trends and patterns. When interviewed, experts disagreed on the nature of Islamist extremism in Tajikistan, thus it became very difficult to recommend countermeasures which would then have to be based on conflicting information, at times even contradictory. As an example, various interviews indicated that the situation in Afghanistan would soon affect Tajikistan in a very negative way, and that Central Asia might experience a wave of Talibanization. On the other hand, other accounts clearly suggested that a Taliban-like movement could never find much support in Tajikistan; the religious and cultural differences between the two countries simply precluded this from ever happening. Faced with such a divergence of views, it became critical to gain a more thorough understanding of domestic radicalization issues, in particular through interaction with Tajiks to gain a deeper and more contextualized assessment. While expert views are certainly much valued, the real battle is always played out among the people, as it is ultimately the population of Tajikistan who will decide whether to embrace or reject Islamist extremism.

Survey on Radicalization

It became evident early on in the project that in order to be able to formulate recommendations for counter-radicalization initiatives in Tajikistan the knowledge base had to be expanded considerably. In the spring of 2009, very little information was available on how the wider public in Tajikistan viewed the situation, and this shortcoming was seen as critical because the civilian population should be the main beneficiary of counter-radicalization programs. To remedy this

shortcoming the OSCE research team decided to conduct a large-scale nationwide survey about people's knowledge and perceptions with regard to Islamist extremism and radicalization.

In order to manage a large-scale survey the OSCE research team partnered with the Center for Social and Political Studies "Korshinos", a Dushanbe-based NGO being experienced in countrywide polling and research. The expertise that "Korshinos" provided to the overall effort cannot be underestimated. In the most intense phases of the survey more than 85 people were involved in managing and gathering data from the field.

A questionnaire was designed with the Tajik context in mind, and it became a balancing act to acquire as much detailed information as possible without frightening respondents away because of the sensitivity of the topic. This critical issue was the subject of intense debate within the research team, and in close collaboration with the local colleagues from "Korshinos", their judgment and cultural insights proved to be invaluable. The questionnaire was reviewed several times by all experts involved. The applicability of the questionnaire for the survey was checked during a pilot test in Dushanbe that involved 50 interviews. Based on the results of the pilot survey a few corrections and changes to the framing in the style of description of the questions were incorporated.

The questionnaire was divided into different topical segments. Firstly, some background information on the respondent's age, gender, education, marital status, current occupation, labor migration experience and religious denomination. Secondly, a set of questions pertaining to the role of Islam in Tajik society. Thirdly, questions about the respondent's knowledge of current issues related to Islamist extremism, and lastly, a series of questions on radicalization issues and possible ways to prevent an increase of this phenomenon.

During the survey the field assistants conducted 3502 interviews. Of those questioned 50.5% were women and 49.5% men. Of the overall number of respondents 72.9% were residents of rural areas and 27.1% from urban locations, as this distribution was set to correspond to the geographical dispersion of the population of Tajikistan.

All interviews were allocated proportionally among the groups, according to the share of population in each group. Due to the sensitivity of the topic under study and importance of opinion of people by age group and sex, it was decided to choose the respondents within 220 primary sampling units (PSU) by 5 years age intervals and sex that are in line with the 2000 Population Census data.

Field supervisors were in constant communication with both the OSCE Office in Dushanbe and “Korshinos”. According to their instruction they maintained daily control of the course of the survey and helped their regional groups of interviewers with questions related to filling out questionnaires.

During the survey phase of the project some difficulties emerged in finding respondents within the desired categories of the population because this period coincided with unanticipated security developments in the Rasht region. These events negatively influenced the process of the survey, especially in the context of readiness and trust among the population towards the interviewers even when they were from the same region. Due to ongoing police and military operations in the Rasht region this part of the survey was delayed for several weeks.

The results of the survey have been incorporated into this report in accordance with the themes of the different chapters. Instead of presenting a series of tables with the statistical results the objective has been to insert specific survey insights into a wider context to highlight specific perceptions, but also in order to confirm or reject popular sentiments towards radicalization aspects. As an example, survey questions related to Islam in Tajikistan will be highlighted in the section of the report that deals with the dimensions of radicalization in Tajikistan, which obviously includes a religious element.

Focus Groups

Even the best survey has its shortcomings, there will always be gaps and questions related to the interpretation of data. To supplement the survey data six focus group sessions were conducted in Kurgan-Tyube, Kulyab, Shaartuz, Khujand, Istaravshan, and Gharm.

The information gathered from the focus group sessions was intended to complement and expand data gathered through the nationwide survey. Specifically, three topics were identified which were difficult to capture in full through a quantitative survey and personal interaction with the local residents was considered a useful method with which to compensate for these shortcomings. The nuances and details obtained through the focus group sessions are considered vital to place the survey data into the correct interpretative framework.

The focus groups were conducted as semi-structured exchanges between OSCE facilitators and the participants, who were all offered anonymity in the report. This setup was to ensure that participants felt at ease and were willing to share their personal insights about a sensitive topic.

The focus groups were composed of individuals from the respective communities who, by virtue of their profession, maintained a wide network of contacts and were generally well-informed about current events within their communities.

The topics which were discussed in these sessions fell into three parts. Issues related to labor migration and religious studies abroad, views on extremist groups in Tajikistan, and finally the participants' perspectives on efficient counter-radicalization measures. Identical topics were also covered in the survey, but in a more general way. The ability to obtain personal experiences and nuanced perspectives greatly added to the interpretation of the overall information available to the research team. For example, focus group participants were able to articulate the need to protect young Tajiks from extremist influences through dedicated educational and outreach programs; in this context traditional law enforcement and security measures were considered less relevant.

Extremism and Militant Islamism in a Historical and Contemporary Perspective

This section constitutes a general introduction to the subject matter which is indispensable to contextualize the analytical part of this report. In order to come to terms with a specific problem, such as radicalization in Tajikistan, it is critical to possess at least a working knowledge of several issues. To meet this requirement this section first outlines the historical perspective on radical Islamist groups in Tajikistan with an emphasis on the 20th century; the Basmachi movement and the civil war period in particular. The end of the civil war also resulted in a fragmentation among local Islamists and led to the rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This will be followed by an overview of active Islamist extremist groups with an emphasis on two specific groups; Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its affiliates across Central Asia. Finally, this section concludes with a review of security incidents in Tajikistan since the end of the civil war in 1997 and an analysis of the domestic security situation in a regional context.

The focus of this report is on current events and future developments related to Islamist radicalization in Tajikistan. However, in order to properly assess and contextualize the current situation it is important to have at least a rudimentary understanding of past developments and historical traits.

Islam in Central Asia has historically been moderate and tranquil, and in Tajikistan the Hanafi school of Islam coupled with Sufi traditions have oriented its role within society in a very

different direction than for instance Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. In the case of Tajikistan there has been relatively little interest in radical ideologies or support for armed groups in recent history, although a few exceptions deserve to be mentioned.

Soviet Rule and the Suppression of Islam

In the 20th century, two events brought about a call to arms in the name of Islam and in both instances these uprisings met with little success. The first case is related to local opposition to Soviet rule during the 1920s as this occurred across Central Asia and the second is the case of the civil war in Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997. These events, and especially the circumstances under which Tajiks were mobilized into armed insurgency with a religious element, are noteworthy. Certain elements of these historical events may present indications of how Tajik society has previously dealt with Islamist extremism.

In 1918 revolts broke out across Central Asia by disparate groups referred to collectively as the Basmachi. Though they differed in composition these groups had the common goal of opposing Sovietization and this also involved Tajikistan. Some of the Basmachi groups were quite religious and some even labeled their armed resistance to the Soviet incursion as a holy war, or Jihad, and called for independence and the implementation of Shari'a law. Fierce battles occurred throughout the 1920s, but in the end all armed opposition was suppressed by the Soviet army. The last revolt to be defeated was in Tajikistan and only happened after almost a decade of armed resistance in 1929.

During the last stages of the Bukharan Emirate, divisions occurred within the Basmachi movement with some wanting to continue the Emirate, while others were keen to abolish this regime entirely, mainly on political grounds and less on religious ones. The most progressive (regionally-minded) Basmachi groups even outlined their vision at the Tashkent Congress in 1922, stating that the desired end goal was a free and independent Turkestan, the area referred to at the time which also included present-day Tajikistan, with no mixing of religious and state affairs.¹

While the Basmachi movement was, strictly speaking, not a religious movement, Islam became a unifying factor among different groups who were appalled at the colonial attitudes of the Soviets and their complete disregard for Islam. The popular mobilization in the 1920s was initiated by the collapse of the Bukharan Emirate, but most important was the general resistance to foreign rule which employed heavy-handed tactics to suppress local religious and cultural sentiments.

Many accounts have indicated that the Soviet legacy, especially on religious affairs, is directly related to current patterns of radicalization. For this reason, a few central issues deserve to be mentioned.

The Soviet assault on religious practices, institutions and worshippers was ferocious. Mosques were closed and converted to mundane and secular purposes, imams were harassed and Sharia courts banned. On the surface it seemed that Islam in Tajikistan was on the path to annihilation. However, Islam did not disappear, but remained at the margin. The persecutions forced the religious leadership, the Ulema underground and Muslims to practice religion out of public view.²

Official hostility towards Islam in the Soviet Union lifted slightly following World War II. The Soviet policy of suppression, which had marked the earlier period, was replaced by a strategy of co-optation. Soviet authorities attempted to regulate Islam by creating an officially authorized version of the religion. A Muslim Religious Board was formed and charged with overseeing “Official Islam” in the Central Asian republics.³

However, not all Muslims in Tajikistan followed the party line and a split occurred between the official and the underground Ulema. The latter group also offered religious education to selected students through unofficial circles, and later some of these study groups would become politicized with a distinctly Islamist agenda. While a few Tajik Muslims went to perform the pilgrimage or to study abroad, the majority of Tajik Muslims were generally cut off from the wider Muslim world. The imposed isolation of Central Asian Muslims coupled with the lack of religious education during Soviet rule would later have serious repercussions and lead to divisions within Tajik society.

The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 brought about unforeseen consequences, in particular in relation to a sort of awakening among Tajik Muslims. While Islam had been suppressed since the 1920s, it had never been eradicated but remained at the margin. Central Asian soldiers serving in the Soviet Army were deeply impressed by the role and status of Islam in Afghanistan, and some actually defected and joined the Afghan Mujahedin. Several figures have been presented on Central Asian defectors during that time, and although none of them seems particularly reliable, the number appears to have been substantial and certainly concerned the Soviet High Command at the time.

The Central Asian Muslims were impressed by the commitment the Afghan people had for Islam. Particularly the Tajik and Uzbek soldiers also recognized shared ethnic and linguistic ties

with the people they were supposed to be fighting. This eye-opening experience made it clear how the Soviet Union had deprived them of their true identity and religious traditions. Contacts that were made between Central Asians and Muslims from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia during this period would later weigh heavily on the resurgence of Islam in Central Asia, following the breakup of the Soviet Union.⁴

The Civil War Period

Independence came in 1991, but the collapse of the Soviet Union did not bring about peace and prosperity. As political instability increased in 1992 and the country slid gradually towards civil war, the scene was set for political and religious reorientation among Tajiks. Much has been written about the nature of the civil war and one of the more contested points is related to the role of Islam and certain Islamist groups. Some have argued that Islam became a key element in the conflict, that indeed it was the driving force, while others have stated that religion was only used as an instrument of political mobilization. Most observers agree that Islam was primarily an expedient political instrument that could be used and manipulated. This interpretation does not ignore the fact that some and often smaller groups came to see the violence in purely religious terms.⁵ However, it is important to distinguish between a religious war, which it was not, and one where Islamist groups did certainly play a part.

In this context the focus is on the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), because at the time the party included a whole range of Islamist, sometimes militant, views. Many IRPT leaders went abroad, settling in Iran, Russia, Pakistan, while others traveled to Afghanistan, in particular in Taloqan and Kunduz where they were hosted by the ethnic Tajiks of Ahmed Shah Massoud of the Northern Alliance. In the upheaval one of the most prominent Muslim scholars in Tajikistan, Akbar Turajonzoda, joined the IRPT and gave religious legitimacy due to his position as the Qazi of Tajikistan. However, in spite of his popularity there was division within the IRPT as to what role religion should play in Tajikistan's future. Turajonzoda held the view that society should be slowly islamized from the bottom up.⁶

Equally interesting is the role of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a political alliance between the Islamist and Democratic forces of the opposition. It is clear that Islamist groups played a more important role on the battlefield, but as it will be outlined later, their entry into the scene has changed the setup, both in Tajikistan and in the wider region. With the arrival of Islamist extremists from Uzbekistan who had fled to Tajikistan to escape harsh repression an additional

complication was added to the situation. Some of the Uzbek militants would emerge as key leaders and field commanders during the civil war and their impact on the security situation in the region should not be underestimated. A key individual in this context was Juma Namangani, who applied his military background during the civil war and rose to become an important field commander who fought together with field commanders of the UTO.

In the 1990s, and particularly during the civil war, Iran was very active in Tajikistan and perceived the IRPT as a viable platform on which to further its regional interests. In spite of the close cultural linkages between Iran and Tajikistan, there was actually little similarity in religious views. Iranian Shi'a influence was generally viewed with suspicion even among Tajik Islamists.

As an important byline it is worth noticing that Central Asian states became very concerned when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 1996, and the spread of radical Islamism seemed imminent. The specific links between Tajik Jihadis and the Taliban was to grow and solidify and this will be covered in more detail subsequently.

The peace agreement which ended the civil war in 1997 allowed for a power sharing arrangement between previously opposing forces. Former IRPT fighters were incorporated into the army and law enforcement structures, and the IRPT itself was legitimized and participated in the general election of 2000. The IRPT had never been able to transform itself into a genuine, popular political movement. Tajik reality dictated that personal, family and regional affiliations took precedence over any party membership.

The moderates within the IRPT who opted for participation in a democratic process asserted their position with regard to Jihad. Armed struggle to further Islamization, here defined as Jihad in this context, could not be the only means to achieving their goals, there also had to be a political dimension. This vision was articulated by IRPT moderates Said Abdullo Nuri and later also Muhiddin Kabiri. What the moderates wanted was a legitimate role for Islam in Central Asia as opposed to persecution on religious grounds.

The split within the IRPT into moderates and radicals set the stage for even more radical groups to emerge. The Taliban had taken over most of Afghanistan and actually controlled a section of the Afghan-Tajik border. Simultaneously, the IMU had become increasingly radical and more active in its armed struggle. And from its base in the Tavildara Valley it recruited fighters from the entire region. When Russia, Iran and Tajikistan increased their support to the Northern Alliance, the response from the Taliban was prompt as the Afghan extremists vowed to

destabilize Tajikistan. Some voices within Tajikistan continue to view the IRPT with skepticism because of its role in the civil war.

The divisions within the IRPT continued and reached breaking point when some members were unhappy with the party line and split to join the IMU. Namangani and his followers represented the hardliners, rejected the peace agreement and decided to continue the armed struggle, in particular against Uzbekistan. At this time the IMU operated out of sanctuaries in Afghanistan but also from the Tavildara district in Tajikistan. Namangani was one of those who opposed the ceasefire agreement, but Ziyoev convinced him to stand down and eventually Namangani settled in the town of Hoit in Tajikistan's Karategin Valley.⁷

The transformation of the IMU into the most formidable Islamist militant group in Central Asia during the 2000s came about as a direct result of repressive government policies, especially in Uzbekistan. The inability to tolerate religious expressions or political activism provided a push-effect among local Islamists to the point where they viewed Jihad as the only viable way when the prospects of meaningful dialogue had been abandoned entirely by both sides. It should be mentioned that while the IMU was by far the most dangerous and best-organized Jihadi group in the region, it did not materialize into an existential threat to any Central Asian country. Although this has sometimes been stated by government officials and foreign observers, at no point was the IMU in any position to come to power.

To complicate matters even further, another Islamist movement would gain a substantial following across Central Asia. Around 2000, Hizb ut-Tahrir emerged as a player in Tajikistan and its message of establishing a Caliphate won supporters from the educated middle class in Tajikistan. The Tajik government decided it would not tolerate the HuT, a move that was supported by IRPT moderates.

Very few outside the region took notice of these developments although the situation was put into a different light in the aftermath of 11th September 2001. Gradually, Tajikistan was more and more seen to be of geostrategic importance, in part because of the domestic issues with the IMU and HuT, but also because of its proximity to Afghanistan.

In spite of strategic concerns over the rise of Islamism in Central Asia, Ahmed Rashid made a profound and personal observation while traveling to Tajikistan in 2001. According to his interviews, many former supporters of the IRPT had grown weary of Islamic movements in general. In their interpretation, all these ideologies brought about were destruction, internal strife

and economic ruin. The electoral support for the IRPT had declined between the end of the civil war in 1997 and 2001.⁸

The civil war in the 1990's had set Tajikistan on a trajectory different from the other Central Asian countries. While they certainly experienced their share of turmoil and instability, only Tajikistan went through a period of protracted armed conflict that cost an estimated 50,000 lives. This experience has set Tajikistan apart from its neighbors, and in some ways the trauma of civil war created lasting impressions to this day. The wartime political division between the government and the opposition has remained inscribed in the geography of the country. Rasht remains the area of 'the opposition', despite the fact that the majority of its inhabitants avoid conflict. Many Dushanbe residents who have never been to the region perceive its residents as 'backward' and Islamists.⁹ Another important observation regarding the period after independence in 1991 is the rise of disparate Islamist groups, some of which are missionary, political or violent.

Extremist Islamist Movements in Tajikistan

Establishing which Islamist extremist groups are active in Tajikistan requires attention to definition. About a dozen different groups, some of which are very different from each other, are currently active and here the previously mentioned distinction between their goals and methods becomes necessary. To view them as a collective and homogenous entity would be highly misleading. However, through the research team's discussions with Tajik interlocutors and respondents it became evident that there remains much confusion about the nature of the different groups and movements.

A starting point to open this discussion is the list of extremist groups specified by the Supreme Court of Tajikistan that contains eleven extremist groups and movements who were banned due to their radical and militant Islamist ideologies. The list reflects the governments concern of political activism channeled through Islamist ideologies. This list includes:

- the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),
- al-Qaeda,
- the Islamic Party of Turkestan (IPT) / East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM),
- Jamaat Tablighi,
- Free Tajikistan,

- the Taliban,
- Call to Islam,
- the Muslim Brotherhood,
- Lashkar e-Toiba (LeT),
- Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), and
- Salafiya.

From an analytical perspective, this list of banned groups is of significant interest. Generally, these eleven groups and movements can be divided into three separate and distinct subgroups. Firstly, the Jihadi groups that have a well-known history of armed opposition to what they perceive as un-Islamic governments. This group consists of the IMU, al-Qaeda, ETIM, the Taliban and LeT. Secondly, the political Islamist groups and movements who in one form or another advocate profound societal changes based on their interpretation of Islam. These groups are the Jamaat Tablighi, the Muslim Brotherhood, HuT and to some extent the Salafiya. Lastly, the two relatively unknown and obscure local Tajik groups of Call to Islam and Free Tajikistan. Very little is known about these groups and for that reason alone it is very difficult to assess the danger they may pose to society. What information could be procured for this research was so sparse and conflicting that it would make little sense to attempt to project any analytical framework based on very inconclusive evidence. What seems fairly certain however is that both groups appear to have very small group of followers and are not particularly active in comparison to the other aforementioned groups.

Equally interesting is the absence of other regional Jihadi groups, such as the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), which has emerged into a significant player in recent years. Also missing is another local group known as Bayat, of which dozens of sympathizers in the Sughd region have been arrested since it first emerged in 1997. Bayat in a sense embodies the confusion within Tajikistan, because some have speculated that it is part of the IMU and others have opined that it doesn't even exist and was an invention of the security apparatus.

Any threat assessment must take these considerable differences, even divisions within these groups, into account. To treat them as a coherent and united entity would be a grave and strategic error. The ideological differences between them are important and continue to sow division within Islamist circles. As an example, al-Qaeda has continually criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for its lack of dedication to genuine participation in the struggle to establish Islamist rule in the Muslim world. The Muslim Brothers are perceived by the hardliners as irrelevant and lackluster compatriots who cannot be trusted, and this antagonism is mutual.

This report does not intend to provide a deep and comprehensive review of these Islamist and Jihadi groups; there is sufficient scholarly work available about each of them to satisfy even the most curious reader. However, some background information on a few of these groups is required because they have been instrumental in the development of radicalization patterns within Tajikistan but also regionally. These groups are primarily the HuT and the IMU, but because of their transnational agendas any mentioning of these groups will by necessity also involve their relationships to al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

The list of banned groups is also useful in a broader context and was therefore included in the survey. The respondents were asked if they were familiar with the respective eleven groups and whether or not they considered them dangerous to society. As a follow-up question, respondents were also asked whether they knew what religious and political views these extremist groups represented. An overview is presented in the table below.

	Yes, know the group (in %)	Yes, dangerous (in %)	Familiar with their ideology (in %)
IMU	27	22	6
Al-Qaeda	49	40	11
IPT / ETIM	4	2	1
Jamaat Tablighi	6	3	1
Free Tajikistan	8	3	1
Taliban	67	59	15
Call to Islam	4	2	1
Muslim Brotherhood	9	2	1
Lashkar e-Toiba	4	2	1
Hizb ut-Tahrir	57	47	9
Salafiyya	56	52	14

For the sake of covering all eventualities, respondents were given the choice to name additional extremist group besides those on the official list; however no single respondent chose to do so. The answers are striking in several respects. With a few predictable exceptions the general level of knowledge of the banned groups is quite low and dropped significantly when respondents were asked to state their knowledge of the specific religious-political ideologies. Even when the frequencies are approached with some caution, to include the possibility that the respondents claimed ignorance because of the sensitivity of the topic, there appears to be a widespread lack

of knowledge and information about specific extremist groups active in Tajikistan, or those that might endanger Tajik society from Afghanistan.

However, one should note that in certain areas where some groups are said to be well established and allegedly recruit members, more respondents claim to know the said groups and more respondents describe them as being dangerous. In Sughd region, 83.5% profess that they know Hizb ut-Tahrir and 68% that this group is dangerous. In the same way, respectively 79% in Khatlon region and 77% in Dushanbe claim that they have heard of Salafiyya while respectively 69 % and 55% label this group as dangerous. Results are more contrasting with regard to the IMU, known to 36.5% and described as dangerous by 31% in Sughd region, but familiar to only 25% and portrayed as dangerous by not more than 19% in the RRS district (where Rasht Valley is located). Likewise, regional results are more mixed with respect to the professed knowledge of the ideology of the groups. Only 6% of respondents in Sughd region assert that they are conversant with Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology, a figure lower than the one surfacing at the nationwide level. A similar trend pertaining to the familiarity with IMU's ideology emerges in both Sughd region and the RRS district (around 2% of respondents in both cases). But an opposite trend can be ascertained with regard to the alleged knowledge of Salafiyya's ideology in Khatlon region and Dushanbe, where respectively 26% and 17% of respondents describe themselves as well informed. In addition, geographical proximity to Afghanistan and religious antagonism may contribute to modify the perception of external groups: in Gorno-Badakhshan region, respondents display much higher scores than the national average when knowledge of the Taliban (77.5%), perception of the danger they represent (72%) and familiarity with their ideology (42%) are measured.

To expand on the information from the table above, it was of interest to learn more about why these groups were perceived as a danger to society. The frequencies listed below are representative of the total sample of 3502 individual respondents. In this respect 29% answered that these groups did not represent a change for the better, and 37% did not believe that their religious views were compatible with traditional Tajik culture. A full 48% stated they created problems in the communities and sowed divisions among people. 39% were against the groups because they had a violent agenda.

To check on the respondent sources of knowledge on the extremist groups they were also asked to list where they had learned about these groups and not surprisingly 81% stated that they had their information from mass media, meaning newspapers, radio but primarily television. When asked specifically about knowledge gained through the Internet, the number dropped

considerably to a mere 7%. **The issue of extremism and radicalization is certainly a topic that is being discussed among Tajiks and it is interesting to note that 60% had their information from their immediate social environment, here meaning friends, families, acquaintances and people in their neighborhood and community. The religious establishment played a much smaller role in this regard and only 11% learned about radical groups through the Mosque. This low score was even surpassed by schools and universities where 14% had derived their information. 10% had gained their knowledge through religious literature, such as books or CDs. Only 15 individuals had learned about the extremist groups while studying abroad, but 4% knew from their labor migrant experience in either Russia or Kazakhstan.** These figures seem quite low, but it would take additional research to uncover the actual information flow that results from an experience abroad. These results will be discussed in the subsequent section on the dimensions of radicalization, which would be premature without outlining the activities of some of the active Islamist groups beforehand.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)

HuT made its first Central Asian appearance in Uzbekistan around 1995, and from there it spread very quickly across the region. It was certainly active in Tajikistan in the late 1990s. The movement's propaganda material has been translated mainly from Arabic, which few Tajiks are able to read, into local languages, including Tajik.

HuT espouses a pan-Islamic vision that seeks to unite all Muslims in Central Asia which eventually will become part of a worldwide Caliphate. According to the HuT strategy, a gradual takeover will take place where one country first submits to HuT rule, which will then serve as a platform for other takeovers. HuT does not advocate the violent overthrow of current governments and as such is distinct from the Jihadi groups. This strategy is more of a bottom-up approach where the movement continues to attract new followers until it eventually reaches a position where it can take power and generate massive societal and political changes. HuT activists are extremely well-organized wherever they operate and this is also true in the case of Tajikistan. The exact scope of HuT activism in Tajikistan is notoriously difficult to estimate because the movement has always maintained strict secrecy with regard to its organizational activities. In addition, government crackdowns have led the movement to exert more caution, to reinforce its low-key profile and to reduce the visibility of its propaganda activities.

Several estimates have been put forward on the numbers of HuT supporters in Tajikistan, one source even stating the figure to be as high as 20,000 in Khujand alone. This figure appears very high and no evidence to support this claim has materialized.¹⁰ The IRPT has voiced its concern over HuT ideology and activism and has issued warnings to refrain from joining such groups. HuT has been most active in the Sughd region of Tajikistan and while there is some uncertainty about the actual figures, several hundreds of HuT activists have been arrested over the past decade. The capital, Dushanbe, has also witnessed HuT activities, but not on the same scale as in Sughd. While detailed background data on HuT membership is not available through reliable open sources, it is clearly a phenomenon that involves all Central Asian states. Most arrests have taken place in areas with high concentration of Uzbek minority within Tajikistan, notably in areas of the Sughd region. Around 2004, observers considered the movement to be predominantly Uzbek although ethnic Tajiks were also enlisted.¹¹ Even the Tajik authorities considered it to be an Uzbek movement.¹²

In spite of frequent speculation there is little evidence that HuT has collaborated with any of the other Islamist groups present in Tajikistan. Media reporting has indicated that there may be a closer relationship between HuT and the IMU, but there is a distinct possibility that this interpretation of events may be related to an issue of radicalization and recruitment. A number of cases from Europe and the Middle East have confirmed that members of non-violent and politically oriented Islamist groups, including HuT, have gravitated towards Jihadi groups for two reasons. In some instances the members grew disillusioned by the lack of progress with the radical group (HuT) and then decided to shift their attention to a Jihadi group instead. In other instances, severe government repression of the non-violent groups has resulted in a hardening of attitudes among Islamist activists.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The IMU was founded in 1998 although predecessors of the movement had existed since 1990. Two individuals, Juma Namangani and Tohir Yuldashev, were instrumental in setting up the IMU and expanding its activities and international reach. Namangani was responsible for the military aspect of the movement whereas Yuldashev emerged as its leading ideologue. This was to continue until Namangani was reportedly killed in Afghanistan in 2001, at which point Yuldashev assumed the overall leadership. From 1998 and onwards the IMU supplied the

Taliban with fighters for the yearly offensive, and it was capable of fielding up to 600 fighters. This was also the year when Juma Namangani met with Osama bin Laden to forge an alliance.¹³

After the split from the UTO after the civil war IMU relocated to Mazar e-Sharif and Kunduz in Afghanistan. Between 1998 and 2001, it had around 2000 fighters under its command. Most of the cadres were Uzbeks, but gradually the recruitment base was expanded and would eventually include Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uighurs and Chechens. At least part of the recruitment was coordinated with their Taliban hosts. The three years in Afghanistan transformed the IMU from a distinct Central Asian group to a transnational militant Islamist group and although it maintained its original antagonism towards the regime in Uzbekistan, it would soon become a full-fledged member of the global Jihadi community.¹⁴

When hostilities in Afghanistan seemed imminent after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the Taliban and the IMU prepared for the inevitable fight ahead. As a sign of the status of Namangani, the Taliban appointed him to be in charge of the Northern front. The IMU fighters fought the Northern Alliance, but were eventually defeated by the superior force during Operation Enduring Freedom.¹⁵ Many IMU fighters fled Afghanistan and found refuge in the tribal areas of Western Pakistan. The fighters, led by Tohir Yuldashev, were largely concentrated in Waziristan and were initially welcomed by the local population. However, the uncompromising stance of the IMU led to a split within local Taliban forces, one branch insisting on focusing the insurgency on Afghanistan. The IMU, on the other hand, continued their relentless attacks against Pakistani security forces and quickly gained a reputation as being both fearless and ruthless. It has been estimated that as many as one thousand IMU fighters took refuge and settled in Waziristan. In ideological terms, the group moved away from the Taliban and much closer to al-Qaeda. It was the behavior and continued attacks of the IMU that eventually led to the Pakistani military offensive in October 2009, as this group more than anyone else had emerged as the main threat.¹⁶

The recent years have seen a relocation of a significant part of the IMU footsoldiers in the north-eastern region of Afghanistan (provinces of Kunduz and Takhar), close to the Tajik border. Despite heavy pressure and considerable losses, the IMU militants have displayed in the region some capacity to challenge both the coalition and the Afghan regular forces. Even Tohir Yuldashev's killing in 2009 in Waziristan seemingly failed to affect significantly the IMU's resilience capability. However, should the IMU militants suffer too severe setbacks in Afghanistan, they may start regarding Tajikistan as a valuable safe haven and an operational rear

base, which would hence pose a much more substantial threat to Tajikistan authorities and people.

Taliban and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)

Having briefly described the IMU, it is obvious that its relations to other Jihadi groups have played a significant role in recent years. In this respect two Jihadi groups deserve to be mentioned as well because of their shared ideology and the close organizational relationship between them.

It is imperative to understand how the Taliban view their Northern neighbor IMU and how that may effect changes on the ground. The relationship between the two militant Islamist movements dates back to the mid-1990s and can be said to have reached a certain climax in 2001 through the alliance forged to fight an impending US invasion. With the appointment of Juma Namangani as commander of the Northern front in 2001 this development concerned several Central Asian governments who were familiar with Namangani's reputation.¹⁷ The IMU veterans who survived the civil war and later battles in Afghanistan forged important personal relationships with Islamists in Tajikistan and gained intimate first-hand knowledge on Tajik affairs. This is important to keep in mind as the regional dimension of the overall Jihadi struggle has not gone away, although it has been supplemented by a global dimension.

In recent years, in particular since 2009, the Taliban and its associate militant groups have increasingly come to see Tajikistan as a significant arena. Along with the IMU, the Taliban have increased their presence and operations in Northern Afghanistan which until recently had been considered relatively safe and tranquil. Tajikistan may well be considered as a legitimate target from the perspective of the Taliban because of the support of the Tajik government to ISAF. Various factors such as geographical proximity, operational experience in Tajikistan and the perception of an illegitimate Tajik government are issues that remain relevant. These factors appear to be of concern when the nexus between the Taliban, IMU and the IJU is considered.

The IJU was established in 2002, after some internationalist oriented fighters left the IMU. This development can be considered as yet another internal split somewhat similar to what occurred after the end of the Tajik civil war, which resulted in further fragmentation of the Jihadi milieu in the region. This represented a new development where predominantly Muslims of Turkish origin

were recruited in Turkey and around Europe and sent for training in Waziristan, where the IJU still retains its headquarters. The group was formed around two Uzbeks, Najmiddin Jalolov and Sahyal Buranov, and their membership is still predominantly Uzbek.¹⁸

There has been some confusion about the exact nature of the IJU, a movement that was virtually unknown outside specialist circles until recent years. Some believe that it is an integral element of the IMU; however through its propaganda material, independent recruitment and terrorist attacks, it seems safe to state that it is indeed an independent Jihadi outfit.

The IJU probably does not comprise more than a few hundred fighters, however these are drawn from across Central Asia, including Tajikistan, and there is close collaboration with Chechen and Uighur Islamist militants.¹⁹ It should however be noticed that the IJU sustained recently significant setbacks and that the threat emanating from this group is assessed to be less vivid than in the previous years. Nevertheless, the group is widely believed to have been behind the first suicide bombing in Central Asia, then under the assumed organizational name of the Islamic Jihad Group. The bombings occurred in 2004 in Bukhara and Tashkent where Uzbek police officials were the target, and later plots involved bombings of foreign embassies in Tashkent. This indicates both an operational capacity and a regional outlook by the IJU.²⁰ When Tajikistan experienced the first suicide bombing in 2010 this was also considered a landmark event. The shift to suicide operations not only verifies an operational capacity but more importantly an ideological commitment which up to this point has been difficult to comprehend for outsiders.

These brief examples of active regional Jihadi groups are of interest because of indications that the war in Afghanistan as well as the insurgency in Pakistan may have an impact on Central Asia, and in this context on Tajikistan in particular. There have been reports of foreign fighters leaving their sanctuary in the tribal areas of Pakistan because of an increasingly inhospitable local population, drone strikes and Pakistani military operations. This development has increased concerns that these fighters, including a considerable number being of Central Asian origin, would leave for Afghanistan or return to their home countries. In the summer of 2009, Tajik media reported that former UTO commanders had returned from Afghanistan to the Rasht valley with several IMU fighters. Other reports have stated that another group had relocated to Tavildara. These figures are difficult to verify with any degree of accuracy through open sources, but numbers aside, it is significant that cross-border relations are in place between different Jihadi groups. The IMU has tried to exploit Tajikistan as a transit area from the region and into Afghanistan, but this situation is now under control according to government security officials.²¹

To estimate the exact number of active Central Asian Jihadis is obviously within the domain of the respective security services. Publicly available figures vary widely, but it is commonly assumed that there are some 1,000 to 5,000 fighters, which appear to be sufficient to sustain a range of disparate groups for the foreseeable future.²²

Security Incidents

A threat assessment would be incomplete without an overview of the major security incidents that have occurred in Tajikistan by militant Islamists. However, this is not as simple as it may seem for several reasons. Official statements and media reports on security incidents have often been conflicting and even contradictory in terms of the numbers and organizational affiliation of detained militants. In several known cases, suspected militants turned out to be ordinary criminals or individuals involved in the lucrative drug trade with Afghanistan. Without access to official records, attempting to detail developments in the security situation in Tajikistan since the end of the civil war would be haphazard at best, as only the most spectacular incidents are reported with any degree of accuracy. Therefore, it is highly desirable, indeed needed, that such a thorough account of Islamist related violence be compiled. This would serve the purpose of informing stakeholders and the general public about what exactly has occurred in Tajikistan and eliminate widespread rumors, as it would also form the basis for an informed debate.

As mentioned, more research is needed to verify specific incidents in Tajikistan, however in light of the scope of this report, a series of dramatic events in 2010 must be considered in order to contextualize the subsequent section on radicalization.

The period 1997-2009 witnessed many incidents caused by militant Islamists. In the summers of 1999 and 2000, groups of IMU fighters based in Tajikistan launched incursions into Kyrgyzstan where they captured villages and took hostages.²³ In May 2006, a group of IMU fighters attacked a border post in northern Tajikistan, with the aim to seize weapons, and fled into Kyrgyzstan, where the group was eventually eliminated in a joint Kyrgyz-Tajik special operation.

During 2010 there was an escalation in violent incidents by Islamist militants. Two incidents stand out because of their violent nature and international dimensions. On 23rd August 2010, 25 prisoners, mainly Islamists, escaped from a pretrial detention facility in Dushanbe. Six prison officers were killed during the breakout, and several shooting incidents occurred at road blocks as the escapees moved towards the East. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this case is the mix of nationalities of this group, which consisted of fifteen Tajiks, five Russians, five Afghans

and two Uzbeks.²⁴ Many of the fugitives had been arrested in Tavildara during the summer of 2009 after several skirmishes with law enforcement and security forces.

The ensuing search for the fugitives took place in the Dushanbe area and in the Rasht region and was followed by several incidents, including the ambush of an army convoy in Kamarob Valley where 28 soldiers were killed in September 2010. Government officials stated that militant Islamists from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Pakistan took part in the ambush. In the same month, a prolonged shootout between Tajik border guards and insurgents from Afghanistan occurred in the Southern border area with several reported killed.

Another significant event occurred on 3rd September 2010 with the apparent suicide car bombing of a police department in Khujand, where two people were killed and more than 25 injured. A few days later a previously unknown group, Jamaat Ansarullah in Tajikistan, took credit for the bombing through a message posted on a website associated with militant Islamists. This particular incident is an indication that local Jihadi groups are present in Tajikistan and capable of planning and executing a terrorist attacks, applying a modus operandi tried and tested elsewhere.

Regional Trajectory and Implications

This brief overview of developments in Tajikistan serves to highlight several relevant contextual observations which will put the following section on current dimensions of radicalization into its proper context. Historically speaking, neither the Basmachi nor the extremist militants who fought during the civil war managed to change Tajik politics or society in any decisive way. Indeed, disagreements within the UTO IRPT after the civil war resulted in a fracturing of the party into very distinct groupings. Those who chose participation in the democratic political process, however flawed, and those who decided to continue and even intensify what they perceived to be a holy war.

Muhiddin Kabiri, the current leader of the IRPT, has expressed his views on the developments of radicalization in Tajikistan eloquently. According to him, the first stage occurred during the civil war when radicalization in religious terms was aggressive, but originated out of ignorance and was predominantly emotional. After the peace agreement of 1997, open aggression has become a thing of the past and has been supplanted by a peaceful wave.²⁵ The major difference lies in the fact that current radicalization is much more a conscious ideological choice of a new generation, and this transition is driven by young and well-educated activists. The series of violent incidents

that occurred during 2010 in Tajikistan serve to illustrate how unanticipated changes may happen.

Any study of radicalization in Tajikistan must include a regional perspective in order to be comprehensive, and the examples of the IMU, the Taliban, the IJU and HuT certify the cross-border nature of this phenomenon. Tajikistan is squarely situated in a volatile region which is presently marked by war in Afghanistan, unrest among the Muslim Uighur minority in China's Xinjiang province bordering Eastern Tajikistan, unrest in Kyrgyzstan, the presence of Islamist extremists in the Ferghana Valley and potential spillover from the security situation in Pakistan's tribal areas.²⁶ Central Asian Islamist militant groups have been dependent on sanctuaries since the breakup of the Soviet Union. And while the previously known strongholds of Sughd and Rasht are still a cause of some concern, as are to a much greater extent the current safe havens in the tribal areas of Pakistan, the overall situation is subject to change.²⁷

It is one thing to study political developments, historical trajectories, organizational profiles and specific security incidents. However, this barely provides any indication of how Tajik citizens themselves perceive the security situation. Intended as a link between this present overview and the following section on radicalization, it is worth noting how the respondents in the survey viewed developments in Afghanistan. Respondents were asked if they believed whether the conflict in Afghanistan had a direct impact on Tajikistan, and 62% answered affirmatively. On a more positive note, 24% held the opinion that the conflict was exclusively an Afghan problem with little or no impact on Tajikistan, and the remaining 14% had no opinion on the issue. These perceptions clearly identify that a majority of Tajiks link events in Afghanistan with developments in their own country,

Presented with several options, 21% of the respondents believed that if there were security issues, then the Tajik government would be able to handle them. When asked about future scenarios, a full 43% believed that the conflict in Afghanistan would only get worse and spread throughout the region, including to Tajikistan. This should be viewed in the context that according to 17% of the respondents, Tajik youth was vulnerable to Taliban ideology and may be sympathetic to their views. These frequencies do not represent a clear and unequivocal trajectory for Tajikistan's future; however, the popular perception of an Afghan war that is getting worse and spreading is certain to have an effect on radicalization trends in Tajikistan.

The Dimensions of Radicalization in Tajikistan

The past two decades of studies in terrorism and political violence have increasingly brought about scientific evidence to support the idea that the phenomenon of radicalization is very complex and consists of a range of different dimensions. Popular perceptions, or rather misperceptions, have all too often singled out specific reasons for radicalization; however none have been proven empirically, and they are too simplified to be useful. To assume that political ideologies, religious beliefs, economic hardships or personal problems alone propel people into extremist groups is not just an oversimplification, but plainly incorrect. Instead it is the convergence of these factors that change individual perception towards extremist ideologies and potentially towards a violent path. Reality is much more complex, and the case studies on radicalization which have been examined from Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and Africa have clearly identified the existence of several factors behind any form of radicalization process.

The four dimensions are related to different societal circumstances, which include political, socio-economic, religious and cultural ones. Differences still exist between radicalization experts as to which other factors should be listed to supplement these four. Some have argued for a historical dimension and others for a specific gender dimension; however for the purpose of this report the general dimensions are sufficient to provide an in-depth view of the different relevant factors to radicalization processes in Tajikistan. The cross-dimensional approach applied here does not eliminate a gender perspective; on the contrary, but this particular issue is dealt with through a socio-economic, a religious and cultural lens.

It is important to stress that not all factors will be equally relevant anywhere all the time. What may hold true for a certain part in Europe at a given time may not necessarily be pertinent to a study about Tajikistan. Societies do differ and therefore it is critical not to become too general in the analysis, as it is often small details or variations that may have a crucial role in driving a radicalization process.

This section of the report has been divided into four parts each defined by a certain topic. All four are linked and intertwined; it does not make much sense to speak about the political dimension alone because it will be quite clear that politics is affected by religious, socio-economic and cultural realities.

The Religious Dimension

In Tajikistan's particular context, it can safely be assumed that religion constitutes an important dimension in the radicalization process, yet any form of simplistic, monocausal explanation should be treated with care. In reality, the interplay between traditional practices of Islam and the recent introduction of radical Islamist ideologies requires an in-depth look at this situation.

As it has been mentioned before, Tajiks found numerous ways to circumvent Soviet repression of religion. Underground mosques sustained the original and traditional Islam, and especially the Ferghana Valley was important as an unofficial center of Islamic learning with links to neighboring Soviet Central Asian republics. However, governmental policies of the Soviet Union led to a degradation of Islam in Tajikistan. It became detached from the major learning centers in the Muslim world and generally existed in relative isolation. In the words of some respondents, Tajiks drifted away from Islam.²⁸

With the breakup of the Soviet Union came an influx of Muslim missionaries to the region, including to Tajikistan, who saw it as their role and duty to instill their different versions of Islam into what was perceived as an uninformed Muslim population. Missionaries from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey and elsewhere actively sought to win new adherents to their respective interpretations of Islam and most came both well-funded and well-organized. In light of massive social, political and economic change, newly established Central Asian governments did not have the time or the resources to adequately monitor the expanding influences of this new religious activity.

During the Soviet era, Tajiks had generally maintained a level of religious identity albeit somewhat superficial, which became manifested in extremes during the civil war period. However, after hostilities ended in 1997, the Tajiks reverted to their traditional ways and radical Islamic influences gradually subsided. While the respect for Islam still existed, Islamism as a political system lost its appeal.²⁹ This is a critical observation in the sense that it established precedence for the prospects of extremism, even in times of societal upheaval.

Observers have verified that the past decade, and especially the last three years, has witnessed an increase in open displays of religiosity. This has come in the form of Friday prayer attendance or changes in personal appearance. This is certainly not to be equaled with a rise in radicalization, but only indicates that religion has increased in visibility and attracts the interest of Tajiks. Interviews with Tajiks from different regions confirmed that the general level of interest in Islam had increased gradually.

Salafism, which is often referred to as Salafiya in Tajikistan, has attracted more adherents over the past decade and continues to be on the rise. However, there appears to be considerable confusion in Tajikistan about what is actually meant by Salafism. Scholars usually distinguish clearly between three forms of Salafi expressions. The first is pietistic, or spiritual, where the individual is exclusively concerned with his or her own lifestyle which should be in accordance with the central tenets of Salafism. The second is political, where Salafi views form the basis of political activism that ultimately seeks to change society into a Sharia-ruled social entity. Lastly, there are the Jihadi Salafis, who generally share the political aspirations of the political Salafis, but have no patience for gradual change. Instead they preach that armed struggle is the only viable option to liberate Muslims and to install a just society according to Islam. The Jihadi Salafis become members of the IMU, the IJU and other al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Central Asian theatre.

The most predominant form of Salafism present in Tajikistan today is deemed to be the pietistic version, and Salafi ideology has been introduced to Tajiks from foreign missionaries, from exposure to Salafi ideology while studying abroad and through information available on the Internet. There are reports of Tajiks who have changed to a Salafi lifestyle, to include the religious rituals and changes in appearance, who have been persecuted by the authorities. Some have been arrested and detained for no apparent reason other than their suspect dress code and full beard.³⁰

There has been speculation that previous HuT activists have gravitated to Salafism. According to this interpretation, this shift has been the result of repressive government action against the HuT and the recent increase of Salafism. This notion is interesting, but it has not been feasible to verify it because of inaccessibility of evidence. The current official Tajik close attention to Salafism is reminiscent of an almost identical campaign conducted by Uzbek authorities in 1992. At the time even ordinary Muslims who were not politically active in any way were quickly labeled as Wahhabi, and thus equaled to a dangerous and radical individual. In this context the Wahhabi label inferred an orientation towards the austere form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. Over time this practice turned out to be a double-edged sword for the Uzbek authorities as it gave Wahhabism a mystical aura, especially in regard to the supposed persecution of Muslim believers.³¹

Religious authorities as for instance the Council of Ulema and the State Committee for Religious Affairs have been somewhat overtaken by events in Tajikistan. While all of the religious officials interviewed actively distanced themselves from radical Islamist ideologies, they had relatively

little influence, especially with regard to the most extremist groups who operate underground and are therefore out of reach. In the words of the Chairman of the Council of Ulema, “*Islam has no deviation, but Man fails*”.³² However, he and others criticized the Jihadi groups for not having sufficient religious credentials, which was perceived as a major problem. Moreover, it was not clear to outsiders who constituted their base of popular support, assuming indeed there is one.

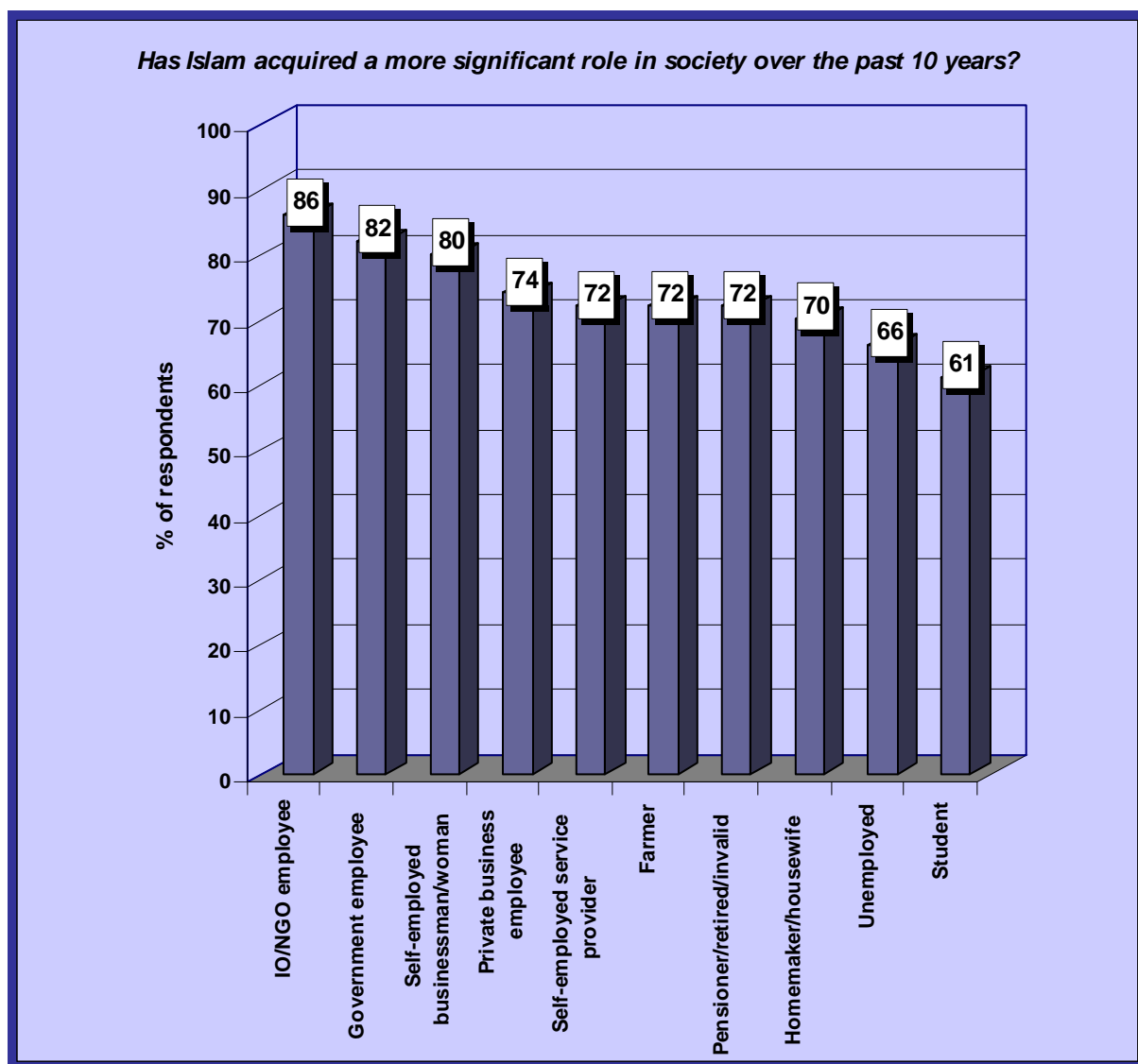
According to the findings of an IFES survey of 2010, 27% of respondents stated that there were specific groups that are causing problems in Tajikistan. Of those respondents, 50% indicated their concern with regard to Salafi groups, while another 32% pointed to the HuT, and 15% naming other groups not listed on the survey questionnaire.³³

Interestingly, the survey data for this project highlights the relative strengths of the Tajik branch of the HuT. It has generally been assumed that HuT actively recruits among vulnerable young males, yet only 47% of youth whose age range from 15 to 19 have ever heard of this group. Even among the 20-24 year olds 55% are familiar with the HuT, and the percentage increases the older the respondents. If indeed the HuT actively seeks to engage young adults, they have so far not been quite successful in becoming a household name among the segment as half profess ignorance about the group.

The majority of Tajiks belong to the Sunni Hanafi branch of Islam, but there is also an Ismaili Shi’a minority, primarily in the Gorno-Badakhshan region. The respondents in the nationwide survey conducted for this study constituted a very homogeneous group as 96% labeled themselves as Sunni Muslims, 3% Shi’a. With regard to the divide between urban and rural respondents respectively 98% and 99% stated an adherence to Islam. The remaining small group consisted of 20 individuals of whom 18 were Christians, a professed atheist and a single Zoroastrian.

To gain a deeper understanding of radicalization, the respondents were questioned about their perception of the role of Islam in Tajik society. More than 70% believed that Islam had taken a more significant role in society over the past ten years. This figure was lower for the younger age groups, specifically for those between 15 and 20 years, but they may encounter difficulties in detecting changes over time. Generally, the older the respondents, the more they supported the view of an increased religious presence. Urban residents were also more inclined to this view.

To gain a deeper understanding of the role of Islam in society the following histogram outlines the respective affirmative answers by the respondents’ current occupation.



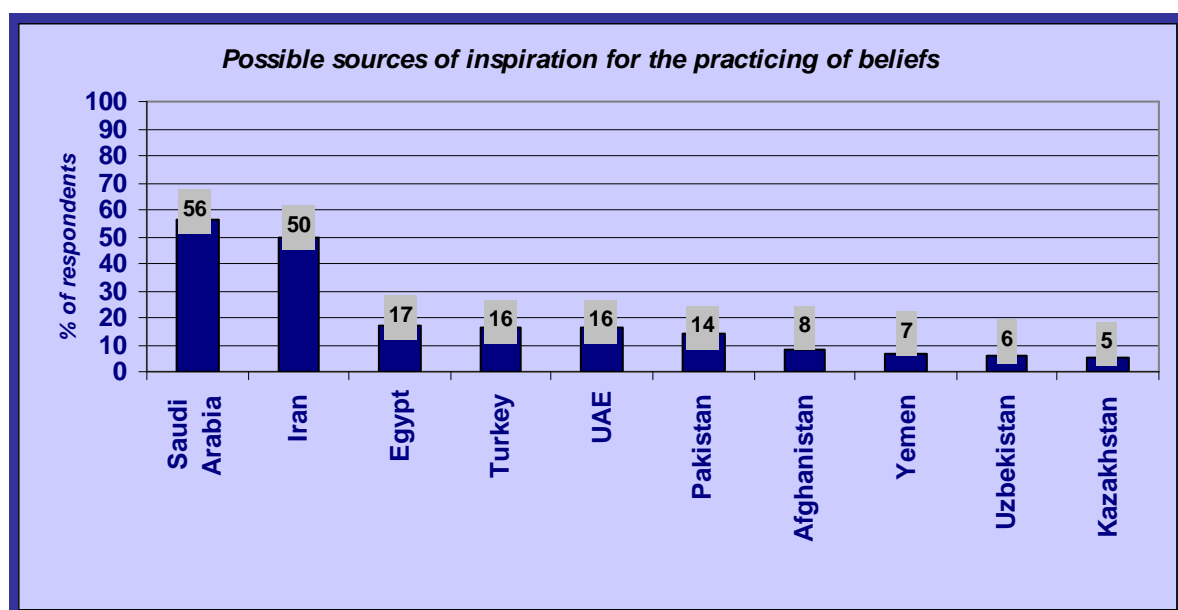
These figures do not show any major differences from the average of 70%, although it would appear that the presumably better educated groups are somewhat more prone to identify long-term religious changes in the country.

This is to some extent corroborated by the fact that 69% of rural residing residents confirmed that changes had occurred whereas the figure for the urban segment was somewhat higher at 78%. It may well be that increased religious observance has become more visible in urban settings and also that this has become the preferred setting for all types of religious groups and movements.

In order to qualify this statement, respondents were asked to elaborate on how these changes manifested themselves. Here 29% believed that Tajiks had gradually become more religious, 27% believed that influences from other Muslim countries was the critical issue, 24% said that

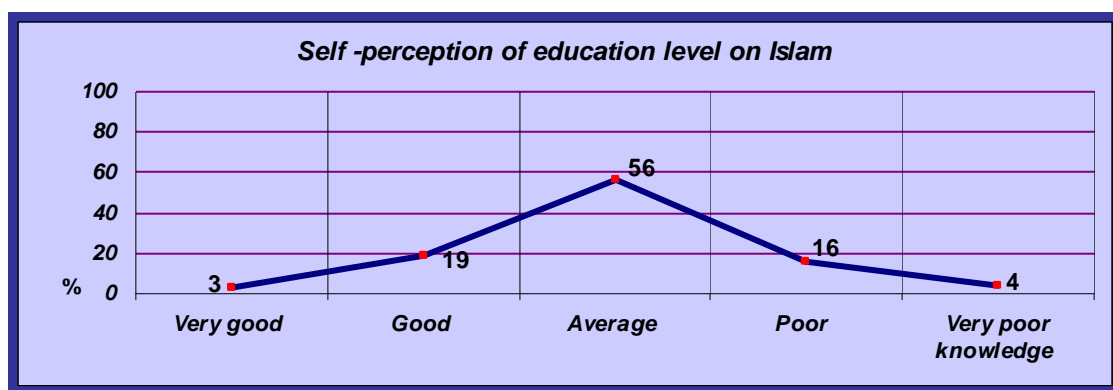
Islam had come to play a more prominent role in Tajik politics and 21% saw that people were turning to religion for an answer to their problems. However, 66% considered Islam to be an inclusive factor in Tajik society, whereas only 14% saw religion as a divisive force. Interesting to note are the remaining 20% who could not answer this question.

Much has been speculated on where Tajik Muslims may draw inspiration from. To get a clearer picture of this religious alignment, respondents listed a number of Muslim countries they believed could inspire the practicing of beliefs, as shown in the table below.



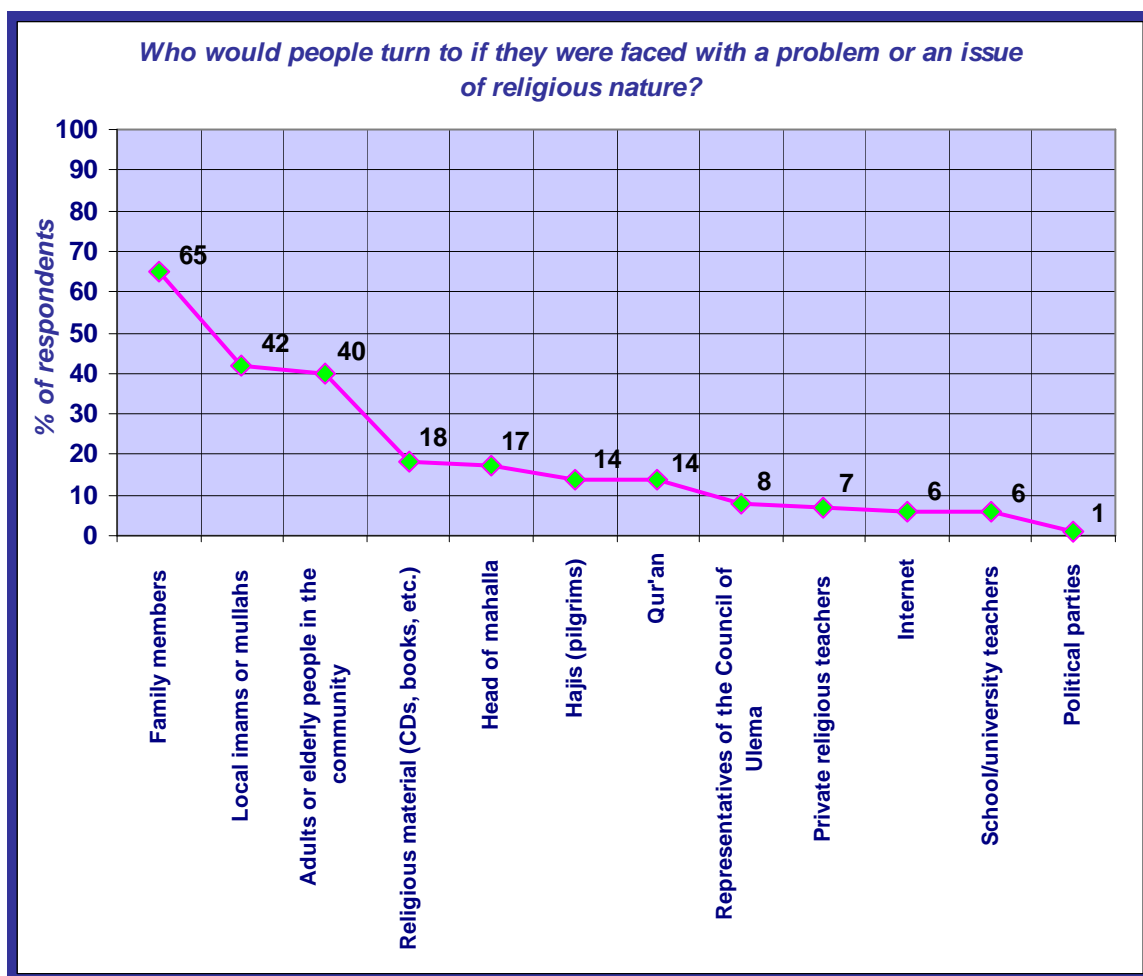
This overview sends a clear message of the level of skepticism with regard to neighboring countries in Central Asia, but also in relation to Pakistan and Afghanistan. The religious affinity between Tajiks and these countries is very low, but the Muslim heartland, the Arabian Peninsula, comes across as places to be inspired by. This is no doubt related to the historical significance of the holy places in Islam, and may not necessarily indicate a deep knowledge of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia for instance. Iran received one of the most favorable rating in spite of the fact that Iran is predominantly a Shi'a Muslim country. However, actual Shi'a influence in Tajikistan is very low, and it seems likely that the affinity towards Iran is rooted in cultural rather than strictly religious factors.

At the personal level, respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of Islam, and although this is a highly subjective matter, it nevertheless gives an indication of people's own perception of their religious grounding that is mentioned in the table below:



Only 3% rated their personal knowledge of Islam as very good, but 19% considered their own level to be good. Unsurprisingly, a majority of 56% were average, whereas 16% listed poor. Only 4% admitted to having a very poor knowledge, with a few not willing to answer. The differences between genders vary little, with only a few percentage points. And the same can be set for rural and urban respondents, although the rural population on average rated that personal knowledge slight lower. These relatively positive affirmations should be contrasted with specific issues related to radicalization mentioned in this study, specifically the often raised concern that young Tajiks are vulnerable to extremist ideologies because of their very low understanding of Islam.

At the practicing level, 73% considered themselves as practicing Muslims, while 17% declared that they were not practicing at all and these respondents were mainly generally from urban areas. Considering that the majority of respondents identified themselves as practicing Muslims, it was of interest to understand who they would turn to in case they were confronted with a problem or an issue of a religious nature.



This overview suggests that religious questions are primarily dealt with at the community level, first and foremost within the family. However, local religious authorities also play a prominent role, much more so than national institutions. Teachers are less sought out for guidance and very rarely are political entities involved. This testifies that the religious issues are dealt with in the private sphere or through networks in the community comprised of individuals with a certain standing due to their age / life experience or pilgrimage and that a social connection is preferred over literature studies for instance. Rural respondents were more inclined to utilize their local religious network, with 46% stating that they would turn to their local Mullah for guidance. The figure for urban respondents dropped to 35%. Since the overall levels of professed religiosity differs very little it can be assumed that religious leaders play a more prominent role in the local social milieu.

The absence of qualified religious instruction has been singled out time and again as a critical factor in the growth of radicalization and this issue will be covered to some extent here. Young Tajiks have studied at madrassahs or Islamic institutes abroad, and as some focus group respondents explained, the children were sent to Pakistan simply because the educational system in Tajikistan was considered inadequate.³⁴ The majority has left for Egypt's al-Azhar University

which is a worldwide recognized center of learning, yet many others have studied in Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan and even some in Afghanistan. Many figures have been offered on how many Tajiks have gone abroad to study, and while there is an official figure based on permits issued, there is also a substantial number of students who are not, or have not been registered. In late 2010, Tajik foreign minister Hamrokhon Zarifi stated that the authorities were trying to establish the actual number of students abroad, and that the religious authorities had calculated the combined figure for Pakistan, Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia at 1430. Unofficial estimates put the real number at above 3000. Some of these youth have come back to Tajikistan radicalized and this has caused serious tension within families and in local communities.

Tajik youth interviewed during this research project remained very concerned about the future impact of returning religious youth. Some stated that they came back to their communities with a disproportionate power because their religious schooling allowed them to challenge the traditional learning of village mullahs. Some indicated that while village mullahs were generally speaking not particularly well-educated this had not been seen as a problem until recent years. Previously, the local mullahs were perceived as custodians of local traditions, which seemed to work quite well until they were challenged on theological grounds by young “hotheads”. The respect for these mullahs has gradually been eroded and in part explains why some Tajik youth have been impressed by the newfound skills and knowledge of their peers and have become more susceptible to alternative forms of religious interpretation.³⁵

It is one thing what students are actually being taught, but new patterns of interaction also emerge from a foreign experience itself. A Tajik scholar familiar with the travel patterns of young Tajik students pointed out that students in Zahedan in Iran had become influenced by Baluchi activists and that connections may have been forged that could lead to political developments.³⁶ This has been a concern to both families and the government as well, and 49% believed that studying abroad could have negative implications, with only 19% considering travel abroad as a harmless educational pursuit. It deserves mentioning that the survey took place at the same time when there was considerable media attention towards this issue. More than half of the respondents would prefer that young Tajiks would stay at home and study, but also realized that the institutional capacity does not exist at the present to accommodate this. When asked about the potential for radicalization of youth abroad, 40% were concerned that this might happen. This sentiment testifies to the perceived link between foreign studies and increased radicalization, a view that is also shared by the government. In August 2010, President Emomali

Rakhmon urged parents to call their children back from foreign madrassahs, specifically stating his fears that they could fall under the influence of radical groups. This prompted many families to contact their sons and a repatriation process began from Egypt and Pakistan that sent hundreds of students back to Tajikistan. These students were repatriated voluntarily, but the sense of urgency raised suspicions that those who did not return quickly could later find themselves being investigated by the authorities.³⁷ A youth representative from Kulyab offered the perspective that parents would generally be interested in sending their children abroad as long there was some form of government control over the process, but if adequate institutions existed in Tajikistan then families would be quite eager to send them there instead.³⁸

Vulnerability to extremist indoctrination can be difficult to assess, yet one way of interpreting the potential for recruitment is to look at the religious foundation and messages of active violent extremist groups. In comparison to other Islamist terrorist groups, the IMU has not performed very well with regard to its religious foundation. Its ideology and propaganda material testifies to the unsophisticated approach of its members and it is doubtful that even a modest level of religious scholarship is available to the group. This same low level of learning could also be found in the various movies that IMU members produced while living in camps in Afghanistan, when the movement had already integrated a clerical presence into its daily life to train the fighters and their families.³⁹

IMU members became increasingly attracted to the Deobandi version of Islam as it has been propagated by the Taliban since the formation of this Afghan movement. Deobandism originated from India in the 19th century and gradually spread to influence many Pakistani madrassahs. Many Afghans refugees who were raised in an austere and conservative Deobandi environment would later form the dedicated elements of the Taliban cadre. This in part explains why there remains a considerable cultural and religious distance between ordinary Tajiks and the hard-line IMU members. The version of Islam which is claimed by the IMU has no roots in and no traditional linkages to Tajikistan and can be said to constitute an imported religious phenomenon, in spite of IMU's insistence that their interpretation is the only valid form of Islam. Uzbek militants from both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan gravitated towards the Taliban, whereas locally anchored movements and parties like the IRPT for instance had a closer ideological affiliation with traditional Islamic beliefs and Tajik nationalism.

This in itself is a critical observation and constitutes a possible entry for counter-radicalization efforts, as it would be possible for Tajik Ulema to review the religiously inspired statements and

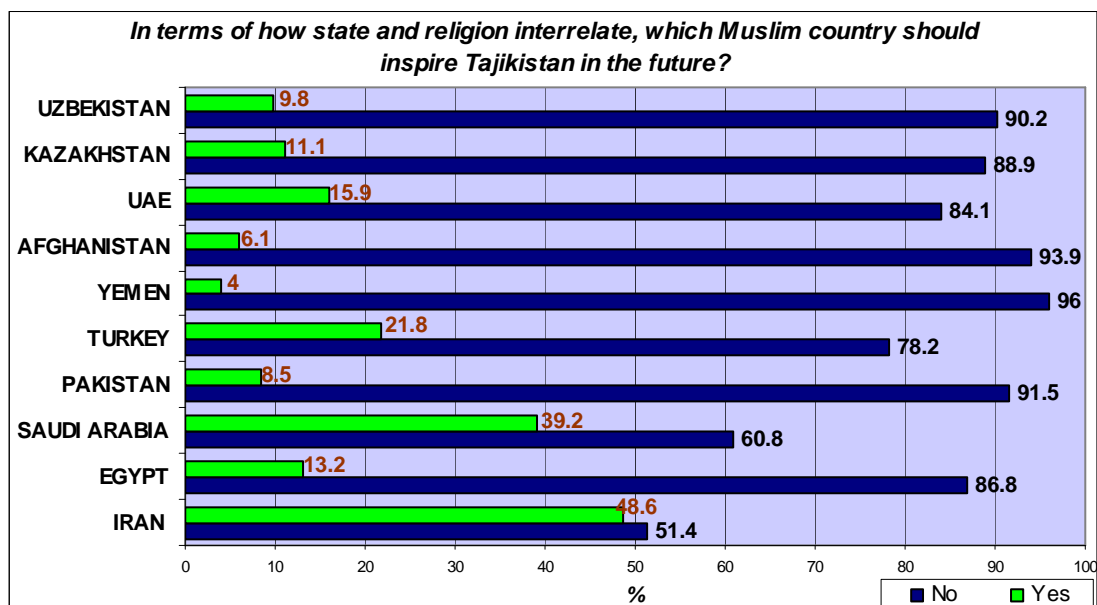
views of the IMU to provide robust arguments for countering the most extreme elements of the IMU ideology.

The Political Dimension

The relationship between the political system and radicalization trends involves a range of different factors all of which have an impact on the current situation. During the course of this research project it became possible to identify some of the most critical aspects, some of which actually inhibit radicalization and yet others that tend to increase it. This is not the proper place to present a detailed account of the political system in Tajikistan, but instead to maintain focus on the topic.

A singular important observation can be found in the IFES survey from January 2010 that clearly indicated that Tajiks wanted a secular state.⁴⁰ It appears that the overwhelming majority of Tajiks have little or no interest in transforming their country into an Islamic state or hold grander visions of a resurrection of a Caliphate. The IFES data is particularly interesting when noting the perceptions on the role between state and religion. 58% preferred that religion played an important role in Tajik politics; however, follow-up questions clearly outlined a desire for Tajikistan to remain a secular state. Only 7% wanted Tajikistan to become an Islamic state on the basis that they believed the country would change for the better and become more moral, ethical, less corrupt and have an improved standard of living.⁴¹

To get a clearer picture of which direction the country might be headed in the future, the respondents in the nationwide survey were asked for their opinion on which countries should inspire Tajikistan politically.



Several clear trends are immediately recognizable, for instance the very negative associations with Pakistan, Yemen and Afghanistan. It should be stressed that the respondents may not have much factual knowledge about the relationship between state and religion in these countries and therefore their answers may be more based on assumptions than actual insight. However, it can be assumed that Tajik respondents are better informed about regional situations and less than 10% were able to draw any inspiration from Uzbekistan.

The highest score was Iran with 48% of respondents being in favor of looking towards its closest cultural counterpart, and it must be assumed that cultural affinity plays a significant role in this particular choice. As to why Saudi Arabia would receive such a relatively high degree of association is difficult to ascertain, however the sanctuary of the most holy places in Islam may result in a more favorable treatment as the cultural, religious and political links between Tajikistan and Saudi Arabia are weak.

Considering this rather secular outlook it becomes relevant to investigate alternative interpretations of radicalization. This situation was perhaps best summarized by a focus group participant in Khujand who stated that

*“In Tajikistan, extremism can be defined as a form of protest. The laws on religion should be amended, including license requirements for religious teaching. It is also important to lift government intervention in international cooperation of religious organizations”.*⁴²

Through interviews, focus group sessions and survey material it is evident that current policies of the Tajik government are perceived by part of the public to be among the main causes of radicalization. It is perceived that especially government policy towards Islam leads to subversive activities, but also corruption and the abuse of power.⁴³ The IFES survey of 2010 has also found a relatively low level of civic society in political activities. This inactivity can in part be explained by the widespread lack of trust in the government and its ability to solve problems. It must be emphasized the focus group participants did not dismiss the role of the government in countering extremism; on the contrary, they suggested better coordination between the state and religious institutions. Participants from Kurgan-Tyube stressed that they looked to the government for help, especially in supporting the educational system.⁴⁴ But if dissatisfaction with the government is so pronounced, it would be prudent to ask why the public has not instigated various forms of protest to change the system. The answer offered by many respondents lies in the collective memory of civil war times.

The ability of the Tajik population to endure continued hardship is in part linked to the experience of the civil war 1992-97. Among those interviewed throughout this research project there was practically unanimous perception that anything was better than a civil war – no one wanted to repeat this experience again. Tajik scholars interviewed during the process indicated that today no one mentions the civil war, as this singular traumatic experience created a form of mental block against the notion of armed conflict. Today the war is seen as irrational and pointless, and no one emerged as winner or hero from that experience.⁴⁵ Accepted wisdom holds that the population is too traumatized by the memory of a horrendous civil war to risk further unrest, and that stability is prioritized over change. However, Tajikistan is changing and the civil war is rapidly ceasing to be a living memory among the younger generation which has not shared this experience.⁴⁶ This inhibitor towards civil unrest may cease to be relevant over time, yet it is impossible to ascertain an expiry date.

With regard to national legislation on religious affairs it is evident that there is a considerable gap between the government's intentions and implementation. Local authorities who are tasked with the implementation of said laws have often been poorly informed about what the law actually says and means. To complicate this situation even further there is the fact that local communities, and very often village mullahs, have been ignorant of the laws. This predicament has led to confusion, ambiguities in terms of implementation and enforcement as well as to mistrust on both sides. Research conducted by a Sughd-based NGO in 2009 stated that out of 270 persons interviewed, 250 had never heard of the law on freedom of conscience and religious unions.⁴⁷

The requirement to register religious institutions offering religious instruction caused consternation among mullahs and a number refuse to cooperate. This meant that religious education moved away from established institutions, primarily local mosques, and into the private sphere to evade government control. This development has resulted in a division of Islamic institutions and activities; one is official, recognized and structured, while the other has gone underground. The latter remains largely invisible to outsiders and this situation is reminiscent of the Soviet period. Probably more than any other single aspect it is especially the laws on religious groups which have opened the door to further radicalization and as one respondent phrased the current situation, *“the Tajik government is looking down the barrel of a gun”*⁴⁸.

Recently convicted extremists from cases in Tajik courts have, comparatively speaking, received very harsh sentences. Around 2006-7 several sentences were handed down to HuT activists of

10, 15 and even 20 years imprisonment for mere possession of propaganda material.⁴⁹ While the individual Islamist activists have been removed from the communities, this policy may well turn out to be a double-edged sword. Within the affected communities there has been widespread rejection of the long prison sentences for what are generally considered minor offenses. The lack of proportionality between crime and punishment has upset local balances between the population and law enforcement structures. However, a further and much more unanticipated consequence is related to the situation that while Islamists may be out of sight, they may not necessarily have changed their views. Through various interviews conducted in Tajikistan it seems clear that the government does not have a policy or program in place that concerns the imprisoned Islamist activists. They are considered as normal criminals with no regard for their political activist backgrounds, and this situation may spell disaster for the future.

In this context the HuT prisoners in Uzbekistan serve as an example, which highlights the dangers of a repressive law enforcement approach. In Uzbekistan, the policy of severe crackdowns appears to have had little effect on the survivability of the HuT movement as it has ingeniously discovered ways of reorganizing in spite of serious setbacks. Thousands of HuT members in Uzbek prisons have reinforced their ideological bonds by staying united. This sense of unity has made them overcome harsh conditions and provided them with the courage to stage protests even within the prisons. In Kazakhstan the pattern is quite similar to what has occurred in Uzbekistan, and there have been confirmed stories of imprisoned HuT activists who have recruited new members to the movement within the Kazakh prison system, sometimes in as little as three weeks.⁵⁰

While the security situation in the Sughd region has been relatively calm over the past years, the policies and actions of the authorities have increased tensions in the region. The authorities have been concerned with the rise of radical groups and many sympathizers and activists have been arrested and sent to prison. However, many of these law enforcement practices have been seen by locals as equally suppressing of traditional, mainstream Islam. In this regard the law enforcement approach to counter-radicalization appears to be short-sighted in the sense that not only will it have to deal with prison radicalization, but has at the same time antagonized the very population it is supposed to collaborate with.

These examples of the relevance of the political dimensions detail several important issues which need to be addressed in order to curb further radicalization. Respondents were asked what role religious leaders should have / perform in the development of state laws where 23% were in favor of their participation, whereas 28% were opposed. Another 21% advocated some form of

involvement in the process and 20% had no opinion on this question. The political and the religious spheres are entities which are linked through complex mechanisms and overlaps, and both impact on the development of radicalization patterns. To this can be added another dimension of direct relevance to the issue, namely that of socio-economic conditions.

The Socio-Economic Dimension

The popular notion that people are attracted to extremist groups through financial incentives is a topic which needs to be tested empirically. If indeed young Tajiks are being lured into extremist groups through promises of money or other material gain, this would indeed be of concern. However, the data available shows reality to be somewhat different and the significance of socio-economic conditions as one of the radicalization dimensions will be outlined here.

Several cases of recruitment into radical groups through financial incentives have been verified, specifically in relation to HuT and Salafi groups.⁵¹ Smaller amounts of cash or the promise of a cell phone were used to attract new members but according to their circle of friends these new recruits had no particular political or religious views that would explain their interest in an extremist movement. Some even held the opinion that their former friends had been tricked because they had no way of understanding the consequences of their actions.

In a wider historical perspective it is of interest to note that former IMU fighters who had been interviewed confirmed that they had been promised US\$ 700–1000 a month to join up when they were located in the training camps in Afghanistan during 2000–2001. However, all of them stated that they had never been paid. While it is known that Yuldashev received funding for each new recruit, that money apparently went somewhere else. It never reached the rank and file members of the movement.⁵²

Direct transactions may explain some of the recruitment into extremists groups that have taken place, but to understand the wider socio-economic setting requires a larger perspective. As one Tajik researcher explained, the primary problem in Tajikistan is the poor state of the economy, and especially HuT feeds of this predicament.⁵³ This view actually changes the prospects for future radicalization considerably because political mismanagement of the economy impacts on the population in several negative ways. When extremists groups in Tajikistan point out that widespread poverty and exceptional high levels of unemployment are the result of an incapable government, this resonates among the population.

It should be recalled that while the religious content of the extremist narrative is often perceived as alien to Tajiks, very real socio-economics are unfortunately not. The political agendas of the extremists groups call for major changes and for the time being they can thrive by being in opposition to the government. From this perspective the recruitment potential expands dramatically, especially when issues of Muslim solidarity are invoked to effect a reordering of society.

Today the majority of Tajiks get by on remittances and various forms of foreign aid.⁵⁴ The money sent back from migrant laborers, primarily in Russia and Kazakhstan, has kept the economy afloat for the time being. This massive migration of more than one million Tajik workers is encouraged by the Tajik government as it brings back foreign currency, but also alleviates the problem of domestic unemployment. If the economic situation in Russia was to change for instance, the return of thousands of young men destined for unemployment could possibly upset the current fragile balance.⁵⁵

The migration trend can be seen as an expedient political safety valve, although it appears to be shortsighted. In 2009, the International Crisis Group remarked in a scathing report on the Tajik situation that it was exactly the social group that could have changed things that left the country.

While the trauma of the civil war may be a fading memory, certainly for the youngest generation, the experience of living through the winter of 2007-08 is not. This was the hardest winter in living memory and the energy system collapsed causing major disruptions in the infrastructure and an unknown number of deaths as a result. Several people interviewed in this project indicated that this experience made it absolutely clear to them what they could expect from the government in a time of crisis and that bitterness still lingered.

Government indifference is further complicated by a widespread culture of corruption. The January 2010 IFES public opinion survey found that 87% of interviewed Tajiks considered corruption to be highly problematic, and this perception had increased from 75% in 2004. The culture of corruption has become endemic, much to the displeasure of the general public.⁵⁶

This displeasure has provided yet another platform for HuT's criticism of corruption, inequality and repression against devout Muslims. The movement's call for social justice easily strikes a chord in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.⁵⁷ Corruption not only affects the economy and the political system, but actually has an indirect effect on religious and cultural behavior, which otherwise may have been mistaken for expressions of increased devotion to Islam.

Mosque attendance has been rising and the use of local imams for settling local or domestic disputes, often divorce cases, obviously involves a religious dimension. However, in the case of using imams in divorce cases this is also an expedient alternative to going through the official court systems, where corruption guarantees this to be a costly affair.

The direct relation between current socio-economic conditions and radicalization is a topic which requires further elaboration and studies. However, Tajikistan is one of the rare cases in which

economic considerations have a direct impact on the development of the security situation. At present it is the extremist groups that criticize government ineptitude, and this is certainly attracting the attention of the population, and it seems quite possible that this relationship has been underestimated.

This overview of the relevance of socio-economic conditions also shows linkages to the other dimensions described in this study. A study of the economic situation in Tajikistan might fail to recognize the importance of political structures, oppositional claims and the emergence of extremists groups.

The Cultural Dimension

Except for the committed hardliners who joined the IMU, the turmoil of the civil war period did not have a general radicalization effect on the Tajik population, neither in religious or cultural terms. There was little or no support to establish radical madrassahs, on the contrary, Sufi shrines were again used in a social way, for instance for picnicking. Youth attendance at mosques declined and formerly hidden bottles of vodka emerged even in previous IRPT strongholds.⁵⁸

One way of gauging the cultural dimension of support for extremist ideologies and groups is to investigate the cultural perceptions of Tajiks towards known extremists groups. Because of the widespread, though often superficial, knowledge of the Taliban, this particular group served as an excellent frame of reference and many respondents and interviewees were quite articulate in their responses. It is important to note the deep mistrust towards the Taliban which is most often articulated along cultural lines. The Taliban are considered as backward, dangerous, primitive, uncultured and uncivilized, or outright described as evil. In this particular context, Islam appears to be a divisive force, meaning that Tajik Muslims have very little if anything in common with the Taliban.

The survey data also showed regional differences in attitudes towards Afghanistan and the current conflict. Gorno-Badakhshan province scored on average ten percentage points higher when respondents were asked if they were concerned about potential spill-over from the conflict or ideological influences spreading into Tajikistan. A full 59% in Gorno-Badakhshan were concerned about this, while the corresponding figure for the Sughd region was only 42%.

Several Tajiks interviewed had themselves worked in Afghanistan and were not interested in repeating that experience. They found the Afghans so different, even when it involved ethnic Tajik Afghans, that they had nothing in common. It is interesting to note, that the all-male respondents were unanimous in their displeasure of Afghan views on the role of women in society. While the role of women in society is a relative concept, conditional on local cultural traditions, these Tajiks went back from Afghanistan taking pride in their own views and treatment of Tajik women.⁵⁹

The cultural divide became even more pronounced in an interview setting with several Tajik women in Dushanbe, who were vehemently opposed to the presence and influence of extremist groups. Their major concern was that the status of women would take a dramatic turn for the worse. In the event that there was to be an extremist Islamist takeover in Tajikistan, they would not be able to leave the house, they would have to be completely covered and they would not be

respected. Moreover, they cautioned, Salafi Islam did not pay respect to the role of parents and thus was a direct threat to traditional family values. Fathers would lose influence over their children and women would be relegated to the role of child bearers. These women had heard stories of parents being sent away from their homes, an action that ran contrary to all Tajik traditions and horrified them because of the perceived cruelty of this act. Even though the Salafis claimed to be acting in the name of God, they did not share the same values or principles nor did they share views on Islam.⁶⁰

The issues of family values and family coherence have been cited by respondents time and again, and this appears to be a critical element in understanding further radicalization. One author has argued that if a young man becomes radicalized, it is nearly impossible for him to pursue his new identity without the support from his family, regardless of whether they share his extremist views or not.⁶¹ This argument would need further studies to verify or reject, but its suggested importance merits closer attention in future activities. It may very well be that cultural values and family norms have changed over time, as it was suggested by an elderly focus group participant from Kulyab. He pointed out that going back 60-70 years, this was a very peaceful and quiet quite period. The key word in this context was sin; once this was said by parents it was taken literally and not repeated anymore.⁶² This apparent concern over the erosion of family values is illustrative of societal changes that play a role in the radicalization environment.

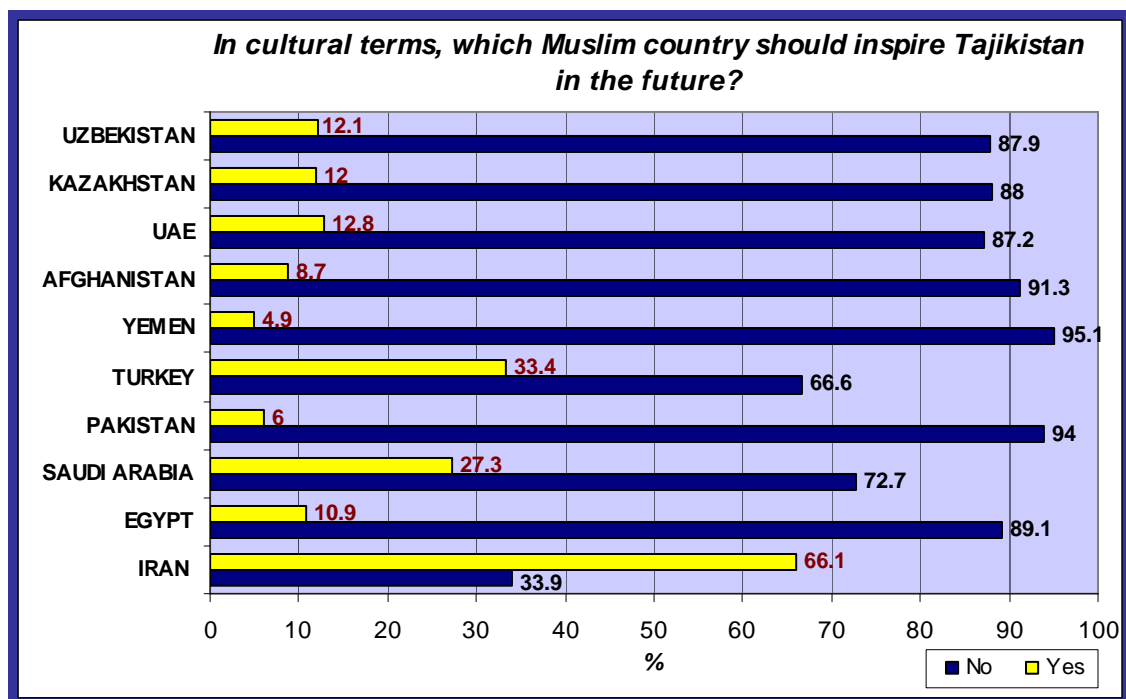
Of the respondents in the nationwide survey, 38% considered that extremist groups and movements contradicted traditional Tajik culture, and 29% explicitly stated that this was the reason why these groups were incapable of improving social conditions. This expression of distrust clearly outlines the differences between imported, radical Islamist ideologies and local sentiments. It could serve as a critically important element in a counter-radicalization policy.

One of the more intriguing aspects of increased religiosity in Tajikistan actually falls into the realm of cultural rather than a religious reorientation. It has previously been mentioned that many Tajik students who go abroad to study Islam return more religious and politically active, but it appears that there might also be a parallel development. Several Tajik scholars interviewed during this research project have indicated that a substantial number of labor migrants returning from Russia had rediscovered Islam as a result of their experiences in Russia. Most often, the negative experience of being exposed to alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, the lack of respect for family values and general poor treatment in the hands of Russian employers had made many Tajiks reconsider their identity. A sort of spiritual awakening had taken place in which Islam was perceived as the foundation of a civilized society that would guard the people from the evils

previously mentioned. By reverting to Islam, these labor migrants had protected themselves from the vices available abroad and it is critically important to note that this group of people did not display any interest in political activism upon their return to Tajikistan.⁶³

If verified, this highly interesting parallel development would be very helpful in differentiating various existing forms of religious activism and identity formation. With regard to the labor migrant group, this may actually be quite beneficial in terms of societal cohesion within Tajikistan, but such a complex issue would ideally require a separate research project. However, initial results from focus group sessions indicate that there is only a very weak link between labor migrants and extremism.⁶⁴ This nexus remains insufficiently explored in the sense that thousands of Tajik families and the boys especially, are bereft of a father figure.

These two examples show how exposure to external groups and personal experiences abroad are cultural markers for the possible extent of further radicalization. The respondents in the nationwide survey were also asked for their opinion on which Muslim countries should inspire Tajikistan in cultural terms. This was to gain an overview of the perceptions of cultural alignment, as it can be seen in the table below.



Iran is clearly the cultural reference point for most Tajiks with 66% confirming that this special relationship is still very much intact. Turkey and Saudi Arabia come second and third, but with much lower scores in the 30% range. Pakistan, Yemen and Afghanistan score very low and this is of direct relevance to the scope of this project as all of these three countries have experienced serious security problems, and even war, that have involved a crucial element of militant

Islamism in each conflict. The affinity between Tajiks and the cultures of these countries is almost non-existent, which in turn has a bearing on the spread of radicalization at the regional level as there is no common cultural ground.

However, these perceptions are largely distributed in society through word of mouth and not in a systematic way. Public information channels have to a large extent neglected to inform the general public about the nature and consequences of radicalization. In what has been described as an information vacuum, this situation follows a direct line from the collapse of the Soviet Union and remains a problem to this day. This has made it easier for extremist groups to attract followers because of their lack of knowledge and understanding to differentiate between altruistic and radical groups.⁶⁵ Lacking, insufficient or unreliable media reporting on radicalization issues and cases have only fuelled rumors about what exactly is happening in Tajikistan. As an example, court documents are not available to human rights activists, researchers or the general public, so very little information on, for instance, HuT arrests in the Sughd region is accessible.

According to some respondents, the lack of Islamic knowledge is not the only cause of extremism, and people should have access to alternative information. Political parties should be allowed to disseminate information to the public through media in order to increase the general level of knowledge on current affairs.⁶⁶ In response to increasing radicalization, several civil society groups have begun to work on this issue which is seen as increasingly important. Among these are youth organizations active at the local level, who have utilized local networks and knowledge to conduct studies and to raise awareness of radicalization. These civil society groups generally enjoy good working relations with local authorities.⁶⁷

As it has been mentioned in the IFES survey, it is important to distinguish between religious freedom and the practice of specific Tajik customs and traditions. Tajik citizens can practice their belief; however some of the recent laws on religious activities have also had an unintended effect on local traditions, such as wedding and funeral ceremonies.⁶⁸ This type of social control has also been extended into the realm of personal appearance, which until recently was a private matter. A ban on the wearing of a full beard was initiated in late 2010. Long-bearded men were brought in by police for questioning because they were suspected of being associated with banned Salafi groups.⁶⁹ Government officials have been quick to point out that there is no official ban on either Islamic dress code or growing a beard, but focus group participants stated that then in practice the police act as if having a beard was illegal.⁷⁰

It is inherently difficult to ascertain the relationship between changes in fashion and personal appearance with a direct link to increased Islamism. Changes may seem like relevant indicators, like the recent popularity of changing traditional Tajik surnames into Islamic names. Some have stated that this trend indicates a growing religiousness, while others have warned that the trend may be much more superficial. This view is somewhat supported by the fact that only a few years ago Iranian and Indian names were in fashion.⁷¹

Another example of appropriated identities of a religious character dates back to the civil war period. Many of the young men who joined the UTO during the civil war were labeled as Muslim fighters, or Mujahids, but in reality they joined the armed struggle out of allegiance to kin and their communities. Here traditional allegiances appear to have taken precedence over religious issues; the latter were merely instrumentalized in a crude fashion to bolster support and to gain legitimacy. This crisis was initiated in a situation marred by social and political struggle which subsequently degenerated into clan warfare.⁷² The significance of clan affiliation is still an important factor, especially in the mobilization of support in political circles, more so than religious affiliations or an actual political program.

These examples of the cultural dimension of radicalization trends and patterns reveal both inhibitors such as traditionalism, family values and gender roles, but also accelerators like an ill-informed public largely cut off from unbiased information about the phenomenon of radicalization in the Tajik context. Moreover, the linkages between political issues, socio-economic conditions and religious issues are once again underscored.

Preventive Measures in Countering Extremism

The previous sections have served to outline the historical developments of violent extremism in Tajikistan and provided an introduction of the interplay of the different dimensions driving the radicalization process. However, as civil society remains the center of gravity in determining which direction future radicalization may take, and to what extent as well, it is equally important to involve the Tajik population as they will ultimately have to decide on whether to embrace or reject extremist ideologies. However, as important as families, communities, teachers and local mullahs are in the first-line defense, a robust counter extremism program would involve government agencies, law enforcement, the media and other stakeholders as well.

The nationwide survey included a series of questions to gain a deeper understanding of local sentiments and perspectives. These topics were intended to serve as a benchmark for future detailed studies and in order to identify specific countermeasures that can be initiated to avoid a polarization of Tajik society. As previously mentioned, the respondents were asked to indicate where they gained specific insights from about the banned extremist groups and their ideology.

Mass media are, not surprisingly, the firsthand source, but this also presents a problem of reliability. Government information on these issues are quite restricted and often biased, and independent media reporting is highly problematic in Tajikistan. This results in a situation where the information about extremist groups is either biased or unreliable, and thus can rarely serve as a trustworthy source. However, the reliance on mass media also opens up a venue for the distribution of informed and unbiased information, which could prove to be an effective method of conducting public outreach regarding a sensitive topic, particularly since Internet penetration remains so low amongst the Tajik population. In this regard television appears to be the best suited means of reaching a wider audience. While some respondents had received knowledge about extremist groups through mosques, schools or independent studies, a significant group of respondents totaling 60% gained their knowledge from members of their own community. This shows that extremism is a topic which is discussed throughout Tajikistan.

The extremist groups that are most widely known are, in descending order, the Taliban, Salafiya, HuT, al Qaeda and the IMU. This more than anything gives a clear indication about the level of attention that is given towards the situation in Afghanistan, and 58% perceive the Taliban to present a grave danger to society. Perhaps because of recent legislation and individual cases which have received considerable attention, Salafiya comes in second with 52%. Though this is, strictly speaking, not a Jihadi entity, but more of a pietistic movement, one possible

interpretation of this very negative association may lie at the intersection between the religious and cultural dimensions. The criticism directed towards Salafiya as a negative influence was formulated by respondents primarily along cultural and much less ideological or political lines.

When these sentiments are compared to actual knowledge about the political aspirations and ideological foundation of extremist groups, there is a clear discrepancy. Rather than being an informed and objective threat assessment, this expression of concern is closer related to the perceived disruptive effect to the state and the cultural identity of Tajiks. Respondents were also asked to comment on what they thought were the best ways to prevent extremist movements. Here the notions of socio-economic stability were raised once again as this dimension was perceived to be the most critical factor in future radicalization. Criticism was leveled at the government for not taking this issue seriously and ignoring the possibilities of unrest that could follow in the wake of increased economic hardship. A full 64% singled out unemployment as a critical factor, supported by 59% who saw roots in structural poverty. These sentiments send a clear message to the government in the sense that if socio-economic conditions are not improved, this could lead to a deterioration of the security situation.

Another important topic that emerged from the survey results was the concern raised over the fundamental lack of education, and particularly with regard to general knowledge about Islam in Tajikistan. A proper understanding of religion would serve as an effective countermeasure to the spread of radical ideologies as people would be able to identify them as deviant. This perspective was repeated and reinforced throughout the research process both during interviews and in focus group settings.

It was also supported by the arguments that Tajik youth who joined extremist group had been misled by friends or relatives, as 41% believed this was the case. This testifies to the perceived ease where extremist groups can indoctrinate new members out of sheer ignorance of core Islamic values and beliefs, and this leaves them very vulnerable. This presents a good argument for increased attention towards religious education provided by knowledgeable teachers or mullahs. A deeper understanding of Islam would enable Tajik youth to recognize extremist ideologies and to reject the violent ones.

Only 17% specifically indicated that the lack of trust in the authorities were to blame for the increase in radicalization or the repression of religious rights as mentioned by 14%. These ideological factors are ranked lower in significance than the ones previously mentioned. Government policies, in particular the laws on religious expression, does alienate some Tajiks,

but cannot be singled out as the main factor driving radicalization. However, the lack of trust indicated in the survey outlines a need for governmental agencies to reconsider their approach and legislation towards religious topics. As a way of understanding how respondents viewed the possibilities of reintegrating members from extremist groups, a specific question dealt with this important topic. While 41% believed that it was possible to turn them around and make a return to their previous lives an option, 35% did not believe this could be done, and the remaining 24% could not tell. This overview unfortunately provides a clear message on the hold extremist groups have on their members. Once Tajik youth have become radicalized, it is very difficult to disengage from this new circle of friends and return to the family.

When asked whether Tajik members of extremist groups could be turned away from radical views and ideologies 35% answered negatively. Within this group 41% held the view that this was because of the fanatical nature of the extremists, and as such they were impossible to change. However, 58% considered poverty and monetary incentive to be important factors in radicalization and the figure rose to 61% when unemployment was mentioned. This quite negative perception on the possibilities of extracting Tajiks from extremist groups is to some extent founded on the fanatical nature of militant activists, however, it appears more concerning that structural impediments such as poverty and unemployment are considered more important. In a sense, it is the difficult socio-economic circumstances that draw youth to radical groups and also keep them there.

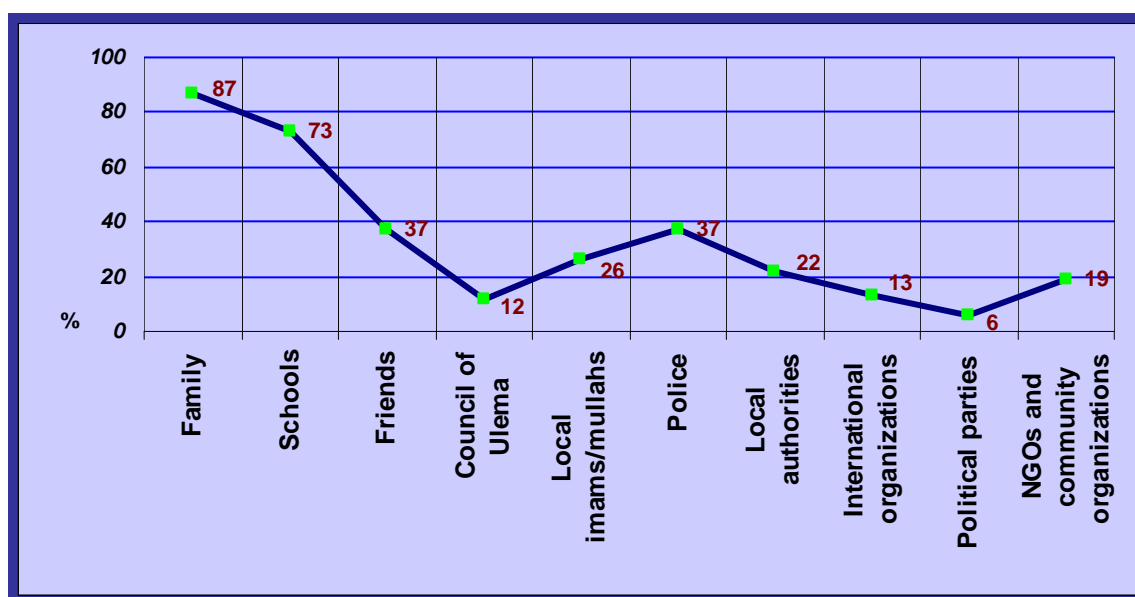
The respondents were asked to identify which measures would be best suited to accomplish the turn around, and the results are listed in the following table.

Improved religious education	29%
Improved general education	38%
Family care and attention	77%
Awareness raising through public campaigns on extremism	42%
Poverty reduction	51%
Stricter legislation and increase police efforts	33%
Increased religious freedom	5%

These perceptions are very valuable in calibrating counter-radicalization responses as these, to be effective, by definition would need to have an element of public support. The frequencies

explicitly state that counter-radicalization starts at home, with no difference between genders. Without the active involvement and attention at the basic family level there is a risk of increased radicalization and it is primarily parental support and guidance that can lead Tajik youth in the right direction. Again, several strands of improvement of the general knowledge of the population are raised as important elements, and these include specific religious educational initiatives, raising the standard of general education, coupled with an awareness-raising campaign. These efforts are obviously large-scale national projects, which would require both time and adequate resources to be successful, but they would have a high degree of public support. When 77% indicate that it is within the family sphere that counter extremism is most important, this sentiment provides a good outline for future programming activities. The civic society approach would focus on the family as this is the center of gravity, with schools, mosques, the media and law enforcement in supporting roles.

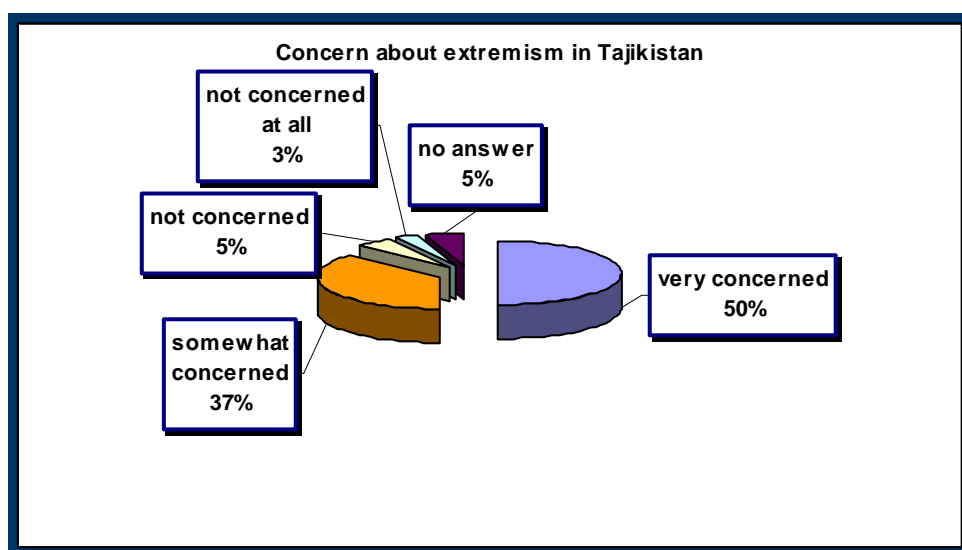
Respondents were asked to qualify their statements by listing who they thought would be best placed to prevent people from radicalizing. The following diagram provides a table of different categories of individuals and institutions mentioned.



Once again, the importance of family is underscored with a full 87% being supportive. The role of educational institutions is equally stressed, and this should be compared with the relatively low level of significance of religious authorities. The National Council of Ulema appears to be largely irrelevant and if religious institutions should indeed be involved, then the community level is much preferred to national institutions. The security dimension is expressed through the indication of the role of the police where some respondents hold the view that counter-radicalization falls in the domain of law enforcement. This could reasonably be explained by the

view that a proportion of Tajiks have a one-dimensional view of radicalization in that this falls exclusively under police business. It is relevant to note that rural respondents were more favorable to police interventions with 41% mentioning this option, while the corresponding figure for the urban population was 27%. Political parties seem to be particularly unsuited, even greater trust is placed in the assistance from international organizations. Yet these bodies are eclipsed by the trust in local institutions, such as NGOs and local authorities. This distribution ranks the primary stakeholders in counter-radicalization and stresses the local, community-based approach. Moreover, it clearly outlines a preference for a soft approach in the sense that societal aspects such as inclusion, family values and education are valued over political oversight or strict law enforcement. This situation indirectly criticizes the regionally popular doctrine on counter-radicalization which has largely been focusing on the domain of law enforcement. According to public opinion, this is unproductive, and other ways and means are preferred.

Finally, respondents were queried on their concerns about extremism in Tajikistan. This was done in order to have some measure of how serious this issue was perceived among ordinary Tajiks.



As shown by the diagram above, a stunning 50% expressed that they were very concerned, 37% somewhat, 5% were not concerned, 3% were not concerned at all and the remaining 5% provided no answer. If the categories of the concerned respondents are pooled together, then a full 87% of the 3502 respondents worry about future developments. However, the focus group discussions revealed regional differences in threat perception. Participants in Kulyab and Shaartuz recognized the dangers posed by extremist groups, but this seemed more abstract than other issues like socio-economic conditions. In Kurgan-Tyube, the mood was quite different. Here participants expressed an immediate concern and not just at a general level but even within their

own city.⁷³ Rather than being one topic among many in contemporary Tajik society, the topic of radicalization is shaping public perception in a negative way. The relatively low levels of Jihadi activities taken into consideration, the overarching consequences of increased radicalization are of serious concern to a majority of the Tajik population.

Labor migration experience has been singled out as a source of radicalization, and therefore it is of relevance to verify if this impacts on the perception. Of the more than 800 respondents who confirmed that they had some labor migrant experience the concern is only slightly elevated to 53% who are very concerned. The overall concern remains very high, but having worked abroad does not appear to change the perception of the situation markedly.

However, concern is one thing, actual impact and prospects for change are another matter. For this reason, respondents were asked if extremist groups could influence the situation in Tajikistan, and if so, in what ways. The results are aligned with the previous question which can be evidenced by the fact that 86% believed that this was indeed the case. Only 14% were of the opposite opinion in stating that extremists would have no influence. These expressions were checked against personal labor migration experience, but the percentages remained exactly the same. These sentiments can be further qualified by statements from the focus groups in Garm and Istaravshan. Here, the participants were very confident that extremist groups would not be successful, as their local culture and religious practices preclude any affiliation with extremism.

Whereas 23% pointed out that this development could bring about new ideas and ideologies into society, 21% stated that extremist groups could bring about an Islamization of Tajikistan. These sentiments indicate that influences were not necessarily a benefit to society, quite the contrary. An additional 15% believed that extremist groups could establish an Islamic state on the territory of Tajikistan, as part of the Caliphate mentioned in Islamist ideology. A full 60% stated that their influence would have a destabilizing effect both on society as a whole and on state structures; other respondents were more specific in pointing out that they have a disruptive effect on society and community cohesion. The violent dimension of increased levels of extremism was also of concern, as 45% believed that these groups could stage terrorist attacks.

Conclusion

The findings of this report on radicalization trends in Tajikistan draw on a range of different sources and data and through the applied historical and contemporary perspectives certain conclusions can be made. Radicalization and subsequent involvement in extremist groups is a phenomenon which is driven by factors internal and external to the situation in Tajikistan.

Violent extremists active in Tajikistan have not been exclusively local or homogenous groups but also consist of Afghans, Uzbeks, Chechens and Dagestanis to name the most prominent ones. International linkages have been forged over the years, although the strength of those ties remains unclear. Considering the current conflict in Afghanistan and regional issues, it is clear that Tajikistan is located at the crossroads of this spiral of religiously inspired violence. To the general public, it is primarily the potential for a spillover effect from Afghanistan that is of concern. This is perceived as an immediate concern, but it should be kept in mind that several globally oriented Jihadi groups are also at play, and the Khujand suicide car bombing in 2010 serves as an apt reminder of the operational capabilities of such groups.

External influences are present in the form of the flow of people and ideas at the regional level and through connections with the wider Muslim world. These developments, and their capacity for social change, are generally manifested through personal relationships or experiences and are for these reasons very difficult to monitor.

External factors certainly play a role in radicalization trends, however issues specific to the Tajik context appear even more relevant. Structural deficiencies in Tajikistan are specifically singled out as highly problematic by the general public. The lack of government attention and action to provide basic services or to improve the economic situation are perceived as very real factors driving radicalization. While socio-economic hardships rarely drive any radicalization process, this seems to be the case in Tajikistan. The public despair of the current living conditions is clearly understood by radical and militant groups alike, who exploit this situation by claiming to represent a more just and prosperous model for society. This propaganda effort largely stands uncontested by the Tajik government and civil society alike, but should be countered in a more systematic way.

While pursuing a law enforcement approach, Tajik authorities have neglected issues of rehabilitation and this constitutes an unknown factor that could possibly serve as an important incubator for future generations of extremists.⁷⁴ Imprisoned militant activists will eventually be

released and it is crucial that a rehabilitation effort takes place within the prison system to minimize a return to subversive activities.

The law enforcement approach has some support from the population, but the majority of the respondents prefer a much softer approach that aligns civil society as the real center of gravity. From this perspective emerge specific elements which are considered crucial such as improved general and religious education, awareness-raising campaigns about extremism and improved socio-economic conditions. Solutions must be generated at the community level, and this bottom-up perspective inserts traditional family values at the core of effective counter-radicalization. The findings highlight the need for continued capacity building across the range of different stakeholders. At the governmental level, there is a need for a clearly identifiable counter-radicalization plan of action, but also down to the village level where local schools and mosques play an important role.

Structural factors have been identified that reinforce instability, and this tense situation is subject to change through several triggering events that have the potential to exacerbate radicalization trends. A sudden, massive return of labor migrants will put strain on already failing socio-economic structures or the event that the war in Afghanistan spreads to the region as some experts have warned. However, these potential causes for escalation can be dealt with since they have already been identified.

As early as 2003, Ahmed Rashid has pointed out that Central Asia was almost certain to become the new global battleground.⁷⁵ This development has fortunately not materialized, but the possibility remains, and that in itself certainly merits closer attention. As the findings of this study conclude, there is cause for concern regarding radicalization trends in Tajikistan. In the Tajik context there are both push and pull factors present. Among the push factors are socio-economic conditions, the presence of violent extremists, potential for regional spill-over and low levels of religious education. Simultaneously are a range of factors which serve to pull Tajiks away from extremism; such as, traditional religious and cultural values, the desire for stability and recent security incidents that are perceived negatively. Some international scholars and observers to Central Asian affairs have described the current situation as one characterized by immediate danger, but this does not appear to be justified in the light of this report.

The situation is indeed subject to change, but it is increasingly difficult to state with certainty when and how and to what extent this will occur. The reason for our lack of prediction is to be found in the complexity of the problem; it simply cannot be reduced to a single aspect as for

instance poverty. Any oversimplification runs the risk of ignoring other very real problems which also impact on radicalization trends. This inherent complexity should not serve as an excuse for inaction; the report has identified several key areas and aspects for counter-radicalization activities which address the causes rather than the symptoms. A list of recommendations is presented to conclude this report.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed here are specifically designed to counter current and a potential rise of militant, extremist Islamist movements in Tajikistan. This is indeed a narrow scope, but it is needed in order to address immediate as well as long-term issues and concerns which are directly relevant to this specific problem. That severe problems do also exist in neighboring Afghanistan is of high relevance as that situation is connected to Tajikistan. For counter-radicalization initiatives and programs to be effective, regional strategies are crucial. However, civil society remains the center of gravity and this will be reflected in the recommendations. This report takes a practical approach and has sought to identify activities which can and should be implemented by a range of stakeholders. At the center remains civil society, and it is of critical importance that specific mechanisms are designed and established to equip civil society entities and organizations to deal with these issues in a timely and responsible manner.

- Review of current legislation on religious affairs. A revision of government policies is needed to adjust current actions to realities. Some recent government initiatives have proved to be counterproductive and are perceived as unnecessary obstructions for traditional religious practices. The revision would ensure that arbitrary enforcement which has resulted in unintended consequences is eliminated. The gap between policies and implementation procedures by law enforcement officials should be bridged through clear guidelines and additional training.
- International support to the Tajik authorities in order to continuously monitor and assess the scope of radicalization tendencies. This would require technical assistance as well as training and advisory functions to involve all relevant stakeholders. It may be desirable to set up a Task Force on Radicalization that involves representatives from both government agencies and civil society. Having a single entry point would make it easier to implement new policies and programs and to avoid a duplication of efforts.
- The need for structured and qualified religious instruction, from primary school up to university levels, has been mentioned as a key issue by almost all stakeholders. It is imperative to train imams on the ideologies of radical Islamism. There is a dearth of subject matter experts on extremist ideologies and groups within Tajikistan. When fully trained and certified, these experts will be able to engage in discussions with vulnerable youth on basic Islamic tenets and to clearly outline alternatives, ideally at community level.

- Increased radicalization awareness. A nationwide information campaign should be launched that highlights the differences between beliefs and objectives between traditional Islamic values and traditions in Tajikistan with those held by extremist groups. Television has been identified as the most significant venue of outreach and is almost guaranteed to reach a wide audience. This campaign should also involve the production and distribution of objective materials for school children and students to stimulate an informed debate among the vulnerable segments of Tajik society.
- The establishment of stakeholder networks and, specifically, a central coordinating body that collects information and distributes best practices based on local knowledge and practical experiences is needed. Communities in need should know where to go and whom to consult for practical advice. This would essentially function as an early warning network and would be designed to link and coordinate subject matter experts with families and communities at risk. The role of central coordinating body may be allocated to the aforementioned Task Force on Radicalization.
- Establishing a rehabilitation program for imprisoned extremists. To avoid a situation in which released extremists continue their previous activities and recruitment of new members to their cause, a dedicated program should focus on the reintegration of former extremists into their communities.
- The formulation of a national strategy on counter-radicalization and an action plan. This strategy would outline the responsibilities of the various stakeholders and outline clear and achievable objectives. The central elements of the national strategy must be communicated to the Tajik public to raise awareness and to enlist public support. The action plan would outline which steps the government intends to take and how it will be implemented.

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