

WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN TAJIKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism has been growing in Tajikistan, together with women's engagement with it. It poses a threat to security and stability, and threatens to undermine the progress towards peace that the country has made since the Civil War which ended in 1997. Trends are most evident in urban and semi-urban areas located at major crossroads, from where men and women have been traveling since 2011 to join terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. The general perception in Tajikistan is that the women who have joined violent extremism movements are passive participants and victims, who followed their husbands or family members unconditionally to the Middle East. However, some women are apparently active agents who willingly chose to travel and embrace violent extremism. Other women are preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and should be further supported.

A National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism 2016-2020 was signed into law by Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon in November 2016 and it includes an Action Plan with specific activities to promote the role of women in preventing violent extremism (PVE). These include awareness raising activities on the dangers of violent extremism, as well as steps to increase women's participation in local councils and law-enforcement. There is a growing understanding that women can help prevent violent extremism by engaging directly with their family and community members through sharing information on violent extremism and counter-narratives, but also by building up their own resilience to extremism by taking on stronger public roles. Law enforcement and local authorities are also likely to be more effective in prevention if they gain more gender sensitive understanding of what pulls and pushes women towards violent extremism. This more nuanced understanding, could help reduce reliance on measures that indiscriminately limit women's ability to express their faith, such as the ban on women's mosque attendance.

Tajikistan is the poorest country of Central Asia but has been registering growth over most of the past decade.^[1] In 2015, it ranked 129 out of 188 countries surveyed in the UNDP annual Human Development

Index^[2] dropping from 113th place in 2002. Growth has been primarily consumer-driven and fuelled by labour remittances, largely from the 1.2 million working in Russia, and the thousands in Turkey, Gulf states and Kazakhstan. In 2016 a significant number of labour migrants returned from Russia, fuelling increased poverty and unemployment in Tajikistan. The Legatum Institute Prosperity Index 2015 ranks Tajikistan 91, with downward movement in economy and governance positions.^[3] Restrictions on political and civil rights have progressively tightened, reducing space for political or social dissent. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which was the party to the Peace Accords that ended the 1992-1997 civil war, and the main legal opposition in the country, was banned in 2015 as a "terrorist organisation" after allegedly taking part in a coup.^[4] Tajikistan has a relatively free media space, with independent media outlets, such as Asia Plus and Ozodi (Radio Liberty) producing quality journalism, but they are under regular state scrutiny.

This research is based on a review of research and policy literature, and data collection in Tajikistan, mostly provided by officials, community respondents, investigative journalists, academics and local civil society experts. Field data collection was carried out in November – December 2016 in the capital Dushanbe, in the South (Vakhdad, Kulyab, Kurgan-Tube, Shahrituz and Kadobiyon in Khatlon province) by Dr. Anna Matveeva and Bahrom Faizullaev and in the North by Bahrom Faizullaev to compare and contrast geographical separate areas where radicalization is known to have occurred. Two group discussions were held: a focus group with international development practitioners in Dushanbe at UN Women's office and another with CSO representatives who are active in Kurgan-Tube, organised by Fidokor, for which the researchers express their gratitude. Interviews were conducted with government officials and state bodies, such as the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, and State Committee on Religious Affairs; as well as with academics and experts (including the Centre of Strategic Studies and Centre of Islamic Studies); and family member of radicalized individuals.

¹ The country's economy grew by 8.6% on average between 2000 and 2008, dropped to 3.7% in 2009 and continued to grow by 7.5% on average between 2010 and 2014. In 2014 growth was recorded at 6.7% and poverty reduced to 32% of the population.

² UNDP (2016) Human Development Indicators: Tajikistan, New York, available at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf

³ Legatum Prosperity Index (2015) ranks 142 countries across eight categories: Economy, Entrepreneurship & Opportunity; Governance; Education; Health; Safety & Security; Personal Freedom; and Social Capital. Available at: <http://www.prosperity.com/#/ranking>

⁴ Steve Swerdlow, "Tajikistan's Fight Against Political Islam: How Fears of Terrorism Stifle Free Speech," Foreign Affairs, 15 March 2016. Human Rights Watch submission to the Universal Periodic Review, September 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/08/upr-submission-tajikistan-september-2015-addendum-april-2016>

RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN TAJIKISTAN: AN OVERVIEW

Views on the scale and nature of religious radicalisation and violent extremism in Tajikistan vary widely.^[5] Some deny its significance in the country,^[6] while others claim that some 6 – 7% of the population are vulnerable to religious radicalisation.^[7]

Officials state that between 2012 and mid-2016, 1094 individuals left to become foreign fighters (FF) in Syria and Iraq, and more generally estimate that there are 2000 cases of FF overall, a high number in comparison with the country's actual population of approximately 8.5 million. According to some government officials, about 200 women accompanied their family members, and only one woman returned. Other local authorities estimate that 100-125 women travelled. Some 300 Tajik nationals are believed to have been killed abroad, and there are no figures on women casualties.^[8] Many women are likely to have become widows, but they and their children face great difficulties in leaving the conflict zones. While most travelled to Syria and Iraq, a group of young Tajiks also moved to Yemen and Afghanistan.

Support to violent extremism appears to largely affect densely populated areas: cities (Dushanbe, Khujand, Kulyab, Kurgan-Tyube, Isfara); semi-urban suburbs, such as Vakhdat;^[9] districts of Hissar around Tursun-Zade, Bobojon Gaffurov district and the Kulyab

district (Dagana); urbanised settlements (Shahrituz, Kabodiyon, Vakhsh, Istaravshan) and more developed borderland areas (Nourek, Khamadoni, Jabbor Rasulov).^[10] The deep rural countryside, off the main routes and where education levels are lower, such as the Rasht Valley, appears largely untouched by radicalisation. However, accounts exist of a group of 42 men having left from the Ismaili-majority Gorno-Badakhshan for Syria.

Departures for the Middle East peaked in 2015, and scaled down in 2016, but did not stop – fresh cases were noted in October 2016 when 11 people apparently left from Shahrituz. A Ministry of Interior official claimed that 29 people left in 2016, but field research indicates that this may be understatement. The Interior Minister Ramazon Rakhimzoda stated that in 2015 and the first eight months of 2016, police repatriated 151 Tajik citizens accused of terrorism and extremism and amnestied 76 of them.^[11] In addition, inside the country, in the first six months of 2016, law enforcement are reporting to have detained 368 members of extremist groups, including 133 linked to ISIS, 18 to the Muslim Brotherhood and 10 IMU members.^[12]

Law enforcement also expresses growing concerns about violent extremists acting in Tajikistan. National authorities claim that in 2015 a group of young extremists planned an uprising launched from a

⁵ In interviews held, respondents did not mention IRP and other oppositionists among terrorist and extremist groups, and the data they provided refers to persons that have joined or sympathize with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and similar violent Salafi-inspired groups.

⁶ Heathershaw J, Montgomery D (2014), "The 'Muslim radicalisation of Central Asia' is a dangerous myth", opendemocracy.net

⁷ Interview with Sharq research center expert(s), November 2016, Dushanbe

⁸ "36 Tajik students killed in armed conflicts abroad, says president," Asia Plus, 30 May 2016. <http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan/security/20160530/36-tajik-students-killed-armed-conflicts-abroad-says-president>

⁹ Vakhdat is located on an intersection of three major highways which allows population movement, and is also a seat of the Turanjonzoda clerical family engaged in Islamic preaching.

¹⁰ Muminobod in Khatlon does not follow any of these patterns, but several cases were reported from there. Interviews with the head of Women's and Family Committee.

¹¹ More details on amnesty provisions below. The amnestied reportedly include 133 suspected members of ISIS (of which 76 had been repatriated from abroad), 5 are accused of belonging to Jamaat Ansarullah and one - to the IMU. Reported in 'Tajikistan co-operates with Interpol to fight trans-national crime,' http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/09/28/feature-01. Discrepancy may result from many of these people being returned from Turkey or other countries rather than actual Syria. The Tajikistan Ministry of Internal Affairs has a representation office in Turkey to cooperate on these issues.

¹² In 'Fewer Tajik youth head to Syria,' 18 August 2016, http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/18/feature-02

mosque in Kulyab, and GKNB narrowly averted the plot.^[13] The Minister of Interior Rakhimzoda also says that in the first half of 2016 four terrorist actions prepared under ISIS orders, were stopped by the police. The suspects “came back from Syria specifically for this purpose,” according to the minister who listed the intended targets as being in Dushanbe, Kurgan-Tyube, Khujand and Panjakent.^[14] Another plot in 2016 is supposed to have included attacks on police stations in Dushanbe, Isfara in Sughd Province, and four towns in Khatlon - Kulyab, Voce, Shahrituz and Kurgan-Tyube. The Ministry of Internal Affairs says that other terrorist plans were drawn up but thwarted, including an attack on the president during his visit to Vakhdat, and a planned mass shooting at the 2015 Victory Day (9 May) celebrations.^[15]

In 2016 the courts tried approximately 1000 individuals on extremism and terrorism-related charges and convicted most of the accused to lengthy sentences commonly under articles no. 189 of the Criminal Code on ‘igniting ethnic or religious hatred’, no. 307 which criminalises ‘extremist activity’ and no. 401 ‘Mercenary activity’.^[16] In the approximate 150 instances of which the authors are aware of, when individuals handed themselves in voluntarily or appeared to genuinely repent, they are sent free under amnesty after 2-3 months in detention. In 2014, an amnesty provision was introduced in Article 401 of the Criminal Code, to exonerate the men and women who had links to violent extremist groups abroad and repent, saying that they were brought without their consent. At the end of 2016, there were six reported cases of women jailed on extremist charges. Since 2013 Interpol placed about 1,400 Tajikistan’s citizens on its international wanted list “in connection with suspicions of extremism and terrorism”, according to Interpol’s representative in Tajikistan.^[17]

As the number of violent extremists sent to prison increases, prison security is becoming a greater issue. One jailbreak occurred in central Dushanbe in October 2015, and two in the Sughd region in June and November of 2016. Returnees from the

Middle East are kept in the 1st and 2nd colonies which host over 150 inmates. Authorities have been discussing keeping terrorists segregated from other detainees since 2010, but claim to lack the budget to do so. Very few counselling services are available for prisoners. A new national incarceration policy is expected to be adopted in 2017.

The young adult men who prevail among radicalised individuals, are generally from lower to middle income backgrounds and with secondary education, though there are also university students, graduates or dropouts. Field research identified several cases of students joining violent extremist groups. For example, one student from a prestigious Dushanbe university left with his friend for Syria but was transferred to Yemen, where he was killed.^[18] Three students from the same Vakhdat mahalla who studied in Dushanbe, travelled to Turkey, where one was detained and returned to Tajikistan, while two other managed to enter Syria. Two other students from Vakhdat were detained in Turkey, one of them a sports’ champion. Poverty does not seem to be a major driver of radicalization,^[19] instead men engaged in lower echelons of the service sector as barbers, bazaar traders and taxi drivers seem more involved in proliferation of radicalisation.^[20]

Even though both Tajiks and Uzbeks are affected,^[21] in some areas including parts of Khatlon bordering Uzbekistan, the majority who travelled to Syria-Iraq, seem to be ethnic Uzbeks. Interlocutors suggested that this may be linked to the frustration that they feel due to the limited access to state employment and opportunities for advancement today compared to during Soviet times.^[22]

¹³ OSCE field office interview.

¹⁴ Reported in ‘Fewer Tajik youth head to Syria,’ 18 August 2016, http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/18/feature-02

¹⁵ Reported by Nadin Bahrom in ‘Tajik law enforcement thwarted 50 terrorist plots in past year,’ 21 June 2016, Central Asia Online.

¹⁶ Mumin Akhmadi, Radio Ozodi, «Борьба с терроризмом» - популярный лозунг года, 6 December 2016, <http://rus.ozodi.org/a/28158836.html>

¹⁷ Cited in ‘Fewer Tajiks’

¹⁸ The mother said that she noticed no sign of radicalization of her son beforehand.

¹⁹ A Radio Ozodi journalist who interviewed about 100 families of radicalised individuals noted that none of these were extremely poor.

²⁰ Interview with local observer. This conclusion is drawn from interviews with a dozen people in different parts of Khatlon province.

²¹ Interview with Ministry of Interior official.

²² Interviews with respondents in Dushanbe, Shahrituz and Kurgan-Tyube.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

Radicalisation in Tajikistan is often attributed to problems including: poverty, unemployment, lack of religious education, poor secular education and growing illiteracy, irregular labour migration and political repression. But the casual link between these problems and violent extremism is not proven through our research, and instead we found that push and pull factors are multiple and complex. When speaking about men who chose to become foreign fighters, close contacts who stayed in Tajikistan, on several occasions described them as racked by multiple grievances, being physically tough, close minded and resistant to dialogue. According to one interlocutor, the men he knew “seemed to be in a constant sulk with the world,” critical of modern dress for women and secular pop culture such as concerts, music and TV which in their view should be banned. Respondents in Kurgan-Tyube characterised their belief system as ‘nihilistic.’ They were said to “reject this world”^[23] while seeking meaning in something higher. This may have been caused by a sense of exclusion,^[24] particularly from the country’s current system of values that tends to prioritize economic wealth and consumerism over political ideology and spirituality. Drugs also factored in the histories of several foreign fighters who recruiters apparently exploited using this vulnerability to offer redemption through participation in violent jihad.^[25]

Officials attribute socialisation into radicalisation to internet propaganda, Islamic education abroad, misplaced ambitions and financial incentives.^[26] Education in Muslim countries is regarded as an initial conduit.^[27] To curb radicalisation, Tajikistan authorities facilitated the return of 3006 students who were studying in religious programs broad (out of 3233 who studied there) in 2010. A provision of the Criminal Code now criminalises receiving such education without a state sanction. The government was ordered to take measures against the 370 Tajiks still studying at foreign religious schools in 2016, while more than 30,000 Tajik students study abroad overall.^[28] Some within the national intelligentsia also blame prominent Islamic preachers for paving the way for socialisation into radicalisation. Our research shows that offline radicalisation typically precedes online. Extended family rituals, such as weddings and funerals, may provide a forum for initial face to face radicalization, to supplement information disseminated online.

²³ Respondent in group discussion held in Kurgan-Tyube.

²⁴ Peter Neumann <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11872.doc.htm>

²⁵ Drug use and trafficking is a major problem in Tajikistan where in the Kulyab region alone some 30 – 40 people are estimated to die per year from overdoses. A Kulyabi respondent commented on the relationship between involvement into violent extremism and drugs, claiming that some joined violent extremist groups as a detox method. For more on the drug situation in Tajikistan and Central Asia see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, Regional Office for Central Asia, Annual Report 2016. http://www.unodc.org/documents/centralasia//_2017/March/ROCA_Annual_report_EN.pdf

²⁶ Interview at the Ministry of Interior.

²⁷ According to President Emomali Rahmon, 36 of those who were killed fighting alongside ISIS militants were student studying at Tajik and foreign universities. “36 Tajik students killed in armed conflicts abroad, says president,” Asia Plus, 30 May 2016. <http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan/security/20160530/36-tajik-students-killed-armed-conflicts-abroad-says-president>

²⁸ “36 Tajik students killed in armed conflicts abroad, says president,” Asia Plus, 30 May 2016. <http://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan/security/20160530/36-tajik-students-killed-armed-conflicts-abroad-says-president>

WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In Tajikistan governmental and non-governmental interlocutors tend to deny women significant agency in the decision to travel to Syrian and Iraq to join ISIS or similar groups. According to the government, most of the approximately 200 Tajik women now in Syria and Iraq, travelled there encouraged by their husbands. In several instances, entire families packed up from the Sughd and Khatlon provinces. The Ministry of Interior reported in 2015 that there were 154 Tajik families in ISIS, including 95 boys and 67 girls.^[29] According to the Ministry's information, 30 women travelled from Khatlon together with 17 children.^[30] 73 families are known to have left the Sughd Province, including 80 women and 32 girls. A journalist who interviewed family members of those who had left said that some of the wives were told that they were migrating to Turkey to work, and only realised later that they were already in Syria. This can partially be explained by women's lack of access to information, especially about international developments, and men's control over family resources and decision-making. While interviews with these women are needed to fully understand their decisions to travel to Syria and Iraq, it is likely that they felt pressured by a mix of economic dependency, traditional family roles and community expectations that they support and follow their husbands' leads.

Women are likely to have been influenced by various factors. Some women decided to join ISIS after their family members had already done so, because they felt deeply ostracized in their own communities. For example, the wife of Colonel Khalimov, the commander of the elite police unit OMON (Special Purpose Mobility Unit), who defected to join ISIS in 2015, decided months later to travel to Syria. She was a press officer of Tajikistan's Customs Service, with her four children, and living a distinctly secular lifestyle and wearing European-style clothes. But she is believed to have come under pressure after her husband defected, was ostracized by her family, and released from her job.^[31] Unable to live under

this type of stigma, she preferred to leave even if she was apparently not a hardened extremist.

In other cases, women from Tajikistan appear to have independently joined ISIS because they accepted its violent jihadist ideology. In one example 34-year old Z.S. from Dushanbe travelled to Syria and returned to Tajikistan to recruit other women before being convicted in February 2016.^[32] According to an interview with a Ministry of Interior official, she had three husbands and when she came to Tajikistan her intention was to collect her daughter and [one of her] husbands. In Sughd, a 28-year old former night club dancer R.M., was sentenced to a 12-year in prison for intending to participate in the armed conflict in Syria with her common-law husband. Reportedly, the couple was recruited by her brother who is fighting in Syria. The husband was extradited from Belarus.^[33] In another case a 60-year old woman from Kabodiyon district, Khatlon and two of her daughters-in-law and another female resident of Isfara district, Sughd oblast were sentenced to 6 and 5 years' imprisonment on charges of extremism. In November 2016, the Ministry of Interior published a wanted list with photos of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq including five women, four out of five born in early 1990s, at the time one woman was pictured posing with a machinegun.^[34]

Individual cases encountered during field research include at least five women who travelled to Syria on their own. They tended to be university or college-educated and employed, some attracted by the prospect of marriage to jihadi fighters. This includes on young ethnic Tajik woman who had spent some time in Russia, an ethnic Uzbek woman who was apparently radicalised via Uzbekistan, and a third woman who left for Russia, then travelled to Pakistan for education, and ended up in Syria

²⁹ В Таджикистане женщина осуждена по обвинению в экстремизме, <http://rus.azattyq.org/a/27572629.html> 25 февраля, 2016

³⁰ Мавлюда Рафиева В Согде впервые вынесен приговор женщине за намерение поехать воевать в Сирию 19/04/2016 <http://news.tj/ru/news/v-sogde-vpervye-vynesen-prigovor-zhenshchine-za-namerenie-poekhat-voevat-v-siriyu>

³¹ One woman was from Nau semi-urban settlement, two from Dushanbe and two from Vakhdat, <http://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/rozyusk?start=42> (viewed on 25 November 2016). On 13 March 2017, there are four wanted women indicated (Абдуллоева Фотимахон Абдурахмоновна, 21.09.1979,

Раджабова Моинав Дилдорбековна, 20.02.1946, Мухитдинова Малика Сухробовна, 30.01.1995,

Тагоймуродзода Мафтунаи Саидакбар 26.11.1991)

²⁹ Таджикистан сообщает о растущем числе боевиков за границей <http://www.sa-portal.ru/article/12-фев-2016>

³⁰ Interview with Tajikistan journalist

³¹ Gulmorod Khalimov was reported killed by an airstrike in mid April 2017. "ISIS 'minister of war' is killed by allied airstrike in Mosul," *The Times*, 15 April 2017. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-minister-of-war-is-killed-by-allied-airstrike-in-mosul-wwt dp388x>

where she allegedly married an ISIS commander. From another town in the Kulyab, a woman with two children left for Syria on her own. A middle-aged woman, married to a trader, with three children, from a southern district travelled to Moscow where she was apparently quickly recruited via the networking site Odnoklassniki and from where she went to Syria. Eventually she got back in touch with her husband asking for him to help her, as she feared that ISIS would make her a suicide bomber, but she was never heard of again. These are the women that are likely to be attracted by a search for a hyper masculine “jihadi lover,” as well as the false notions of moral certainty, purity, unity of people irrespective of ethnicity, social equality and justice that ISIS claims in its online sites and through face-to-face recruitment networks.

The link between violent extremism and migration, moving from Tajikistan to Russia especially, has been made by some observers. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, as of January 2015, there were 999,169 migrants from Tajikistan officially residing in Russia, including 182,262 women (actual figures are likely to be much higher).^[35] Migrants’ vulnerability to violent extremism was highlighted again after the April 2017 bombing in Saint Petersburg allegedly carried out by an immigrant to Russia born in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Based on this hypothesis, discrimination, abuse, isolation and the search for identity while abroad may cause some people to turn to groups like ISIS for empowerment and support.^[36] However without extensive research in Russia, it is impossible to verify this claim.^[37] Whether migration of male family members makes Tajik women who stay behind more vulnerable to violent extremism also requires more research. These women who are forced to become the defacto heads of household often shoulder many new responsibilities with little support from the state or their local communities, and may be vulnerable to promises of a better life abroad, even though we did not encounter any cases of such women traveling to Syria or Iraq in our research.

It has also been alleged that women who are educated, but have been unable to find any husbands,

are particularly vulnerable to ISIS recruiters. For example, an ethnic Uzbek woman born in 1986 who used to work in a bank in Kolkhozobad and aspired to go to college, struggled to get married probably because of her age. Matchmakers came from Kulyab with an alleged marriage proposal, but recruited her to leave for Syria. She got married to a man from Uzbekistan, went to Turkey but found out that the husband deceived her. She did not enter Syria and managed to return on her own. There was a public meeting in Shahrituz, at which she spoke of her experience, and a local newspaper published an interview with her.

In a few instances, women who suspected that their husbands were being radicalized reported them and turned to the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs for help. The case of an ethnic Uzbek was shared, whereas upon seeing her husband frequently on the phone, and believing that it was due to an infidelity, the woman started to listen in and discovered that her husband was voicing violent and extremist views. She appealed to the district Women’s Committee which then carried out an investigation with other family members and ultimately arranged an interview with the husband himself which proved that what the woman suspected was true. The wife eventually decided to leave him, and the Committee supported her with the provision of independent housing for her and the children, and helped to find a job. Similarly, a married woman with four children turned to her local Women’s Committee because her husband tried to lure her into accompanying him into Syria. The Committee helped her leave the husband and find a job. The man was eventually referred to the police and registered on the police watch list.

Tajikistan has legislation on “complicity to extremism” where people who fail to report knowledge of cases of exodus to ISIS are sanctioned. Most parents who learn that their child is in Syria, find it unavoidable to report the case to the security officials, and show evidence, e.g. photos sent electronically, to avoid prosecution.^[38] Some request that Tajikistan authorities assist them return their family members, but their efforts are often too late. For example, a family left from Dagona: first a brother and uncle went, then a husband took his pregnant wife and children to Syria. The husband was killed in an aerial bombardment in the first week. The daughter gave

³⁵ Data quoted in Helene Thibault, “Female Virtue, Religion and State Ideology in Tajikistan,” CERIA Brief, January 2016 <http://ceriainitiative.org/likepomeps/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CERIA-brief-10-January-2016.pdf>

³⁶ Edward Lemon and John Heathershaw, “How can we explain radicalization among Central Asia’s migrants,” 2 May 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/edward-lemon-john-heathershaw/can-we-explain-radicalisation-among-central-asia-s-migrants>. Already in December 2016 a series of attacks was allegedly planned to be executed in Moscow by citizens of Tajikistan and Moldova, and ordered by an ISIS mastermind based in Turkey who was known to Tajikistan’s authorities. 15 December 2016, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/3171149>

³⁷ Attributing radicalisation chiefly to labour migration also conveniently absolves domestic actors from much responsibility

³⁸ For example, cousins of Gulmurod Khalimov’s wife were given 15 year sentences for helping her to cross with children into Kyrgyzstan, from where she travelled to Syria. Племянники Хумайро Мировой приговорены к 15 годам за то, что помогли ей выехать в Ирак, 25 May 2015, <http://www.toptj.com/News/2016/05/25/plemyanniki-khumayro-mirovoy-prigovoreny-k-15-godam-za-to-chto-pomogli-ey-vyehat-v-irak>

birth and sought to leave. She gave all her golden jewellery to a trafficker to be taken to Turkey, but he deceived her and she was unable to escape. The mother approached the Women's Committee for assistance but until the woman leaves Syria, there is little that Tajikistan state bodies can do. In a few positive instances mothers were able to intervene before it was too late. One mother appealed to the police when her daughter – a third-year medical student -- tried to go to Syria to join her ISIS 'lover' whom she met on internet. She was detained in Turkey and returned to her family.

Our research also illuminated a few cases where parents inherently supported their children's move to the Middle East, because of the prospect that they may become martyrs or due to the expectations that they will make financial gains.^[39] In Kulyab, cases of mothers being initially pleased that their daughters had gone with their husbands to Syria, because they expected that they would soon send them money, rather than to their husband's mothers which is normally the case, were reported. These mothers were unaware of the war, and started to realise what had happened only when their daughters were widowed and could not return. Limited interest in and access to international news and information on developments outside the country for many women outside major cities helps explain this attitude. Most mothers claim that they had no clue that their sons had been radicalised. For example, in Shahrituz, a young man left home in slippers with no bag and no passport, saying he was going to see a friend – and contacted the family from Syria next. A few others said that their sons had started to be critical of their behaviour and lifestyle, e.g. the way they dress, but this did not signal to them that they were preparing to combat with ISIS.

In other instances, mothers thought that their sons were just joining the hundreds of thousands of Tajiks who work in Russia. In one account related to the researchers, a young son from a poor female headed household got into debt, was targeted by local recruiters through his classmate who gave him \$5000 cash to pay his debts and go to Syria. He left the money and a note at home saying that he was leaving for Russia for work and the cash was an advance payment. No news came until he sent his photo holding a machinegun in the Middle East. He was subsequently killed.

Religious education for women and girls is very limited in Tajikistan. Those with a genuine interest in religion have few options. In 2005, Tajikistan's

religious authorities banned women from attending the mosque prayers, offering a justification that in the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam women do not have to attend mosque.^[40] The only mosque at the IRP headquarters which admitted women was closed and its women's educational network was dismantled when the party was banned. A small number of women are admitted to the Islamic Institute and a new subject on religious education was introduced in upper school.^[41] Women are banned from wearing black hijabs and encouraged to wear colourful traditional clothes.^[42] Adult women have to rely on families or other women for religious learning. Some women have started to express resentment at limitations on their freedoms to express their religion, especially to pray in mosques, whose imams' are now funded by the state.^[43]

An informal institution of *bibi otyun* – learnt, often elderly women who render nascent religious education and guidance on all life aspects, including administration of ceremonies, exists in Sughd oblast. Religious Affairs Committee defined their role as positive in mentoring young women. In Vakhdat such 'female imams' (religious women) are called *hojji bibio*. There is no matching equivalent in the South in Khatlon, but individual women performing similar functions are found. In Sughd, the province's authorities sought to use *bibi otyun* as agents of positive change, but in September 2015 the presidential aide on social issues and public relations *Abdujabbor Rakhmonzoda* stated that activities of such women in Dushanbe and Kulyab drive radicalisation instead.^[44]

⁴⁰ Others claim that the ban was put into place because mosques were not effectively separating men from women. "Tajik Mosques Open Their Doors Wider to Women," Central Asia online, 1 February 2014 <http://islam.ru/en/content/story/tajik-mosques-open-their-doors-wider-women>

⁴¹ <http://uatoday.tv/politics/tajikistan-seeks-to-tackle-islamic-extremism-with-new-classes-for-teenagers-604836.html> 5 March 2016

⁴² Police say that in 2015 they closed about 160 shops where hijabs were sold, and convinced 1,773 women to stop wearing them. President Rakhmon warned: «Don't worship alien values, don't follow alien culture. Wear clothes of traditional colours and cut, not black. Even in mourning, Tajik women [should] wear white, not black." Reported in Anora Sarkorova, 'Tajikistan's Battle against Beards to 'Fight Radicalisation'', 21 January 2016

BBC Russian Service, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35372754>. Several public figures have publicly criticized women's clothing style which is too provocative and European. As some researchers have pointed out "traditional" pre-Soviet Tajikistan women's clothing include robes called *paranja* or *chavchan* that covered the whole body including the face. Helene Thibault, "Female Virtue, Religion and State Ideology in Tajikistan," CERIA Brief, January 2016 <http://ceriainitiative.org/likepomeps/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CERIA-brief-10-January-2016.pdf>

⁴³ One Tajikistan journalist Anora Sarkorova apparently started a campaign via her facebook page complaining about monthly salaries being paid by the state to imams, because "I am not only a dutiful taxpayer, but also a Tajik woman who is deprived from visiting mosques and attending religious worship by a decision taken by Tajikistan's Muftiate." Quoted in Humairo Bakhtiyor, "Tajik Women fight Mosque Exclusion," RCA Issue 727, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 28 February 2014 <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajik-women-fight-mosque-exclusion>

⁴⁴ Таджикских бибиотун обвиняют в связях с экстремистами, AsiaPlus, 30 September 2015, <https://www.asiaplus.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20150930/tadzhikskikh-bibiotun-obvinyayut-v-svyazakh-s-ekstremistami>

³⁹ Interview with Tajikistan journalist

POLICY AND LEGAL RESPONSE FRAMEWORKS

Tajikistan has developed a strong legal basis for preventing and combating violent extremism. Some of the new laws have been criticized by human rights organizations for limiting religious freedom, especially when they impose tight state controls on religious activity and are used to punish religious activity whose link to violence is unclear. A Law on Religion was passed in March 2009 regulating places of worship. In February 2009, the Salafi set of beliefs in Sunni Islam was banned and prosecution of its adherents started in 2014 when Salafiya was outlawed as extremist. A law on Parental Responsibility was adopted in August 2011 prohibiting under 18-year olds from attending mosques and vesting parents with duties to prevent their children's' radicalisation. Women are not allowed to wear headscarves in educational institutions, and men are not permitted to wear beards in public buildings.^[45] In July 2014, Tajikistan introduced a law making it a criminal offence to fight abroad. At the same time, as mentioned above, an amnesty provision was introduced into the Article 401 of the Criminal Code, to exonerate the men and women who had links to violent extremist groups abroad and repent. There is a separate commission on extremism and terrorism at the Ministry of Justice which elaborates legal proposals. According to national law, nearly 20 groups are banned as extremist or terrorist. not only ISIS but groups including Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), Jamoat Ansarullah,^[46] Jabhat-al Nusra,^[47] and Tablig-e Jamoat.

A National Strategy on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2016 – 20 was signed by President Rahmon on 12 November 2016 which includes an

Action Plan.^[48] The Strategy contains a section which mentions the following factors as contributing to women and girls' being driven into VE movements: social expectations due to ascribed gender roles, women's passivity and inability to resist their husbands and fathers who have become extremists, underdeveloped social and economic opportunities for women's self-realisation, young women being too trustworthy and easy to influence, whereas their vulnerabilities, especially to do with their family life, are easily exploited. Proposed solutions include strengthening the state gender policy, promotion of gender equality in public and private life, awareness raising and psycho-social support, and involvement of women in all aspects of policy formulation that concern them.

THE ACTION PLAN INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING OUTPUTS AND ACTIVITIES UNDER ITS 'GENDER ASPECTS':

Output 1: Strengthening of social activity and role of women

Activities:

1. Analysis of implementation of law and state programmes in the field of gender equality;
2. Enhancement of the role of family in promotion of social stability and mutual respect, prevention of young people being drawn into extremist and terrorist organisations and groups;

⁴⁵ Shaving beards is part of a government campaign targeting trends that are deemed «alien and inconsistent with Tajik culture» and is explained as part of the government's PVE strategy. Anora Sarkorova, "Tajikistan's Battle Against Beards to 'Fight Radicalization,'" BBC Russian Service, Tajikistan, 21 January 2016 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35372754>.

⁴⁶ Jamoat Ansarullah took responsibility for an act of terror in Khujand. In 2016, 28 individuals from the Istaravshan and Kanibodam districts of Sughd were arrested on suspicion of belonging to the group which allegedly was recruiting people to go and fight for ISIS.

⁴⁷ In May 2016 four residents of Yavan district of Khatlon oblast were convicted of membership in this organisation <https://ria.ru/world/20160514/1432857995.html> 14 May 2016

⁴⁸ Both documents were developed in cooperation with the OSCE and were presented for the discussion at the Public Council under the President which includes representatives of ethnic minorities, NGOs, civil activists and public intellectuals. The draft Concept generated an active debate and amendments were recommended. Interview with Dilbar Khalilova, head of Fidokor NGO and a member of Public Council.

3. Implementation of measures to protect girls' right to education and combat their pre-term exclusion from education process.

Output 2: Raising political, religious, cultural and legal awareness among women and prevention of their involvement into VE

Activities:

1. Together with CSOs, education of women in cultural, religious and political history, so that they appreciate falsehood of extremist theories and can distinguish genuine Islamic teachings from their radicalised interpretations;
2. Awareness raising among young women and underage girls about the need for caution in interaction with others, defensive reaction against attempts at recruitment and the ways how recruitment is practiced;
3. Identification of at risk groups, including family members of known extremists, vulnerable and lone women who have problems with relatives and conducting 'preventative talks' with them, in order to strengthen their resilience to recruitment into radicalisation by relatives or strangers.

Output 3: Promotion of broad participation of women in PVE and terrorism

Activities:

1. Strengthening the role of women's councils, women – community leaders, especially in the rural areas, in PVE among women;
2. Increase in numbers of women in law-enforcement agencies at all level and all positions which are engaged in counter-terrorist measures, achieving gender balance in composition of teams directly engaged in community interaction;
3. Preparation of a manual for police and other specialists engaged in development of interaction with women towards prevention of radicalisation and VE.

The identification of specific interventions to help prevent women from being attracted to violent extremism through the provision of information

and empowerment is an excellent starting point. As indicated above, absence of information on violent extremist groups, and particularly on ISIS, has left some women vulnerable. Awareness raising, as called for in the Action Plan, is therefore essential. However, the educational materials and how they are shared, need to be gender responsive to be effective and reach isolated women. So far state sponsored PVE has mainly focussed on mechanical public awareness raising, with the primary aim of frightening people away from violent and extremist groups, rather than teaching and deepening of religious and secular knowledge, self-awareness and critical thinking. More awareness raising of the gender specificities of violent extremism and recruitment, including via the internet, is needed for state institutions, as well as for civil society organizations working with women.

Another area worthy of further investigation is how to involve prominent conservative Muslim clergy in PVE. So far this is rarely being done, and when it is, there is little consideration of how to strengthen women's sense of agency through religious teaching and exchange.

The Committee on Women and Family Affairs, which has 110 Information and Consultation Centres across the country, has proven to be a trusted counterpart for some women seeking ways to address violent extremism in their families. This infrastructure has occasionally been used for awareness raising on violent extremism, and in Dushanbe some mothers have been trained on how to detect signs of growing extremism within their families. The Committee shot a PVE documentary shown by local branches in which mothers share their grief by talking about their children who left to join ISIS. This is a good first step in engaging women directly in the development of their own counter-narratives to convincingly amplify their voices, those of their family members and communities to prevent violent extremism. The Committee also runs Women Advice Centers (центр доверия) which encourage women to share their problems, including those concerning violent extremism, and promises confidentiality (unless security risks are imminent). An NGO with close ties to the Committee, Bovari ba Fardo, also works with families affected by violent extremism, including through the provision of support from psychologists and lawyers. These kinds of women's centres can sometimes provide a key "last chance"

to women who are vulnerable to violent extremism and already feel disconnected from the rest of their community.

Other authorities, including at the town level, have also become engaged in PVE. The cities of Khujand, Khorog and Kurgan-Tyube began to establish mahalla committees in 2012 as urban administrative units through which information can be disseminated. Mahalla committees also make house visits and can provide advice when requested. The Committee on Religious Affairs, the Center for Islamic Studies and the Centre for Strategic Studies has all started to work more on PVE, including carrying out research. At the same time, overall capacity to systematically gather, process and analyse information on violent extremism among state bodies needs to be strengthened. Different agencies reported different raw data, while their own structures release more and fuller information to the press. Data from the periphery is available locally, but not all of it appears to find its way into national level. Observers conclude that data collection from districts and municipalities is a problem across the board. International practitioners underscored that although state capacity has improved, the capacity to collect, process and analyse country-wide data on VE is limited. Gender disaggregated data is particularly lacking.

The security sector has been playing a lead role in PVE, but in some instances, it counterproductively veers towards collective punishment for family and community members of violent extremists, rather than positive engagement with them. After someone leaves to join ISIS, security services typically descend onto the village or neighbourhood to find out who knew what, interrogating community members indiscriminately. Human rights organizations have

also blamed Tajikistan authorities for using terrorism charges as a way to detain dissidents or perceived government critics with little evidence that they were involved in illegal acts according to the criminal code.^[49] The Organised Crime Department (UBOP) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs works together with representatives of local authorities responsible for ideological matters, and has engaged in talks with various target groups including young people, students, leadership of youth organisations to increase their awareness. This kind of community level police work to build up trust is crucial for effective PVE. Enhancing the recruitment and retention of women in the police can also improve PVE effectiveness by providing trustworthy contact points for women and more gender-responsive police interaction with communities.

Even though some men from Tajikistan have begun to return from the conflict zones, there is no rehabilitation commission which combines the expertise and services of law-enforcement, local authorities and specialised experts, such as psychologists with radicalisation expertise. Comprehensive rehabilitation and re-integration will nevertheless be needed for returnees and their families.

Until Fall 2016, OSCE was the lead international agency working on CVE in Tajikistan, assisting in developing the National Strategy and Action Plan, capacity-building of officials and awareness-raising of national and regional authorities and NGOs. Apart from this, there have been few PVE programs supported by international organizations. Some international donors are also hesitant to engage substantively in PVE despite the significant needs.

⁴⁹ Steve Swerdlow, "Tajikistan's Fight Against Political Islam: How Fears of Terrorism Stifle Free Speech," *Foreign Affairs*, 15 March 2016.

CONCLUSIONS

Some important conclusions can be drawn from the field research. Firstly, violent extremism is continuing to attract men and women inside the country, even though for the past two years fewer people have travelled to Syria and Iraq. Secondly, geographic areas most affected by radicalisation were established which confirm a link between radicalisation on the one hand, and urbanisation and density of population and social networks on the other. Thirdly, women's radicalisation has a dual face – passive and active. Society's overall conservatism, and women's limited room for independent political action, means that so far many women have had limited agency deciding whether or not to travel to Syria and Iraq. Women are generally perceived as victims, by local security forces, government authorities and other Tajikistan interlocutors. At the same time, during the course of our research we came across reports of activist women, who apparently were driven by ideological considerations, were fully aware of the consequences of their actions and for whom involvement into violent extremism appeared to be an expression of independence and free-will. Some of these women reportedly were vulnerable to ISIS's highly gendered messaging, calling for women to travel to the Caliphate to take on gender specific roles as wives of hyper masculinized fighters, but these are a handful of cases.

Tajikistan's new National Strategy and Action Plan provide clear opportunities to increase attention and engagement of women in the prevention of violent extremism. It is evident from the field research, that more empirical and qualitative gender disaggregated data is needed to fully understand the push and pull factors that attract women to violent extremist groups to improve PVE intervention and make them more effective at addressing women.

Until now apart from the Women's Committee, few in Tajikistan's state structures see violent extremism as a gendered phenomenon and understand women's role in prevention. There is no dedicated gender group working on VE among security structures for example. The Women's Committee

and Tajik women's organizations should be brought in more frequently to policy and programming discussions on PVE. Tajikistan authorities and civil society could benefit from training and experience sharing from others countries and experts who have well integrated a gender perspective into their PVE efforts, for example on developing counter-narratives, cooperating with police at the local level and assisting re-integrate the families of former fighters. Provision of specialized training will support women to develop the skills necessary to recognize early-warning signs of radicalization in family and community members that lead to violent extremism and to develop messages and make use of tools that effectively counter the narratives of extremist groups. Through the Women's Committee, vulnerable women who are being preyed upon by recruiters, or are in family relationships where other members are radicalizing, already have some safe spaces where they can seek support and guidance to evade pull factors towards violent extremism. These kind of spaces should be supported and further developed to also accommodate women returning from Syria and Iraq or women whose family members have returned.

The emergence of ISIS and similar groups in the Middle East should not overshadow the domestic challenge which violent extremism presents to Tajikistan, especially as their fighting fortunes turn for the worse in Syria and Iraq. Afghanistan might rise in significance as a violent extremism nesting ground, and the security of Tajikistan's south could be effected. How the decrease of security in Afghanistan, and ongoing activities of violent extremist groups, will affect women in Tajikistan is a topic requiring future research. Even if fewer Tajikistan citizens travel to Iraq and Syria in 2017, it will be important to continue to support women to increase their resilience to violent and extremist groups, to help prevent others, in their families and communities from being attracted to calls to mobilize for extremist violence, and to support reintegration of former fighters and their families.

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The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and analysis of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

