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## **A BRIEFOVERVIEW OF EXTREMISM IN AFGHANISTAN BEFORE THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

**Annotation.** The article reveals some aspects of extremism in Afghanistan before the 2019 presidential elections. The main emphasis is placed on the reasons of spread of extremism and options to curb, the efforts of the former Government of National Unity (NUG) to reduce the level of extremism. Briefly shown the experience of the current leadership of Uzbekistan in this sphere. The article emphasizes the need for joint efforts and cooperation of the Central Asian states and Afghanistan in order to restore peace and stability in the region.

**Keywords:** *Afghanistan, extremism, The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP), NUG, regional stability.*

According to General John W. Nicholson, Commander, of the NATO Resolute Support Mission, and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan “Of the 98 U.S. designated terrorist groups globally, 20 are in the AF/PAK region. This is the highest concentration anywhere in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Among those terrorist and militant organizations active in the region, the following are of particular note: ISIL-KP (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Khorasan Province), Al-Qaeda; the Taliban Movement; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), along with its political wing Jamaat Ansarullah; Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); and Lashkar-e-Tayba. The top two organizations of concern for General Nicholson “are the al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. These two have transnational ambitions.”<sup>2</sup> Further commenting the situation in Afghanistan he stated that “...more radicalized elements of other groups ready to join the Islamic State for two reasons: one, they may agree with the ideology; or two, the money. There’s direct financial support flowing from Syria to Afghanistan. An Islamic State fighter is paid almost twice as much as a Taliban fighter.”<sup>3</sup>

Most recently, the proximity of Central Asia (CA) to areas of Afghanistan that ISIL-KP has come to control has rendered it vulnerable to potential ISIL-KP infiltration, efforts, and attacks. Moreover, weak government and civil society institutions, un- and underemployment, poverty, corruption and illiteracy in Afghanistan are, it is believed, contribute to terrorist and extremist organizations, including ISIL-KP’s survival in Afghanistan and the region.

Estimates of the number of ISIL-K fighters in Afghanistan vary widely. “...the Pentagon estimated 1,000–3,000 fighters as of mid-February 2016, and Gen. John

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<sup>1</sup>A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan by Brian Dodwell and Don Ressler.

[https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/02/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol10Iss227.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/02/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss227.pdf). p12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.p13

Nicholson, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, estimated between 1,000–1,500 fighters as of late July(2016).<sup>4</sup>British sources estimated 10000 fighters as of December 2017.<sup>5</sup>Russia also estimates 10000 fighters as of December 2017.<sup>6</sup>The exact number of CA citizens in the ranks of ISIL-KP is not known. Currently, it appears that ISIL-KP remains largely regional in nature, but not entirely so.<sup>7</sup>

For the time being, ISIL-KP’s presence remains mostly limited to Nangarhar (Achin, Chaparhar, DehBala and Kot districts), province, and the local population and the majority of Taliban resent ISIL’s presence. Having said that, we should not underestimate ISIL-KP’s capacity to recruit fighters from the population, or form allegiances with elements of the Taliban, and other militant groups.<sup>8</sup>There are also credible reports of ISIL-KP presence in a larger number of provinces than this.<sup>9</sup>

According to information obtained from the meetings with a number of people from provinces where these terrorist groups are most active, their recent success has been based on the following main elements:

- Well organized information outreach to local communities and recruitment process;
- Well established network of madrasas in their area of operation;
- Clearly-defined objectives of their struggle (saving Islamic values and traditions);
- Financial support to their fighters (salaries of foot fighters are higher than ANDSF and Taliban salaries and wages);
- Well organized logistical support and good military equipment (which is a strong indication of external support);

### **Reasons of spread of extremism and options to curb**

Poverty, under and un-employment, which are common (but to a variable degree in CA countries and Afghanistan), should also be considered as one of the

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<sup>4</sup>Casey Garret Johnson “The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. «Special Report. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR395-The-Rise-and-Stall-of-the-Islamic-State-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

<sup>5</sup><http://uk.businessinsider.com/ap-a-look-at-islamic-state-attacks-in-afghanistan-2017-12>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-afghanistan-islamic-state/4176497.html>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/11/03/the-rise-and-stall-of-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan>

<sup>8</sup>For example, see: Donati, Jessica and Totakhil, Habib Khan (2016) 'Taliban, Islamic State Forge Alliance of Convenience in Eastern Afghanistan: Two insurgencies find common cause in battling U.S.-backed Afghan forces instead of each other'. WSJ. 7 August 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-islamic-state-forge-informal-alliance-in-eastern-afghanistan-1470611849>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.af-crpa.org/single-post/2017/12/15/Enemies-or-Jihad-Brothers-Relations-Between-Taliban-and-Islamic-State>

major factors contributing to radicalization of people in this vast region. This is despite some overarching research findings to the contrary.<sup>10</sup>In addition, the collapse of the Soviet Union and emergence of independent states in CA, along with the commencing of the process of democratization in these republics, provided a good opportunity for people to travel and the spread of different ideologies, including radical ones. CA countries and Afghanistan are endeavoring to resist radicalization occurring on their soil, but each country has its own specifics and different capacities to militate and fight against this.

Using this opportunity, I would like to share with you recent Uzbekistan’s experience with regard to combating extremism and its ideology. As is well known, all CA states from the beginning of their Independence started to undertake strong measures against extremist and terror groups to insure security and sustainable development in their countries. The legislation in this area has been tightened.

A tough approach and pressure tactics in relation to this complicated issue in Uzbekistan started to change when Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power initially as acting President in September and later as elected President in December 2016. In September 2017 he stated “...the most important task is to fight for the minds of people, especially young people.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the President demonstrated a new approach towards issues related to restraining extremism and the role of religion in enlightening people, especially youth that constitutes about 60% of population of the Central Region and significantly exceeds world average figures.<sup>12</sup>

Having said this, it doesn’t mean that there is complete and full denial of necessary forceful measures against violent extremism and terrorism.

Consecutively implementing the new approach, about seventeen-thousand citizens of Uzbekistan who previously occurred in the ranks of the religious extremist and terrorist organizations, "came out from under the influence of these sects" and returned to normal life according to the President of Uzbekistan.<sup>13</sup>

Recently, the Centre for the study of public opinion of Uzbekistan “Ijtimoiy Fikr” published the results of a survey related to the policy of the Government in this sphere. These showed that 90.1 % of people positively appreciate the policy in the sphere of religion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup><http://www.rochester.edu/College/PSC/clarke/214/Krueger03.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72. [https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements\\_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72](https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72)

<sup>12</sup><http://president.uz/ru/lists/view/1227>

<sup>13</sup><http://muslim.uz/index.php/rusnovosti-2018/item4679-prezident-uzbekistana-prizval-usilit-rabotu-po-raz-yasneniyu-suti-islama>

<sup>14</sup>[http://ijtimoiy-](http://ijtimoiy-fikr.uz/ru/publikacii_v_smi/ijtimoiy_fikr_uznal_stepen_religioznosti_uzbekistancev)

[fikr.uz/ru/publikacii\\_v\\_smi/ijtimoiy\\_fikr\\_uznal\\_stepen\\_religioznosti\\_uzbekistancev](http://ijtimoiy-fikr.uz/ru/publikacii_v_smi/ijtimoiy_fikr_uznal_stepen_religioznosti_uzbekistancev)

Summarizing our short overview of the new trend in the policy with regard to combating extremism, it should be noted that the Government of Uzbekistan started large-scale work in order to bring to the public an invaluable spiritual heritage of great thinkers through enlightenment and the improvement of education coupled with rise of living standards of people. All institutions are being encouraged to take more responsibility for the enlightened education of people, especially youth. It appears that Uzbek experience would be useful for those countries facing similar problems in combating violent extremism.

### **Efforts in Afghanistan to restrain extremism**

As to the policy of former National Unity Government (NUG) with regard to combating extremism, one can see the Afghan leadership is consistently trying to undertake concerted efforts to combat extremism, and to enter into cooperation with neighboring countries and international organizations in efforts to ensure security inside the country. Indeed, particularly through strengthening its ANDSF. At the same time, the NUG was trying to find peaceful measures, for example, to talk to the Taliban and other opposing groupings. As a result of this approach Hisb-e-Islami-Gulbuddin (HIG) and its leader formally joined a peace process in 2016.

The recent Kabul conference held on 28 February 2018 saw the stated readiness of President Ghani to continue efforts to talk directly to Taliban. His peace plan includes amending the constitution, amnesty for Taliban fighters, recognition of the Taliban as a political party and lifting sanctions on their leaders. However, this is predicated on the Taliban's recognition of the Afghan government.<sup>15</sup>

There is also the matter of measures undertaken by the NUG that have not been and are unlikely to be fruitful for peace attributable to the following factors:

- Continued war in the country and limited capacity of the Government to ensure security across the country;
- A lack of unity within the Government and a lack of a common vision on the most important issues like peace and national reconciliation;
- Corruption eroding the governance system;
- Limited job opportunities and a lack of needed development programs;
- The low level of the education system of Afghanistan (approximately half of schools do not have buildings or are functioning in a temporary building which does not fit requirements);
- A lack of high Islamic educational institutions in Afghanistan that Afghan youth have reasonable and substantial access to in which to acquire high religious

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/taliban-pour-cold-water-on-invitation-to-afghan-peace-talks-idUSKCN1GD4LV> also see: <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-silence-prompts-ghani-to-repeat-afghan-peace-overture/4284069.html>

education in other countries, where they often come into contact with radical ideas and agendas;

It's also worth mentioning that approximately 300,000 clergy are active in Afghanistan, although some sources report as many as 400,000 - 450,000 (depending also on how these numbers are calculated). Ulema and religious leaders have a strong, influential impact on the mindset, behaviour, social and political life of Afghans across the country.

The education system is another serious challenge of Government. The WorldBank reported that only about half of the total registered schools have proper buildings, while the rest operate in tents, houses and under trees.<sup>16</sup> The quality of education and administration remains weak. Education in Afghan schools partly falls under the mandate of the Ministry of Hajj and Auqaf. It is believed that curriculums require improvement and greater focus on Government policies to build a democratic society.

It is believed that more attention to education and gaining the support of Ulema and Islamic institutions on key issues on the national agenda, would strengthen state building, contribute to peace and stability and increase public support to the Government, decrease extremism and its ideology in the country, and also prevent the influence of radical Islamic organisations such as ISIL and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Implementation of the above recommendations could provide significant support to the Government of Afghanistan. At the same time, however, implementing these recommendations requires commitments, additional resources and time given their ambitious goal to change the minds of the people.

All Central Asian countries have a vital interest in a stable Afghanistan. Stability and reduction of extremist activities cannot be achieved without improvements in the education sector, long-term economic growth, strengthened trade relations, and progress in infrastructure development. Central Asian countries and Afghanistan lack a common strategy to address this issue.

Afghanistan needs sustainable economic assistance in order to become stable, safe and prosperous, and should be seen as part of the solution, rather than the problem. With closer cooperation between Central Asia and the Afghan Government, the threats of extremism and terrorism can be mitigated, and regional stability enhanced. The recent efforts undertaken by the Republic of Uzbekistan are aimed at facilitating the launch of inter-Afghan negotiations. The end of the long-lasting war and stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan will help to reduce the level of extremism and radicalism in the country and in the vast region. It will also allow substantially expand the scope of cooperation of all Central Asian states and Afghanistan in various fields.

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<sup>16</sup>World Bank, Afghanistan Country Snapshot, 10/2016, p. 14.