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Deradicalization, Disengagement and Reintegration of former Taliban

Summary

- Combat military strategy dominated more than a decade of war against terrorism in Afghanistan.
- Despite past counter-terrorism success, Taliban are still successfully recruiting and mounting major attacks in Afghanistan.
- Currently, nearly 10,000 violent extremists are held in detention centers and prisons throughout Afghanistan.
- The time is ripe for a holistic de-radicalization program to reform these violent extremists starting with Bagram which host the majority of the violent extremists.
- A robust monitoring and evaluation post-release program jointly conducted by the government and civil societies will ensure the success of disengagement and reintegration as well as evaluate the impact of the Islamic training de-radicalization program.

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Introduction

Military strategy dominated last decade's fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. While military strategy brought much success, arguably it may have also contributed to the radicalization of some Afghans on both sides of the Af-Pak border. It is time to focus on countering violent extremism (CVE) in Afghanistan.

The United States (U.S.) is committed to continue to support Afghanistan and the fight against terrorism during the transformation period 2015-2024. The "U.S. Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism" is part of the fight against violent extremism globally is one such program of de-radicalization – an aspect of CVE. Other countries have also adopted similar de-radicalization strategies, but Afghanistan has no such national strategy or action plan hitherto.

The challenges for violent extremism are daunting for the international community and for Afghanistan as well. This is particularly true in the case of the law enforcement sector in Afghanistan and the prisons and detention centers that houses these violent extremists. Among these centers, Bagram and Pule-Charkhi houses the majority of violent extremists that are captured during military, police or intelligence operations. Presumably the men incarcerated in these prisons present an acute threat for violent recidivism, and can act as force multipliers for violent groups by using incarceration as a tool to lure possible recruits.

The last thirteen years in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, reports in the media showed violent extremists who are released from prisons rejoin the insurgent groups – Taliban.

Absent any empirical data to understand the drivers for violent recidivism in Afghan prisons, prison studies from other countries show religion can offer a support network and a sense of belonging for inmates behind bars. These individuals present both a threat and opportunity, but with the proper education prior to their release they could become the most vocal voices for non-violence in their communities.

The Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO) with the support of United States Institute of Peace (USIP) implemented pilot project for a year training Taliban inmates in Pole-Charkhi. This brief summarizes the findings of that training.

Deradicalization Training

One of the methods to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is deradicalization. While scholars and practitioners vary on the terms and types of deradicalization,

the aims are the same: rehabilitate, ideological reform, and counter-narrative.

There are various ways to rehabilitate, reform, and counter-radicalization (counter-narrative). The deradicalization, however, aims to reform terrorists in custody while the counter-radicalization method aims to help prevent the vulnerable population before they are radicalized.

AJO held Islamic training classes for inmates on four topics aimed to de-radicalize, which emerged as a common theme and also presented acute problem preached to radicalize Afghans:

Topic One: The legitimacy of the Government of Afghanistan under Islam

Topic Two: Jihad and its etiquette

Topic Three: The importance of negotiation, peace and tolerance under Islam

Topic Four: The crime of murder and punishment under Islam

The lectures focused on these issues from the historic, moral, and legal perspective of Islam. Heavy reliance on historical anecdotes, passages from the Quran, Hadith and Islamic scholars were presented as well as, when an opportunity presented itself, extremist atrocities (suicide attacks, destruction of schools, bridges, markets and mosques) were discussed (i.e. Farkhunda's death, blowing up markets and murdering innocent people) as an example of how such violent actions are not sanctioned in Islam; but such acts actually defame Islam and consequently Islam is negatively perceived by the world.

Of the topics selected for training, the most challenging one was the "Legitimacy of the Government of Afghanistan under Islam". The focus of this lecture was to dispel any misconceptions about the legitimacy of the government under Islam by understanding first what an Islamic government is. How an Islamic government or political system is formed? Who is a legitimate Caliph? Rebutting the argument that only Shari'a must prevail and be the law, and that the current laws are therefore contrary to Shari'a. Further, understanding the various methods in applying Shari'a in today's world and what the requirements for Mullahs and Taliban issuing fatwas are?

While the other three subjects received some attention in class and in the majority of the cases the participants would agree that killing innocent people is prohibited under Islam including non-Muslims, or that destroying mosques, roads, bridges or other such properties was not allowed under Islam to be destroyed, the criticism on the legitimacy of the government was heavily debated, and as such, justified destructive actions. Specifically the inmates perceived Afghan laws to be against Sharia or not following Sharia, reasoning otherwise there would be no oppressive government (judiciary is corrupt and no

one gets to be heard in court only the powerful), or warlords (they reign with impunity but if there was Sharia law they would be hanged).

After months of continuous lectures the comfort and trust level between the lecturers, evaluators, class facilitators and participants increased from which AJO collected some interesting anecdotes. Unfortunately, the program was near ending and did not provide the opportunity to further pursue one on one interview and discussions with some of the participants who expresses views and willingness to share more on the motivation of extremism. As Khalil from Kunduz who is 50 years old and was serving time for transporting explosive materials told AJO that the government has neglected the prison conditions and not offering any vocational and educational programs to enhance the knowledge, improve skills and thus employment opportunities for inmates after release. He added, *“In fact, this is [referring to Pole-Charkhi] the second home of the Taliban. Here they conduct meetings and make plans to implement it whenever they are released. The other prisoners who are brought here convicted of crimes other than terrorism also join the Taliban parties after they are invited by Taliban and act against government whenever they are released from here.”*

The training team noted behavioral changes for some regular participant inmates in the three month long sessions. The team observed that not only the inmates who participated in training sessions, but also the prison staff showed trust and respect for the trainers and evaluators. The inmates requested repeatedly for the program to continue as soon as they knew the program end date.

Trainers noted changes in the manners and views of those attended the class regularly. For instance, when discussing the peace topic, the views of most prisoners were to bring peace, mutual views should be respected and that the peace is an order/obligation of Allah. They even discussed and appreciated women participation in peace talks, which AJO considered a tremendous improvement in their beliefs and perception from the first days and assessment where they negatively viewed the government of Afghanistan and the women being outside and working.

The Need for Deradicalization Program

Afghanistan entered the transformation decade (2015-2024) in its turbulent history with a new president and National Unit Government in office now for a little over a year and foreign troop's combat mission ended.

It is this decade without the support of international troops that many civil

societies, INGOs, and NGOs consider and agree to be a window of opportunity to continue the momentum of the last 14 years to safeguard the gains made in various sectors in Afghanistan. The fear is that these gains might fall back to the time of the Taliban; rather we hope not only to prevent this reversal, but also to continue to advance these gains. Yet, security still remains fragile - despite all the progress - as witnessed daily throughout the country.

It is further self-evident that the fight against terrorism cannot solely be won by military means or by negotiating peace. The problem lies in addressing directly the ineffectual method -terrorism - employed by those who believe they can achieve their goals and aims through terrorism.

In Afghanistan, radicalization to a large extent is the result of ideological indoctrination (Islamist extremism) interpreting the Shari'a, negative image and perception of the government (foreign invasion, puppet un-Islamic and corrupt government), unemployment, and emotional involvement (closed relatives killed during a military operation) and the latter could also be attributed to tradition and history. It is therefore imperative that Afghanistan implement a CVE program in general, however, particularly to fight terrorism, a robust deradicalization program is a must ingredient of that fight.

Additionally, Pole-Charkhi pilot program, while challenging, proved that such de-radicalization program could have a positive impact on violent extremists. It is, therefore, recommended that if Afghanistan is to fight terrorism, it must have a holistic de-radicalization program starting with Bagram.

Currently, nearly 10,000 violent extremists are held in detention centers and prisons throughout Afghanistan and Bagram and Pole-Charkhi hold the majority.

Implementing De-Radicalization Program

For any prison de-radicalization program to succeed, it must include every aspect (de-radicalization, disengagement and reintegration) that culminate in both behavioral and attitudinal changes of the violent extremist.

1. More field research is needed to further understand the recruitment dynamics in order to better design and implement development programming.
2. A long-term Islamic training program allowing trust to build between trainers and participants provides a behavioral and attitudinal change environment.
3. A robust post-release assistance and monitoring program involving

About This Brief

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government and civil societies ensures the success of disengagement and reintegration as well as evaluates the impact of the de-radicalization program on recidivism.

4. Prison conditions including inmates' treatment must be in accordance with the law and vocational programs provided to equip inmates with skills for future employment post-release.

NOTES

¹Recent Long Term Commitments Pledged for Afghanistan Critical to Future Stability, as Transition Made to Afghan Security Leadership Post 2014

<http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10688.doc.htm>

¹<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/08/strategic-implementation-plan-empowering-local-partners-prevent-violent->



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AJO provides capacity building and training, conducting research and analysis, publishing findings, and holding seminars and symposiums on major legal, economic and social issues of significance to the Afghan people and the government.

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