Radical and Active: Radicalisation among University Students in Kabul and Herat

Introduction

Afghanistan is struggling with fragile security. Despite efforts to address extremism, various violent radical groups appear to have no issue accessing a pool of sympathisers and potential recruits, given that radical ideologies and views are widespread among different strata of the society. Like in many other countries, radicalisation in Afghanistan is a complex phenomenon.

In this policy note, the term radicalisation primarily means a "growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose, a direct threat to the existing order"[1]. Radicalisation is not necessarily only "what goes on before the bomb goes off"[2]. Hence, radicalisation does not always end in violence. Radicalisation can be categorised into two types: 1) violent radicalisation and 2) non-violent radicalising. A number of groups, such as the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Tehrik-e Taliban of Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), al Qaeda, and Daesh can be categorised as violent extremists who, to various degrees, are active in Afghanistan. These are groups of armed men who have frequently engaged in clashes with security forces and have launched attacks in various parts of the country. Additionally, there are a number of other networks and organisations operating in the country, which may espouse similar extreme ideologies but are not necessarily linked to violence. The non-violent form of radicalisation that these groups promote is more complex.

Methodology

This policy note is based on a brief study carried out during January 2018. A total of 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with a number of university students and professors at Kabul University, Ustad Rabani Education University and Herat University. Extensive qualitative interviews were collected to identify specific characteristics of communities of interest in these universities. The sample was selected based on a snowball and convenient sampling method. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interviewees were given codes to maintain their anonymity.

Universities demonstrating a more prominent presence of extremist groups tend to be in historically highly politicised places around the country[3]. Research shows that universities in Nangarhar, Kabul and Kandahar are more prone to higher levels of radicalisation and more students are exposed to radicalising ideologies[4]. Although universities may not directly preach extremism, they provide a venue where political discussions take place and student groups are formed on political and ideological lines[5]. At times these differences in ideologies and political views have led to violent clashes between students. Research shows that radicalised groups exist and operate inside both public and private universities. Radical groups attract students indirectly through charitable works, organising competition and offering rewards for winners[6].

This policy note is based on assessing radicalisation in universities with the aim of answering "how" and "why" this happens. It discusses who is radicalised and if there are any particular categories of students who are more likely to be radicalised than others. Questions such as the contextual factors that influence radicalisation of youth on campus and how radicalisation happens are also the focus of this part. The purpose of this brief study is to provide an in-depth understanding of radicalisation in universities, which will contribute to better inform organisations that aim to implement CVE programmes at higher education institution.

1   Schmid, Alex P. (2004). Terrorism—The definitional problem. Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law 36(2): 375-420.

2   Sidgwick, 2010, "The Concept of Radicalisation as Source of Confusion." Terrorism and Political Violence, 22:479-494

3   Zaman and Khalid, Trends in Student Radicalisation Trends-in-Student-Radicalisation-across-University-Campuses-in-Afghanistan1.pdf http://www.aiss.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Trends-in-Student-Radicalisation-across-University-Campuses-in-Afghanistan1.pdf

4   Fazli, Reza, Casey Johnson, and Peyton Cooke, "Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan", United States Institute of Peace, September 2015.

5   Zaman and Khalid, Trends in Student Radicalisation Trends-in-Student-Radicalisation-across-University-Campuses-in-Afghanistan1.pdf http://www.aiss.af/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Trends-in-Student-Radicalisation-across-University-Campuses-in-Afghanistan1.pdf

6   Osman, Borhan, "Beyond Jihad and Traditionalism: Afghanistan's new generation of Islamic activists" .Afghanistan Analyst Network, 2015. Accessed at: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AAN-Paper-012015-Borhan-Osman-.pdf

Key Findings

Religious Radicalisation: in different words, most respondents defined radicalisation as "crossing limits" and showing a lack of tolerance for other people's ideas, behaviour and beliefs. Religious radicalisation was reported as a common form of radicalisation in universities. According to the interviewees, groups such as *Hizb-ul Tahrir, Jami'at-e Eslah* and *Jama'at Tablighi* are very active in both Kabul and Herat Universities. Furthermore, political and ethnic extremism are prevalent in universities. Political parties such as *Afghan Melat, Hizb-e Islami* and *Jami'at-e Islami* were mentioned as the most active ones.

Drivers of Radicalisation

Social Factors: social factors such as family background, socialisation and whether students grew up in rural versus urban environments, or in communities and family settings where their opinions are listened to and accounted for, also determine how students behave, debate and engage in dialogues when they enter university. Some students who attended madrassas in Pakistan were also singled out as having a high propensity of joining radical groups or encouraging radicalisation[7].

Economic Factors: many university students view prospects of employment after graduation very challenging, particularly given the widespread corruption in the country. In fact, economic factors were frequently brought up by a number of students as a driver of radicalisation. Some interviewees mentioned that radical groups attract students by promising them potential employment opportunities. However, those recruited for economic reasons may not necessarily be radicalised and students may only see violent extremism as an economic opportunity[8].

Discrimination at Universities: discrimination based on language, ethnicity or religious affiliations is common in both Herat and Kabul Universities. It was reported that debates and discussions based on ethnicity are considered as disturbing the academic environment and conducive to pushing students towards radicalisation. Ethnic and linguistic tensions too cause major frictions in universities. Lack of ethnic diversity at the academic cadre of universities is seen as another factor that has increased grievances among students who suffer from ethno-linguistic and sectarian politics. Although there are no reliable statistics available to show the ethnic composition of the academic cadre, the low number of professors from minority groups such as Hazara and Uzbek at both universities is a case in point. Furthermore, ethnic tension is not limited between students, university leadership and academic cadre. Ethnic tension often becomes a source of conflict among students and is considered a hot and contentious topic of debate and arguments.

The university leadership is aware of the presence of radical groups in universities and is said to rarely take any measures to address the situation. However, it was pointed out that in Kabul University the new leadership is said to have limited the activities of radical groups among the student body. In Herat University, the establishment of the Committee for Management and Discipline is said to have deterred some of the students from instigating conflict or causing disturbances, as students are afraid that the Committee will take disciplinary action against them[9].

Curriculum: university curriculum both in terms of content and workload can influence the process of radicalisation either directly or indirectly. The curriculum for some departments was described as lacking the ability to encourage students' curiosity in a positive way and fostering a culture of debate and intellectual curiosity and rigour[10].

University Dorms (*Lailia*): students have a higher risk of getting radicalised in university residences. The dormitory environment in Kabul University is described as very politically charged. "Students always talk about ethnic, language, religious and political issues. The entire dorm is under the influence of various ethnic, political and religious groups"[11]. Students who are not living in dorms have networks and social circles that extend beyond immediate university friends and acquaintances. The concentration of closed radical communities among students residing in university dorms is higher and they are more likely to socialise with each other and form more gatherings than students who live outside. There is little oversight on activities of students in dorms, as such radical students carry on with their activities quite freely[12].

Topics of Gatherings: students organise gatherings on a wide range of issues from students' rights to politics and socio-economic issues, religion and ethnicity. Discussions on differences between Shiite and Sunni tenets and teachings are particularly hot topics. Other highly debated topics are political such as freedom, democracy and women's *hijab*.

---

7 A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118; G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118, G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118, JD_Stu_Kabu_140118, K_R_Stu_Kab_60118 _MK, R_J_U_Stu_H_130118

8 A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118, JA_U_Stu_H_180118 , K_R_Stu_Kab_60118 _MK, R_J_U_Stu_H_130118, A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118, G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118, O_N_U_Stu_H_180118, SH_Stu_Kabul_MK080118,

9 HB_U_Stu_Herat_130118, K_R_Stu_Kab_60118 _MK, R_J_U_Stu_H_13011; HB_U_Stu_Herat_130118, O_N_U_Stu_H_180118, R_J_U_Stu_H_130118; SH_Stu_Kabul_MK080118, G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118

10 G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118, HB_U_Stu_Herat_130118, R_J_U_Stu_H_130118

11 Interview with a student from Kabul University. Many other students echoed similar views.

12 A_N_Stu_Herat_170118 , A_F_Stu_Kabul_KB_080118, A_W_Stu_Kabul_KB_210118, A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118, A_W_Stu_Kabul_KB_210118, AK_U_Herat_201217, A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118, O_N_U_

Social Media: university students, as a young and educated segment of the society, perhaps more than any other group, have regular access to internet and use it more than the rest of the population. In fact, being active on social media is a status sign among youth and indicates being "young and involved", therefore the majority of university students are active on social media channels. Many radical ideas are propagated through Facebook groups or Twitter networks. Facebook was identified as an effective means of connecting with other like-minded people and propagating radical ideas.

Distributing Radical Material: in addition to circulation of the material online, hard copies of pamphlets and booklets are distributed among students by parties and organisations, which are not necessarily officially registered with the government. Once booklets and pamphlets are distributed, they can circulate widely among students. Night letters and posters on the walls are other means of distribution of radical ideas.

Political and Social Activism: activism is particularly high among students who have joined various radical movements and takes place in line with their religious beliefs. Radicalised students actively take part to gatherings that are not necessarily relevant to their field by delivering speeches and engaging in debates and discussions.

Demonstrations are used as another tool for these groups to showcase their power and extensive presence in universities. Reasons for organising and attending demonstrations are very complex and lie at the intersection of ideology, politics and opportunistic intentions. Regardless of the intentions, religion gives legitimacy to demonstrations. On the other hand, by organising demonstrations on various political and social topics, many groups not only publicise their demands, but they also use this opportunity to assert their presence[13].

Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) Programmes and Effective Interventions

To devise effective policy recommendations, respondents were asked whether any activity and programme organised by and for students will be effective in addressing the radicalisation issues they discussed. The following recommendations reflect students' voices.[14]

Recommendations:

•   Promoting healthy entertainment opportunities such as organising tournaments on any sports, from martial arts to tennis, football, chess, etc. that can contribute to physical and mental well-being of students and indirectly prevent engaging with radical movements.

•   Professional development programmes: professional skills, such as research methodology workshops or classes, leadership programmes, public policy and public administration courses, internship opportunities and academic writing workshops that can facilitate the transition to the job market.

•   Debate clubs: encouraging formation of debate clubs where ethics of debating are taught and rules are set to avoid conflict and violence is a significant step forward. Such programmes can foster a culture of tolerance and inclusivity, where students learn to listen to each other and respect differing opinions.

•   Inter-university competition and tours to other universities in order to become exposed to various learning environments and settings.

•   Arts and cultural events: painting, student theatre, exhibitions and concerts are important not only for the purpose of entertainment, but opening a space for diversity tolerance and co-existence. Such activities can also contribute broadly on nation-building too.

•   Trainings and workshops for university staff and professors to prepare the university leadership to deal with the issues at hand. A starting point is to depoliticise the university leadership by requiring university professors to grade students objectively and avoid fostering contentious religious, ethnic and sectarian discussions.

•   A principle of zero tolerance towards disrespectful comments in the classroom is a simple and effective method. Developing university guidelines for the professors and in cooperation with them, and making sure those guidelines are followed, can be another effective mechanism.

•   Students are rarely given guidance about university rules and regulations and the newcomers do not receive any orientation about university, in general, or regulations in dorms. This can be particularly problematic for first year students who are new to the environment and are the prime target of radical groups.

•   Empowering student *shuras* (councils): student *shuras* should be empowered so that they can function as a buffer zone and facilitate more dialogue and discussions between student body and the university leadership, and also try to address conflicts among students in a peer group.

---

13   AK_U_Herat_201217, A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118, O_N_U_Stu_H_180118, N_B_Stu_Kabul_KB_220118, A_W_Stu_Kabul_KB_210118, EJ_U_Stu_Herat_110118, G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118

14   A_N_Stu_Herat_170118, A_T_Stu_Kabul_KB_110118, A_W_Stu_Kabul_KB_210118, G_U_Stu_Kabul_110118, JD_Stu_Kabu_140118, SH_Stu_Kabul_MK080118, K_R_Stu_Kab_60118 _MK

•	Student-centric policies: given the highly politicised environment of the university, conflict resolution and CVE programmes will be more effective if policies are more student-centric and cater to what students want in the university environment rather than programmes that fit well with the donor's specific projects.

About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and by promoting a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection, and debate.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community in Afghanistan and has a Board of Directors comprised of representatives from donor organisations, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations.

In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.

For more information visit **www.areu.org.af**

Prospect
Think Tank Awards
★ **WINNER** ★

International ★ **Social**

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of AREU or its donors.