Meeting Report of the NATO Advanced Research Workshop

Violent Extremism in Central Asia: Indicators, Trends and Possible Responses

2-3 September 2015, Astana, Kazakhstan

This NATO Advanced Research Workshop in Astana was organised by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) and the Center for Security Programs (CSP) in Astana, with support of the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme. The main aim of the workshop was to identify to what extent radicalisation and violent extremism are on the rise in the region, what can and should be done about it and how actors can advance on a countering violent extremism (CVE) agenda in the future.

The two-day meeting was attended by thirty-five representatives of different fields and levels, including those from Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the region, the European Union Delegation to Kazakhstan, the Centres for Strategic Studies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as academic representatives from the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University from Kyrgyzstan. Also present were independent researchers, directors of local non-governmental organisations and renowned international experts and scholars.

During the introduction, the organisers made mention of the wish to regard this workshop as the start of a process, rather than a one-time event. "Breaking the loneliness of the individuals that work on this issue in the region", was the way it was framed by one of the speakers. Many participants were in agreement that this goal was an important one and that this workshop was an important first step in contributing to this aim.

Regarding developments in the field of religiously inspired violent extremism with political and social roots in the region, the different speakers acknowledged first and foremost that no two countries in the region are the same, not least due to significant differences in political and cultural realities. For instance, workshop participants of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan contributed a rise in extremism in the Central Asian region mainly to geo-political developments outside of their borders, such as the Wahabi influence but also the influence of the Afghan/Pakistani Taliban and of new actors such as the so-called "Islamic State" (IS). A participant from Kyrgyzstan considered the increasingly unstable internal political situation in the country, as well as inadequate institutional and governance response mechanisms as a main reason for the emergent turmoil. A Tajiki speaker mentioned a decline of socio-economic opportunities, religious ignorance and *Tajikis* migrating to Russia where some radicalise and end up in violent extremist groups as important causal factors for the rise of extremism in the region. The situation in Afghanistan, combined with the increasing presence of the IS in the region was mentioned frequently as a relevant explanatory factor for the destabilisation of the region as a whole.

Regardless of these differences between and within countries, the picture of violent extremism in Central Asia is a worrisome one. In several countries, the number of individuals that travel to the Middle East to join IS has exceeded over one hundred. Additionally, organisations like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) still pose a considerable security risk inside Central Asian countries and some have substantial constituencies, especially among young men and women.

The workshop identified the following factors as important drivers for radicalisation: The limitation of civil liberties, human rights violations, corruption and impunity, poor governance (especially at the local level), pre-existing and unresolved violent ethnic-regional and criminal/mafia related conflicts, and discredited regimes, as well as social exclusion and poverty. On top of these, a number of drivers related to religious issues were mentioned, including the lack of trust of official Islamic clergy, fragmented Islamic communities, the use of mediaeval religious sources, and religious illiteracy. Adding to this mixture is the pull factor of extremist groups, such as a number of highly charismatic imams, strong (virtual) social networks, material and social benefits like social status, adventure and fame, plus a set of attractive ideas.

In terms of counter- and de-radicalisation, the workshop participants noted that – compared to the threat – a disproportionally low number of known initiatives have been conducted. These include a number of research projects, which have, for example through interviews with prisoners, shed some light on motivational factors and drivers. The OSCE in Tajikistan is running a project on CVE in which training and workshops with a focus on mutual trust building are provided to parents and (migrant) communities. The Kyrgyz branch of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Search for Common Ground has tried to bring together civil society groups to discuss violent extremism and CVE, including one, very promising, meeting in which Tajik, Kazakh and Kyrgyz organisations were present. Search for Common Ground has been taking steps to connect these and other civil society actors, with religious authorities and government actors. In 2003, another initiative was set up in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), which entailed steps being taken to start a dialogue with Jamiaat (HuT), IMU and East Turkestan Islamic Movements (ETIM)). While three successful meetings with good achievements were organised, this initiative was soon terminated. In the experience of participants there was very limited cooperation between civil society and governments on the topic of CVE, and conflicting views on how to address issues of spreading violent extremism.

Limiting the operating space for extremist groups often is the immediate and most common reaction by governments to rising violent extremism. This strategy regularly has counter-productive effects, as it may simultaneously limit the space for other, non-extremis societal actors as well. In the past, NGOs and other societal actors proved key in successfully countering and preventing radicalisation, certainly when they worked in close cooperation with governmental bodies.

It was therefore stressed that political stakeholders ought to sometimes take a step back, to open space for cooperation and let other actors take the lead. General ideas that were mentioned to counter and prevent radicalisation were: Providing counter-narratives, setting up youth programmes mobilising religious leaders and mothers against violent narratives. The idea of a hotline through which a caller can express concern about a person (an initiative seen in many Western countries) will,

in the view of participants, not work in most of the Central Asian states, because of legislation-related challenges: Individuals would be too frightened to express their concerns, because this could lead to the immediate arrest of the person in question. The public taboo on the topic of radicalisation contributes to the difficulty in countering and preventing it in the region of Central Asia.

One of the related questions that arose was how governments could play a role in optimising CVE measures, since many held the view that visible or obvious government sponsoring of CVE activities could have a negative effect. This is a common challenge if CVE and the experience is that this balance is very delicate. However, some very innovative and effective experiences were raised during the meeting. Some of the best practices, including the examples of the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), International Research & Exchanges Board REX Youth Programmes offering alternative action and identity boost for the youth and the SAVE/PAVE government – CSO network in Nigeria, were discussed and met with enthusiasm by the participants. Generally, it was felt that the ability to measure impact and have correct indicators for radicalisation and the inverse were of the utmost importance for effectively countering violent extremism.

Based on the discussions of this workshop, it can be concluded that more needs to be done in light of the challenges related to violent extremism in Central Asia. There is an urgent need for a research- and evidence-based foundation as the basis on which future work can build. Additionally, best practices, including those stemming from the practical examples mentioned above, and intensified exchange with international actors in the field of CVE can be important for the future. But first and foremost, the work should focus on the creation of a network of academics, practitioners and other experts in the region that connects with relevant actors in governments to make progress feasible.

It was decided that the mentioned suggestions would be taken up by a committee of four workshop participants that will develop a project to continue the exchange and guarantee progress in the field of countering violent extremism. Identification of donors for this project is an important first next step.