A participatory action research on causes & concerns related to growing Violent Extremism in Kunduz Province
Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Global Center on Cooperative Security. We thank our colleagues from The Global Center on Cooperative Security who supported the research.

WPSO team including Enayatullah Osmani, Head of Peace and conflict Unit, Naveed Zulfiqar, Deputy Director and our field worker Gita Yaftali collected the data in Kunduz and provided the analysis for the final report.

We would also like to express our gratitude to over 300 men and women from different walks of life for their time and patience in Kunduz, for sharing their perspectives and experiences with us during the course of this research and community dialogues.
Acronyms

IMU Movement of Uzbekistan
WPSo Women & PEACE Studies Organization
ALP Afghan Local Police
ANA Afghan National Army
ANP Afghan National Police
ANSF Afghan National Security Forces
AOG Armed Opposition Group
CAPU Cooperation for Peace and Unity
GIRoA Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
HI Hezb-i-Islami (Political Party)
ISAF International Security Assistance Forces
JI Jamit-i-Islami (Political Party)
MoI Ministry of Interior
MoD Ministry of Defense
NDS National Directorate of Security
PRT Provincial Reconstruction Team
CVE Countering Violent Extremism
PRT Provincial Reconstruction Team
NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization
MSF Médecins Sans Frontières

List of Political Parties (Factions)

1. Harakat-I Islami
2. Hizb-i Islami (Hekmetyar)
3. Hizb-i Islami (Khalis)
4. Hizb-i-Tanzim Dawat-i Islami-i Afghanistan (Sayaf)
5. Hizb-i Wahdat
6. Ittihad-i Islami (Sayaf)
7. Jamiat Islami Afghanistan
8. Junbesh-i-Melli
9. Shura-i Nazar
Summary

• A number of private Madrassas in Kunduz promote violent extremist propaganda targeted towards young women and young men that incite violence and spread intolerance.

• Community members, including women leaders and activists, have been threatened by some religious groups and clerics in Kunduz for speaking out against their extremist teachings. As a result, these women are hesitant to take the risk to challenge violent extremist narratives at the public level. However, within the family and private sphere, mothers, in particular, have tried to dissuade their sons from supporting the insurgency and partaking in violent activities.

• Families, particularly mothers, lack self-confidence and believe that they are not adequately equipped or knowledgeable to counter the violent propaganda promoted by militants groups and religious clerics since these groups use Islamic sharia interpretations and Hadith and speak Arabic to enforce extreme ideologies.

• Many influential members of the community like police, judge, and district governor and other government officials or even politicians like the members of Provincial Council do not believe that violent extremism is a serious threat to Kunduz. While Madrasas and mosques play a critical role in providing Islamic education to youth, there are a number of non-formal Madrasas and non-registered mosques that the local and central government have no supervision over or able to monitor their curriculum and Islamic education practices. Therefore, opportunities exist for extremist elements and clerics to incite violence and promote intolerance in these spaces.

• There is little or no political harmony in Kunduz due mainly to political rivalry, ethnic discrimination, and appointment of authorities based on ethnicity and favoritism. These deficiencies in governance contributed to an environment where regional terrorist groups such as IMU, Jundullah, and the militant wings of Hezb-Islami Hekmatyar are able to attract angry and frustrated youth to their causes and battle fields.
Why Kunduz:

Kunduz, traditionally known as “the bread basket of Afghanistan” connects the northeastern provinces to Tajikistan. The geographic location of Kunduz has added strategic values to this province in northern Afghanistan. It serves as a gateway to northern Afghanistan as it sits on the primary east-west road connecting the north of the country as well as the main north-south road connecting Kabul with neighboring Tajikistan in Central Asia. The province currently has nine districts: Imam Sahib, Dasht-e-Archi, Qala-e-Zal, Chahar Dara, Ali Abad and Khan Abad, Kalbad, Curtepa and Aqtash. Various ethnicities live in the province including Tajik, Pashtun, Uzbek, Hazara, Aymaq, Baluch, Turkman, Huchi, and Hindus. During the “Islamic Emirat” Kunduz was the main focus of the Taliban. The state of public opinion in most areas of Kunduz is “Talibanism” and some religious schools (known as Madrassas) are known to promote violent extremist ideology.

On September 28, 2015, Kunduz provincial capital fell into the hands of the Taliban. The fighters held the city for three days before a government counter-offensive, with support from United States and NATO forces, was launched. However, during the 15-day occupation, the Taliban, which is supported by some local religious clerics, roamed the streets in pickups, commemorating their victory; freed hundreds of prisoners, including many murderers, dangerous criminals, militants and Taliban supporters; and declared Sharia law and strict rules and restrictions on women and girls’ education. About 6,000 families were displaced and large parts of the city destroyed. At least 57 civilians and Afghan security forces were killed and 630 wounded. This devastation was exacerbated by Afghan-backed U.S. bombing raids on the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Kunduz Trauma Center (KTC). Across the city, buildings were burned to the ground. NGO offices, government buildings and local shops were looted and vandalized. As Afghan security forces regained control of the city, some of the estimated 20,000 families that fled the violence have slowly begun to return. Despite political and security improvements, the Taliban and militant groups once again took control of Kunduz during in October in 2016 for the second time in two years.

Living in Kunduz remains a challenge. Even before the provincial capital fell into the hands of Taliban, many families were displaced or fled from the districts to the provincial center or to neighboring provinces in the face of growing insecurity caused both by the Taliban and the ALP. Additionally, travel to and from Kunduz from other provinces is unsafe. Residents are fearful of being questioned by the National Directorate for Security (NDS) or the Taliban during their travels and many choose to pray at home instead of going to the mosques. Furthermore, the provincial governor’s office is empty most days with the number of daily visitors reported at about less than ten people a day. WPSO has been working in Kunduz for the past few years and the field team have reported on numerous instances of violent extremist groups attacking women’s rights and human rights projects. Therefore, Kunduz has been selected for this study.

Objectives of this fieldwork:

The discourse of countering violent extremism and radicalization is slowly emerging in Afghanistan and further evidence and dialogue opportunities between and among communities and the government are needed to develop timely responses and even a consensus around the issue. To this end, WPSO as a local civil society initiative, with the support of Global Center on Cooperative Security, undertook a pilot phase of field work to explore the increase in violent extremism in Kunduz province and the role of communities, especially women, in countering and preventing the violent extremism in the province. The field work and initial research in Kunduz aimed at the following objectives:

- To engage women leaders in identifying the causes and drivers of radicalization among young men and women in Kunduz province
- To provide evidence and grounds under which the government can create measures to prevent growing extremism among young men and women in other provinces
- To facilitate community engagement between parents and community members led by women leaders to identify early signs of youth vulnerability to violent extremism.

This study was conducted through participatory action research which aims to engage community members especially mothers, wives, and daughters who are often among the first to detect the early signs of radicalization in the behavior of their male members of the family. The action research, which also facilitated dialogues led by women leaders, contributed to a process of awareness raising and consciousness among these women. Considering the sensitive nature of this topic and the related issues, women were chosen to facilitate and lead the community dialogues mainly from the mother’s perspectives. Also because women are not considered political or militant competitors among the key powerful figures, it was appropriate for women leaders to facilitate such dialogues.

These community dialogues and engagements with women, families and community members allows for peaceful narratives to take shape that counter and challenge violence and violent messages. The field research from this pilot study suggests a lack of political will and consensus among the influential community leaders and government officials in Kunduz about the existence of violent extremism. Additionally, a lack of control on the activities of nonregistered madrassas and mosques provide opportunities for extremist religious clerics to promote and incite violence.
Methodology

The findings in this report are based primarily on interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations by the researchers in the province of Kunduz. In addition, the community dialogues were used as a participatory action method to engage the communities especially parents and families on a daily life topic regarding the future of their children. Most of the research was conducted in the center of Kunduz and some surrounding districts including Imam Sahib. WPSO researchers conducted over 228 semi-structured interviews with a number of influential members in and around Kunduz, including government officials, Islamic scholars, university professors, women rights activist, and community elders.

In addition, WPSO researchers organized 20 focus group discussions to gain a better understanding of concerns and perceptions of community members regarding the threat of violent extremism in their community with participation of women from government and non-government sectors. These focus group discussions were instrumental in expanding the understanding of violent extremism and finding ways to counter and prevent the threat. The data from these discussions were translated, transcribed and edited by WPSO researchers and analyzed in this report. WPSO also conducted two town hall type Community Dialogues in which more than 120 women & men participated and the majority included female teachers, female government officials, and members of the social groups.

Limitations

Field work in Kunduz was limited due to serious security challenges. Due to insecurity, travel to districts such as Khan Abad and Char Dara proved very difficult and severely limited the number and depth of interviews for this project. As a result, most of the interviews were conducted within the city center.
Impact of Violent Extremism on Women Activists in Kunduz

Women remain the most vulnerable segment of Afghan society. They are subject to harmful traditional practices such as underage marriage, forced marriage and honor killings. During the fall of Kunduz, women activists focusing on issues such as women’s rights and human rights, stayed underground and hid at their friends and relatives’ houses since Taliban militants were in search of them due to the nature of their work which runs counter to Taliban ideology.

It was reported that the Taliban recruited young children to locate government employees, NGO workers, and women rights activists. During a CVE dialogue organized by WPSO, a female head of an NGO stated that during the takeover, the Taliban had a list of female activist, which included her name alongside almost every active working female in Kunduz. As a result, many female activists had to traverse the city’s backstreets on foot and conceal their identities by wearing burkas. It was mentioned that a group of female activists paid a sympathetic driver to take them to a nearby safe district. They were crammed into a small car with their children and was eventually stopped at a Taliban checkpoint. The militants ordered that any woman who worked should come forward. The driver, risking his own life, lied and said he was only transporting housewives. The female NGO leader recalled that she and her colleagues “were completely paralyzed with fear, and we thought this is the end.”

In a number of interviews with Afghan women from Kunduz, including civil society activists, lawyers, and human rights defenders, they all presented the same harrowing testimony: they were hunted, they were threatened, and they were lucky to escape alive.

As the Taliban overran the city, they captured governmental and non-governmental buildings including Roshani Radio and TV, a private broadcaster where they blew it up, and set it on fire. A number of radio and TV stations were looted during the Taliban’s attacks and takeovers in September 2015 and October 2016. This included a prominent Radio and TV station which covers a large portion of Kunduz, employs mostly women, focuses on women and youth issues, and produces social, cultural, sports, and entertainment programs.

Local radio stations were targeted because, among other reasons, they are an economical and effective way to spread important messages about women’s rights. Following the end of fighting in Kunduz and retaking of the province by ANSF, United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) supported the people of Kunduz by backing a series of public information programmes on civil rights and human rights with Kunduz RTA and Independent Radio Kunduz. The broadcasts aired via four local radio and TV channels. In addition, they provided technical assistance and outreach activities to promote the media programs. Furthermore, in addition to restarting of 6 radios, TVs, monthly and weekly magazines in Kunduz province, many organizations came back to operation, such as Mediothek, International Legal Foundation of Afghanistan and Women & Youth for Peace organizations.
Women’s Perception of Violent Extremism in Kunduz

Women play a measurable and diverse role in prevention of violent extremism. Women can play important roles in developing responses to violence extremism, and challenging and delegitimizing extremist narratives. However, it should also be noted that women are also supporters, mobilizers, and perpetrators of violent extremist activities. For instance, some interviewees for this project admitted to having extreme thoughts about the presence of foreign troops and were happy about the fall of Kunduz to the Taliban.

The field work for this project revealed that women initially felt helpless in their own families and expressed their inabilities to impact the attitudes and behaviors of their husbands and sons. Both publicly and privately, women are regarded as weak and without any kind of influence. However, for some, there is relative agency within the home but not publicly. As a result, the community dialogues and focus group discussions undertaken by WPSO focused on ways to harness women’s agency at the family level. Elder women and younger women explored the entry points in their families to impact and influence attitudes. Interestingly, the personal examples and stories of the elder women motivated the others and directed the discussions towards women making an impact. For example, a doctor from Badakhshan recalled that “when wounded insurgents families came to my clinic for medication, I always try to advocate and appeal to them to request their sons, fathers and husband to stop the insurgency and join the peace process.” Another woman stated that “when my son wanted to join Taliban, I told him that I will never forgive the milk that I have given to you. I convinced him to join ANA but I am so worried that I will lose him one day.”

Women leaders from Kunduz as well as housewives both had a common understanding of violent extremism and how it can be tackled. It was observed that in Kunduz, public spaces like schools, markets, madrassas, and colleges, are increasingly becoming spaces for radicalization and mobilization of young men and women in different parts of the province. The Afghan government has focused primarily on hard security responses to the Taliban insurgency with little or no consideration for the drivers or factors that contribute to a conducive environment for radicalization and extremism. These factors include corruption, weak justice system, poor governance, lack of institutional coherence and capacity for service delivery and addressing grievances.

Women were also concerned that a lack of economic opportunities for young people push them towards joining insurgency because they will be paid well and can earn a living for their families. However, there were a number of examples in which the sons of well-off families joined insurgencies too. While socioeconomic deprivation does not directly lead to radicalization and violent extremism, community members agree that it can foster support for violent extremist groups who appeal to those who may be socially marginalized or economically deprived as a way to seek justice and
equality. In the long run, unemployment and lack of equal access to resources can contribute to further instability and insecurity in Kunduz province and Afghanistan as a whole.

Women leaders and community members expressed that a lack of political consensus and ethno-centric conflicts, which pulled the country into civil war for many years, contributes to the destruction of the social fabric and creates space for violent extremist groups both locally and regionally to gain a foothold in Afghanistan. These political and social schisms could also provide opportunities for organized criminal groups to enter into the community and offer residents their protection while impacting the legitimacy of the central and local government as well as law enforcement and security institutions. These drivers are exacerbated by weak governance and failures to counter the insurgency has contributed to the presence of regional terrorist groups. In some cases the absence of law enforcement agencies has result in creation of militant wings by political parties. Tensions and clashes between different ethnicities and religious minorities continue to rise and contributes to further instability in the province.

In addition, many of the women interviewed believed that social issues like injustices and violence against young men particularly by armed militants and local gunmen are contributing factors that push them towards the insurgency and to take up arms so that they can defend themselves. Therefore, it was widely suggested that military operations alone are not sufficient to address the threat and the focus should be on building trust between the community, particularly the youth, and the police and government officials and holding them accountable.

While many of the housewives admitted that they did not have insights into the reasons why their husbands and sons joined the Taliban, they did express concerns about close contact and relations with religious clerics and madrassas in Kunduz. While a pattern of violent extremism could be drawn around extremist ideologies that are taught at the madrassas in Kunduz, based on this field work, further in depth studies are needed to determine if there is indeed a direct correlation between madrassas and violent extremism in Kunduz.
Conclusion and Recommendations

For centuries, Afghanistan’s political system has been male-dominated, which has seriously impacted women’s presence in decision making. Women’s perspectives, solutions, and interventions are often locked down upon and ignored. However, women involved in the Provincial Peace Committee (PPC) have exhibited how effectively they have contributed to reconciliation and reintegration efforts. The participation of women in the peace process meant that women were now included in an area from which they have been traditionally excluded. The following recommendations reflect insights and ideas gained through engaging with women and community members on ways to prevent and counter violent extremism in Kunduz and other provinces, and Afghanistan as a whole. These recommendations are intended for local, provincial, and national government officials:

1. **Adopt a multidimensional national P/CVE strategy, which includes a gender perspective and participation of women and women’s groups:**
   Any local or national strategy or action plans should take into account women’s perspectives and ideas on how to address the threat of violent extremism. Community dialogues could be facilitated for community members to voice their concerns and share their perspectives.

2. **Facilitate the creation of local and national networks or platforms that promote collaboration and unity among various religious groups:**
   Such a network could bring together different religious scholars from various sects such as Salafi, Wahhabi, Deobandi and Muslim Brotherhood that are currently carrying out various activities in Kunduz province. The government, for example through the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs, Education and the Academy of Sciences could support this network to develop easily accessible interpretations of religious texts. Such a network, with support from the Ministry, could also facilitate exchange programs between and among Afghan Islamic scholars and Islamic scholars from countries like Egypt, Malaysia and Turkey to discuss the issues of extremism, moderation, and preventing violent extremism and radicalization.

3. **Develop an appropriate system to register and monitor nonregistered madrassas and mosques:**
   There are many religious madrasas in Kunduz operating arbitrarily and without registration to any government institutions. The government, especially Ministries of Education and Hajj and Religious Affairs, should take appropriate steps to ensure that these madrassas in Kunduz and across the country are registered. This includes monitoring the level of knowledge, teaching materials, teaching methods and sources of funding of these madrassas in Kunduz to ensure that violent extremist elements do not infiltrate these schools to radicalize and recruit young men and women to their cause. In addition, the Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs should take necessary action to register nonregistered mosques in Kunduz province, and should determine the criteria for the establishment of mosques and the selection of imams and, when appropriate and necessary, monitor sermons and religious activities.
4. Facilitate open dialogue between community, civil society actors, religious authorities and other key stakeholders to promote a culture of tolerance and coexistence:
This community engagement between different actors, should be encouraged and supported through central and local governance bodies. Understanding community priorities and concerns can help to address grievances that may drive people towards violent extremism. The Ministries of Higher Education and Education could support essay competitions among students of various education levels and backgrounds to write about topics like strengthening resilience against extremism during each semester.

5. Support civil society in P/CVE efforts:
Local and national governments should ensure a collaborative and safe environment for civil society with deep roots in Kunduz to play a role in reducing violent extremism and rebuilding trust between communities as well as strengthening cooperation between civilian and government spheres.

6. Develop and convey effective messaging against violent extremism:
Local and central governments should develop hopeful messages that appeal to the youth. This is important as the Taliban and anti-government groups are effectively communicating their messages which are persuasive, emotional and targeted and are distributed through social media and secret gatherings, for example.

7. Invest in evidence based research on the drivers of violent extremism in Afghanistan:
This includes committing resources to the social sciences and promoting interdisciplinary approaches to improve research methods. In areas where primary data may be difficult to collect, innovative and creative research methods, like the participatory action research conducted for this report, need to be developed and supported.

8. Foster an enabling environment to rehabilitee and reintegrate those who have been radicalized or want to exit violent extremist groups:
This could include facilitating and supporting the engagement of women and women’s groups in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Additionally, civic education curriculum that promote, advocate, and campaign for rehabilitation and reintegration could be developed in consultation with civil society actors.

9. Improve government accountability and responsiveness to public needs:
A series of measurable and immediate constructive steps toward reform in different local governance bodies, especially security and justice systems should be put in place. Civil society could play an important role in helping to build the trust between community and law enforcement officials.