

SEPTEMBER 2016



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RADICALIZATION  
AND VIOLENT  
EXTREMISM IN  
CENTRAL ASIA AND  
AFGHANISTAN

**Muhammad Idrees**

BISHKEK



## KEY POINTS

- Radicalization and violent extremism are growing problems for Central Asia and Afghanistan. The issue of radicalization must be addressed at its early stage in order to prevent that it would lead to violent extremism and terrorism. The five Central Asian states along with Afghanistan must come up with solid strategies how to tackle this growing threat. Youth make up a large percentage willing to join the extremist forces, therefore proper youth policies should be designed and implemented.
- This policy brief discusses the primary and secondary causes of radicalization along with its brief historical background in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Recommendations have been made in order to tackle the problem before it gets deeper and settle its roots.
- The atmosphere of regional cooperation in terms of security, border management, counter-terrorism strategies, share of intelligence and narcotics control is very important between Central Asian states and also between Central Asia and Afghanistan.
- The issues of corruption, weak institutions and bad governance must be strictly noticed by the government. Public institutions need to deliver properly and the issue of corruption should be handled, so that people could develop their belief in the public institutions.
- Mullahs, local Imams and religious scholars carry a lot of responsibility in eradicating the problem of radicalization and extremism. Most of the times it is the misinterpretation of the Quran and Hadith, which mislead the youth. Moreover, prison reforms and de-radicalization programmes in prisons must be introduced.



# INTRODUCTION

Radicalization and violent extremism have been hot issues confronting the modern world. From Europe to Australia, and from America to Africa and Asia, this virus has been spreading rapidly by different names like color, religion and ethnicity etc. This issue is not limited to any specific region, religion or ethnicity but has spread all over the world in more or less intense form, while coming to Central Asia and Afghanistan, the possible threats have been imposed by radical Islamist groups. This policy brief discusses radicalization and violent extremism in the context of Afghanistan and Central Asia. The purpose is to analyze the issue, discuss various factors and provide recommendations to the governments of the Central Asian states and Afghanistan to use them while designing the policies in eradicating radicalism and violent extremism. The paper briefly discusses the historical background and various reasons behind radicalization and violent extremism. In the end, recommendations are offered, which can be used as possible solutions to the problem.

When a person's beliefs or thought shifts to an extreme wanting a drastic change in the society is called radicalization<sup>1</sup> while if a person wants to achieve his/her ideological, political or social goals by using violence or force is called violent extremism.<sup>2</sup> Radicalization and violent extremism can be considered inter-related sometimes, but radicalization may not always lead to violent extremism. The idea of Islamic radicalization and violent extremism can be traced back to the issue of Palestine and British influence on Egypt which gave birth to the formation of Muslim Brotherhood but certain other incidents worked as fuel to the problem. But here I have confined myself to Afghanistan

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- 1 "Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization in Australia", Living Safe Together, accessed October 05, 2015, <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/informationadvice/Documents/preventing-violent-extremism-and-radicalisation-in-australia.pdf/>.
  - 2 Ibid. 10.

and Central Asia and therefore I did not touch the issue of Palestine although later the war in Iraq followed by Syria lead to the formation of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and had a substantial effect on Central Asia and Afghanistan.

## CAUSES OF RADICALIZATION

There is no single cause of radicalization and violent extremism. The causes or factors of radicalization may vary depending upon the circumstances surrounding individuals. Some of the main causes (both primary and secondary) of radicalization and violent extremism are discussed below.

### Primary Causes

Although in Afghanistan the conservative mindset existed long before, King Amanullah Khan's era of modernization that included the liberation of women embarked the conservative mindset of the populace which resulted in his overthrow in 1929.<sup>3</sup> But the 1978 Communist Party coup<sup>4</sup> followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was associated with religious and extremist drive that formed a more severe layer of extremism in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Different Islamic groups/parties were established fighting the Soviets and later these groups extended their ideology as the basis for their parties/groups activities. After the withdrawal of Soviet forces, those Islamist groups started fight-

3 Paul Fishtein, "Afghanistan's Arc of Modernization: 1880 to 1978", *The Globalist* (September 1, 2010), accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.theglobalist.com/afghanistans-arc-of-modernization-1880-to-1978/>.

4 "Afghan President is Overthrown and Murdered", *History*, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/afghan-president-is-overthrown-and-murdered>.

5 Reza Fazli, Casey Johnson and Peyton Cooke, "Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan", *United States Institute of Peace, Special Report*, (September 2015), accessed 6 February, 2016, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR379-Understanding-and-Countering-Violent-Extremism-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

ing one another which made the way for Taliban to come and rule the country with stricter form of Islam. During that time Afghanistan became a safe haven for foreign Islamist fighters. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the twin towers of New York and the Pentagon near Washington D.C. followed by the US attack on Afghanistan, the idea of radicalization and extremism rapidly gained weight. In 2003, the US involvement in Iraq further complicated the problem. These waves of radicalization and extremism not only affected Afghanistan and Iraq they rather have spread to other countries including the U.S. and western European countries. They also had violent trans-border repercussions. As a result, the ideology of Jihad developed, which was not only the basis of fighting against the Soviets. This ideology is still important as a foundation of the ongoing fighting. In the same way its immediate impact was felt in the region, and the Central Asian countries were also affected by these new waves. Since 2001 the radical Islamic groups, Al-Qaida, Taliban and the Islamic Party (Hizb-e-Islami) lead by Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, have been involved in fighting against the foreign forces and Afghan government while some others were accommodated in the government. Currently the peace talks with the Islamic Party are moving likely towards a positive end and it is expected that the Islamic Party will be accommodated in the government. These talks have also got U.S. support and besides many agreed terms, it is an important condition to remove Gulbaddin Hekmatyar from the United Nations Security Council Black List.<sup>6</sup> ISIS has been also an emerging headache for the government of Afghanistan. Kim Sengupta writes in "ISIS in Afghanistan: The Country's Taliban Problem hasn't gone away and it has new extremists to contend with", that Americans who were first denying the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan are now worried about their growing influence.<sup>7</sup> ISIS fighters who were once gaining

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6 "US Welcomes Afghan Government, Hezb-e-Islami Peace Accord", Bakhtar News Agency (May 18, 2016), accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.bakhtarnews.com.af/eng/politics/item/22714-us-welcomes-afghan-government-hezb-e-islami-peace-accord.html>

7 Kim Sengupta, "ISIS in Afghanistan: The country's Taliban Problem hasn't gone away-and it has new extremists to contend with", Independent (July 24, 2015), accessed November 03, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/afghanistans-taliban-problem-hasnt-gone-away-and-now-isis-has-arrived-too-10411835.html>.

momentum in the eastern province of Nangarhar are facing defeat and their strength has been weakened by Afghan Security Forces with the help of international forces.<sup>8</sup>

The evolution of Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia can be divided into two phases i.e. the beginning of Islamic radicalization after the emergence of Central Asian states and the post-2001 era (after the fall of Taliban).<sup>9</sup> The fighting by Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviets also affected the Central Asian region. However its impact remained very limited. The first group of Islamist students came as Ikhwan al Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood) in the 1970s and created the Tashkent Group with the aim to establish an Islamic state. Their main centre of activities was the Ferghana valley and thus the discussion of radicalism and extremism would have been incomplete without mentioning the importance of the Ferghana valley. The Ferghana valley is comprised of the territories of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has been the centre of many radical or Islamist movements, which have also spread to southern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>10</sup> After the emergence of the five Central Asian states, the transfer of power took place peacefully except in Tajikistan where civil war broke out in 1992. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IPRT), which had been the main player of the alliance in the civil war later signed a peace agreement with the government in 1997 and thus became 30 % partner in the government. IPRT was the only registered Islamic political party in Central Asia before it got banned on August 28, 2015.<sup>11</sup> Later in 1999 and 2004, the incidents of bomb blasts took place in Uzbekistan

8 Abubakar Siddique "Is Islamic State on the Verge of Defeat in Last Afghan Stronghold?", Gandahara (7 February, 2016), accessed May 18, 2016, <http://gandahara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-is-defeated/27558495.html>.

9 Jozef Lang, "The Radical Islamic Militants of Central Asia", OSW, WARSAW November 2013, accessed 24 October, 2015, [http://aei.pitt.edu/58014/1/report\\_the-radical-islamic-militants.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/58014/1/report_the-radical-islamic-militants.pdf).

10 Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU", Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, accessed October 24, 2015, [http://www.wh.agh.edu.pl/other/materialy/678\\_2015\\_03\\_17\\_22\\_03\\_31\\_Islamic%20Radicalism%20in%20Central%20Asia%20and%20the%20Caucasus.pdf](http://www.wh.agh.edu.pl/other/materialy/678_2015_03_17_22_03_31_Islamic%20Radicalism%20in%20Central%20Asia%20and%20the%20Caucasus.pdf).

11 Qishloq Ovozi, "The Demise of Tajikistan's Islamic Party", Radio Free Europe (September 04, 2015), accessed May 28, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-demise-of-tajik-islamic-party/27227509.html>.

killing dozens of people and the alleged group behind these blasts was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.<sup>12</sup> But overall the security atmosphere in Central Asia was peaceful and these groups could not be able to reach their objective and achieve what they wanted.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Hizb ut Tahrir, and Tablighi Jamaat are the main Islamist groups that started to operate in Central Asia. IMU and IJU are believed to be using force and other violent means to achieve their goals while the latter two pursue their activities through peaceful means. The IMU and IJU were fighting against the Northern Alliance until 2001. Since 2001 both groups have been fighting the coalition and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. The emerging threat of ISIS has developed serious concerns among Central Asian states. There has not been exact information about the number of Central Asian citizens joining ISIS. Cholpon Orozobekova states in her article that according to the International Crisis Group the number of Central Asians joining ISIS may range between 2,000-4,000 while some experts mention the number of 4,000 which can be an even higher figure.<sup>13</sup>

Deirdre Tynan (The ICG's Central Asia Programme Director) states in her interview with Deutsche Welle that besides internet and social media the Central Asian migrant workers are radicalized and they are recruited in Turkey and Russia while some can also get attracted through religious education in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup> Tatyana Dronzina - an expert in Islamic and ethnic conflicts from Sofia State University in Bulgaria-mentions in her interview with the Diplomat that Central Asian countries do not have any solution on how to tackle the growing issue of

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12 "Insurgency – GWOT", Global Security, accessed May 28, 2016, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/centralasia/uzbek-terror.htm>.

13 Cholpon Orozobekova, "Central Asia and the ISIS Phantom", The Diplomat (October 02, 2015), accessed November 03, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/central-asia-and-the-isis-phantom/>.

14 Deirdre Tynan, "Thousands from Central Asia joining 'Islamic State'", Deutsche Welle (January 21, 2015) accessed June 12, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/thousands-from-central-asia-joining-islamic-state-report/a-18203785>.

their citizens joining ISIS.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and later the U.S. Global War On Terrorism (GWOT) are the primary reasons for radicalization and extremism in Afghanistan from where these waves also extended to Central Asia.

## Secondary Causes

Among the secondary reasons, different factors are involved varying from poverty to illiteracy and unemployment. However, it may not be necessarily true that a person having radical or extremist ideas must have been poor, uneducated or unemployed. This issue is so complex that one cannot come out with any single cause or factor although Michael Laubsch [a German expert on Central Asia] writes in an e-mail to Trend that the main cause of extremism and radicalization in Central Asia are poor social and economic conditions.<sup>16</sup> Javid Ahmad mentions in his article, "5 Paths to Islamic Radicalization", various factors of radicalization. He writes that religious teachings are exaggerated. He gives the examples of Pakistan and Europe that in Pakistani Madrassas (religious schools) students are convinced to struggle in bringing about the change that will bring them closer to God. In Europe many young people that are alienated and discriminated by some factors seek religious justifications. I would say that the issue has multiple drivers and sometimes even not understandable. In Kyrgyzstan, one of my colleagues shared with me an interesting story about a dispute in a private company where she used to work.

An employee "A" with Kyrgyz ethnicity working in a Private company "X" had problems with his female colleague (Russian Christian) because according to him her dresses were improper/short. After receiving several warnings from him, she shared the issue with her other colleagues in order to make him understand not to interfere in her affairs and later after the intervention of

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15 Jacopo Dettoni. "Interview ISIS in Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, (August 11, 2015), accessed October 29 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/interview-isis-in-central-asia/>.

16 V. Zhavoronkova, "Experts: Poor Political Systems in Central Asia May Lead to Extremism." *Trend News*, (February 18, 2010), accessed October 4, 2015, <http://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/1641159.html>.

other colleagues and supervisor, the person stopped giving her further warning. The person was an ordinary Muslim having no connection with any radical group. Here I would like to illustrate that the radical mindset may be present everywhere and could be acceptable until it starts affecting others or in severe form it could turn into violent extremism. One would not believe to hear such kind of story mentioned above a decade ago. In the same way some other factors, like personal dissatisfaction, disenchantment intolerance towards religious values or practices, the negative effects caused by air strikes lead people towards religious radicalization. Furthermore, social networks like friends and relatives accompanied with poverty and unemployment add to Islamic radicalization.<sup>17</sup> The individual's environment or social connections affect him/her and could move him/her towards radicalization. For example Afghanistan has been facing war for the last four decades and that war torn environment is affecting children. Svetlana Dzardanova writes in her policy brief that in a war-torn atmosphere the warlords become like heroes to children, which shift their behavior into violence.<sup>18</sup> The Madrassas network in Afghanistan and Pakistan also contributes to the radicalization of youth, specifically Pakistani Madrassas. After the Soviet invasion the influx of refugees started to flow to Pakistan and Iran. Most of the Afghan refugees could not afford other education for their children and therefore it was a good option for them to send their children to these religious madrassas. Kaja Borchgrevink mentions in her research paper that in 1982 9 per cent of total population studying in Madrassas

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17 Javid Ahmad, "5 Paths to Islamic Radicalization", *The National Interest*, (February 18, 2015), 2015, accessed October 24, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/5-paths-islamic-radicalization-12269>.

18 Svetlana Dzardanova, "Socialization in Violence and the Post- 2014 Approach in Afghanistan", *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs OSCE Academy, Central Asia* ,Policy Brief #30, 13, (November 2015), accessed December 16, 2015, [http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Brief\\_30\\_For\\_Web.pdf](http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Brief_30_For_Web.pdf).

were Afghan refugees.<sup>19</sup> She further stated that madrassas located in the tribal areas of Pakistan have links with the militants fighting in Afghanistan and they also have their role in recruiting the suicide bombers.<sup>20</sup> Moreover in prisons the atmosphere of radicalization further develop the ideology. Sarkhat, an Afghan daily investigated the overall situation in Afghan prisons. It states that terrorists, criminals and mafia control their activities from the prisons. In Pul-e-Charkhi prison, Talib leaders and mafia bosses have access to all services which are provided to them from the outside. They have mobiles, internet and good food (in difference from ordinary prisoners). Lately, the Afghan government announced the execution of six terrorists and before their execution their posts appeared in social media. All these activities further facilitate the criminal and terroristic activities.<sup>21</sup> In order to further elucidate the situation in prisons, I interviewed an Afghan defence lawyer who has been working on the cases of prisoners in Bagram prison. When I asked him about the status of prisoners, their ideology behind the fighting and the reasons which made them fighters, he replied:

“In Bagram prison, there are approximately five thousand prisoners and all of them are anti-governmental elements or you can say that their reason being behind bars is their insurgency and fighting against the government and Coalition Forces. They are arrested due to multiple reasons including IED (Improvised Explosive Device) fitting, killing, fighting and would-be suicide bombers. They also belong to different age groups but mostly are in their twenties and thirties. Here they are provided with defence lawyers who investigate their cases. Over the past five years of my experience, I came across different reasons behind their fighting. The main reasons are the Jihad ideology, lack of knowledge about Islam, poverty and unemployment (because the young un-

19 Kaja Borchgrevink, “Beyond Borders: Diversity and Transnational Links in Afghan Religious Education”, Peace Research Institute Oslo (September 2010), accessed May 25, 2016, [http://file.prio.no/Publication\\_files/Prio/PRIO%20Paper\\_%20Borchgrevink\\_%20Beyond%20Borders%20Diversity%20and%20Transnational%20Links%20in%20Afghan%20Religious%20Education\\_September%202010.pdf](http://file.prio.no/Publication_files/Prio/PRIO%20Paper_%20Borchgrevink_%20Beyond%20Borders%20Diversity%20and%20Transnational%20Links%20in%20Afghan%20Religious%20Education_September%202010.pdf).

20 Ibid. 56.

21 “Prisons are the favorite places for terrorists”, Sarkhat (Kabul), May 11, 2016, First Year, Issue No. 235.

employed fall easily into the hands of those elements who brain-wash and use them). The young ones whose cases I investigated even did not know why they were fighting. Unlike the Pole-Charkhi where there are programmes for engaging the prisoners in de-radicalization activities, which include Islamic teaching and sports activities while here they don't have any de-radicalization programs. They only have sport activities and access to books. I was personally dealing with the case of a 16 years old boy – would be suicide bomber sent by the militants based in Pakistan. When I asked him several questions, he did not know anything why he was doing that and he could not justify what he was going to do. He was just told that infidels were ruling Afghanistan and it was our religious obligation to fight against them. When I asked whether he would continue his activities after he would be released, his answer was 'no'."

Similarly, the prisons of Central Asian countries also reflect a horrible picture mentioned above. Prisons should be the centres for de-radicalization but on the contrary some time they do the job of radicalization. Tortures and atmosphere of the prisoners make them even more brutal after they spend their time in prison. The United States Institute of Peace states in its report "Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan" that as to a large extent the common prisoners and the prisoners belonging to radical/extremist groups stay together therefore the extremist elements deliver their message.<sup>22</sup> The genuine fear is that the growing level of poverty and deteriorating infrastructure of Central Asian countries provide the opportunity for the extremist and radical forces in the former Soviet republics to grow and enforce their influence considerably. In the same way, the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan is casting its shadow of a negative impact on its neighboring Central Asian neighbors.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, due to the complex nature of the problem, one cannot come up with some solid solutions. Below are offered some recommendations.

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22 Fazli, Johnson, Cooke, supra no 5, 10.

23 International Crisis Group, "Central Asia: Decay and Decline: Executive Summary and Recommendations", Asia Report No. 201 (2011), accessed October 04, 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/201%20Central%20Asia%20-%20Decay%20and%20Decline.pdf>



## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to tackle the challenge of radicalization the report makes some recommendations for the Central Asian countries, such as focusing on eradicating corruption, improving their human rights records, resource development, including providing better social benefits, working on capacity-building of local governments, implementing multiple reforms, particularly in education and health care as well as in the business sector.<sup>24</sup>

- The governments of all five states and Afghanistan must pay comprehensive attention to involve their people especially the youth in activities like debates, cultural and sport events in order to enlighten their minds and understand each other point of view. Proper youth policies must be designed and implemented.
- All the five Central Asian states and Afghanistan should extend their cooperation in the fields of border management, drug trafficking and terrorism. They should design an effective intelligence sharing strategy.
- Prison can become the hub of radicalization and violent extremism. The Central Asian states and Afghanistan must develop proper de-radicalization programmes in prisons. The de-radicalization programme can include Islamic teachings, learning of different professional and vocational skills, sports activities etc. The drug-mafia and terrorists should not be allowed to operate and monitor their groups' activities from prisons.
- The role of religious leaders and Imams of mosques is very important because they usually have direct influence on the people. Systematizing preaching in mosques and religious

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24 Ibid.

gatherings is essential, as the proper interpretation of Quran and Hadith has a direct link with the mindset of the audience and the young community. In many cases it is the misinterpretation that may lead to radicalization and violent extremism. In Afghanistan the religious leaders or Mullahs are reluctant because of the fear of Taliban or other extremist organizations to speak clearly about some issues like declaring the suicide attacks haram (forbidden). Islamic scholars all around the world must have a clear stance on the growing issue of terrorism, so the young mindset could not get indulge in terroristic activities. Recently, the Kyrgyz government took an excellent initiative of testing their Imams of mosques. However, the problem is that some elements of Kyrgyzstan becoming radical and are joining fighters in Iraq and Syria that has become a headache for the Kyrgyz government. Since 2014, the Muslim Spiritual Board has made it obligatory for all Imams to pass tests on Sharia Law and Arabic. The committee conducting the tests consists of Muftiate representatives, and members of the Secular State Agency on Religious Affairs and Kyrgyzstan's Security Council. The same year they found that 70% of 59 Imams surveyed were not qualified enough.<sup>25</sup>



## CONCLUSION

The idea of radicalization and extremism has been flourishing for the last four decades. Different factors like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. global war on terrorism along with poverty, weak institutions, unemployment, corruption and illiteracy are involved in its developing. The Central Asian countries and Afghanistan do not have any proper strategy to tackle this growing problem. I would like to mention that radicalism and violent extremism are emerging threats to the Central Asian countries

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25 "Kyrgyzstan testing clerics' knowledge of Islam", EURASIANET (May 28, 2015), accessed October 26, 2016 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/73636>.

and Afghanistan. Therefore the governments of these six countries must develop appropriate policies how to handle this problem. The role of religious leaders and Imams can help to stop this from growing. Strengthening the public institutions and eradicating poverty and unemployment will develop confidence among the youth and they will play their role in the development of their country.

Central Asian countries are passing through a very critical time and they need to be very conscious about the growing threats of radicalization and extremism. So far the region was safe and no prominent activities of terrorism occurred but the growing radical mentality and the number of Central Asian citizens joining ISIS is an alarming threat to these countries. On the one hand, these countries are worried about their internal threats of radicalization and extremism while on the other hand their concerns are growing about the recent developments of Taliban in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan and Central Asia are getting closer in terms of energy trade, therefore, these countries should take serious measures to stop spreading radicalization and design methods to counter terrorism. Kyrgyzstan has already started introducing preventive measures like educating and appointing the religious leaders. In my opinion creating awareness about radicalization and extremism at different levels starting from school to mosque would help the young populace not to get involved in such activities. Tajikistan has introduced the subject of religious education lately. The introduction of this subject would help prevent radicalization.<sup>26</sup> But certain other things by the name of de-radicalization campaign like mandatory shaving of beards or ban on hijab<sup>27</sup> can provoke the people. Therefore, Central Asian countries and Afghanistan must be very careful while designing the appropriate de-radicalization strategies.

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26 "Tajikistan seeks to tackle Islamic Extremism with New classes for teenagers" Ukraine Today, (March 05, 2016), accessed August 16, 2016, <http://uatoday.tv/politics/tajikistan-seeks-to-tackle-islamic-extremism-with-new-classes-for-teenagers-604836.html>.

27 "Tajikistan battle against beards to fight radicalization" BBC News, (January 21, 2016), accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35372754>.



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