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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report offers perspectives on the national and regional dynamics of violent extremism with respect to Kyrgyzstan. Derived from a study supported by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to explore the potential for violent extremism in Central Asia, it is based on extensive interviews and a countrywide Peace Game with university students at Kyrgyz National University in June 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast

Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan

Summary

- Kyrgyzstan, having twice overthrown autocratic leaders in violent uprisings, in 2005 and again in 2010, is the most politically open and democratic country in Central Asia.
- Many Kyrgyz observers remain concerned about the country's future. They fear that underlying socioeconomic conditions and lack of public services—combined with other factors, such as drug trafficking from Afghanistan, political manipulation, regional instability in former Soviet Union countries and Afghanistan, and foreign-imported religious ideologies—create an environment in which violent extremism can flourish.
- One of the fault lines occurring among its population of 5.7 million is between those who value the Soviet legacy of secularism, *svetski* in Russian, and an emerging generation that sees Islam as a core part of its identity. The mistrust between these two constituencies prevents them from addressing a mutually recognized problem: the grassroots radicalization of young men and women, especially in Fergana Valley.
- The polarizing influences of hyper-ethnic nationalists and uneducated and often unaccredited religious leaders is particularly worrisome for women, whose status has become marginalized over the past two decades. Extremist notions with regard to limited women's rights are a bellwether for instability down the road.
- A long-term strategy to counter violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan requires finding common ground between leaders and influential members of the secular and religious constituencies. Together they can develop strategies to foster a national identity inclusive of diverse religious creeds and ethnic backgrounds and to challenge extremist ideas on religious, moral, and cultural grounds.
- To offset pressures from Russia and China, its larger neighbors to the north and east, more coherent efforts are needed to find effective practices in countering violent extremism between Kyrgyzstan and its immediate neighbors, such as Kazakhstan, that involve other regional actors and institutions, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

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Introduction

Countering violent extremism (CVE) is a field of policy, programs, and interventions designed to prevent individuals from engaging in violence associated with radical political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and groups. Although it remains part of international and national security policymaking to counter terrorism, it focuses mostly on non-kinetic methods and prevention. It also incorporates significant research from subject matter experts and social scientists to understand the dynamics, root causes, and drivers of how and why individuals join violent extremist organizations.¹

Despite this intention, programming in the field is nevertheless often devoted to international hot spots that are experiencing significant violence. Kyrgyzstan and other countries in Central Asia, by contrast, present an opportunity to engage in CVE at an upstream point of prevention. Currently, the region is not experiencing high levels of violence or conflict, but certain indicators and assessments from regional experts suggest that violent extremism will likely become more pronounced in the future. Successful CVE programming today can prevent violence tomorrow in both Kyrgyzstan and the greater Central Asian region.

History of Violence

Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia that has seen significant political transition since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, having twice—in 2005 and 2010—overthrown autocratic leaders in violent uprisings. Its post-Soviet neighbors, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, are still ruled by the same leaders they had on independence in 1991. Its neighbor to the east, China, has been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party since 1949 (see map 1).

Map 1. Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia



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Kyrgyzstan's democratic institutions, elected leaders, and multiparty parliament make it a test case for political liberalization. If its political system fails or the country falls apart, so will the first democratic experiment in Central Asia. However, if it can overcome rivalries between

northern and southern, religious and secular, and post-Soviet, Islamic, and Western-oriented politicians, Kyrgyzstan will demonstrate to other Central Asian countries that the current autocrat-for-security arrangement need not be inevitable and that a more democratic future is possible.

Kyrgyzstan's unique history of revolutions and political change began in 2005, when its first president after independence, Askar Akayev, was overthrown in the Tulip Revolution. Akayev's successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was himself overthrown five years later, in 2010, after he cracked down violently on protesters in Bishkek, killing more than a hundred people. Both Akayev and Bakiyev and their families were accused of nepotism and corruption. The Bakiyev regime in particular closely approximated a narco-state, in which high-ranking officials run drug trafficking operations and extract illicit profit from the drug trade.²

Bakiyev's overthrow in April 2010 revealed regional and ethnic-clan fault lines across the country. Some southern politicians, who had formed Bakiyev's support base, wanted to see one of their own remain in power and preserve their illicit economic activities. They threatened secession and ratcheted up "pure Kyrgyz" ethno-nationalistic rhetoric to destabilize the new government. Local mobs interpreted this rhetoric as a call for cleansing ethnic Uzbeks, who make up nearly half the population in southern Kyrgyzstan's Osh and Jalalabad regions. That June, some four hundred thousand Uzbeks fled across the border to Uzbekistan as refugees and hundreds of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz were killed.

In late 2010, under interim president Roza Otunbayeva, Kyrgyzstan successfully transitioned to a multiparty democracy and, in 2011, elected Almaz Atambayev as president. There have since then been no major outbreaks of violence between ethnic, religious, or other groups in Kyrgyzstan. However, among Kyrgyz citizens, regional experts, and stakeholders, concern is ever present that the Kyrgyz government has not addressed the factors that enabled the violence to break out so quickly in 2010. Moreover, many are also concerned that the country's fledgling democratic institutions will not be able to withstand similar levels of violence if clashes or militant activities in the country reoccur.

Five Trends Since 2010

After the violence in 2010 in the southern Osh and Jalalabad regions, the issue of violent extremism entered the national discourse. The head of the National Security Service went on record by stating that Kyrgyzstan was the weakest link in Central Asia because extremist groups could exploit the country's "state of permanent social and economic crisis."³ Since 2010, five key trends indicate risk factors of increased violent extremist activities in Kyrgyzstan in the future.

The Drug Trade

Networks between drug traffickers and the country's top leadership became weaker after Kurmanbek Bakiyev left power in 2010. However, the drug trade remains largely under the control of the Kyrgyz security forces and is showing signs that it may shift more to the control of militant groups after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Bakiyev and close members of his family controlled the security forces and the drug trafficking routes in the south of the country during his five-year tenure as president from 2005 to 2010. After Bakiyev was deposed, control of the drug trafficking market shifted to regular law enforcement structures, such as the police, who either directly participate in the trade or allow it to persist under their protection in return for bribes.⁴ Often times, people arrested for drug trafficking in Kyrgyzstan are those who try to operate independent of law enforcement. This system makes it less likely that the highest-ranking politicians in Kyrgyzstan can once again deploy or incite drug and criminal networks

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to carry out violent acts similar to the way Bakiyev and his family or clan are believed to have orchestrated the ethnic violence that occurred in 2010.⁵

However, the involvement of representatives of formal state institutions, such as the police, in the drug trade means continued corruption and little incentive for officials to change the status quo. Despite this, Kyrgyzstan still experiences significantly less drug-related violence than other countries along major drug trafficking routes—such as Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador, or the Golden Triangle countries of Burma and Laos—because the police have been able to maintain an equilibrium with sellers, buyers, and transporters.⁶ If other actors, such as militants based in Afghanistan and their networks in the Fergana Valley, wrest control of the drug trade from the state structures after the US withdrawal of most of its troops between 2014 and 2016, it could lead to increased turf wars and violence.⁷ Afghanistan-based violent extremist organizations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which have political objectives to overthrow or destabilize Central Asian governments, could present a significant security threat to the region, as they did in the late 1990s when they controlled key drug trafficking routes into the Fergana Valley.

Disaffected Youth

Disaffected youth, particularly ethnic Uzbeks, who suffered during the unrest in 2010, have become more likely to join religious extremist groups. The discrimination felt by Uzbeks during the violence of June 2010 resulted in many young Uzbek men and women in southern Kyrgyzstan believing that they were disfranchised, left with no room for their Uzbek identity and language. Many of them found the prospect of becoming a commander in a militant group and therefore “being a somebody” more appealing than staying at home without a job in an environment where they felt unwelcome.⁸ They also tended to believe that the government sided with the Kyrgyz in the 2010 clashes and were even complicit in allowing violence against Uzbeks. Like violent extremists in other countries, their lack of a sense of “belonging and validation” in Kyrgyzstan and emotional drivers, such as resentment against the Kyrgyz government, spurred their desire to join antigovernment organizations, often religious ones.⁹

The Grand Mufti in southern Kyrgyzstan said in 2011 that accusations of Uzbeks as “disloyal” and ethnic grievances—rather than religious factors—drove young Uzbeks into “militant migration.”¹⁰ Although religion itself was not the root cause for young Uzbeks to turn to violent extremism, these young Uzbeks increasingly framed the narrative of their differences with the Kyrgyz in religious terms. For example, they publicly questioned the “Islamic credentials” of the Kyrgyz and noted that many Kyrgyz women do not wear an Islamic headscarf (*hijab*) or pray five times a day. In other cases, they referred to the Kyrgyz as “mountain people,” implying that the Kyrgyz were not indigenous to the flat lands of Osh, Jalalabad, and the Fergana Valley.¹¹

Extremist religious organizations were quick to capitalize on this sentiment. Kyrgyzstan’s National Security State Service reported that four hundred young Uzbek men fled Kyrgyzstan for IMU training camps in Pakistan after the June 2010 riots. Since 2011, a disproportionate number of Uzbeks from southern Kyrgyzstan have also traveled to join the several hundreds of Central Asian militants in Syria.¹² Some of them claim to have gone to fight in Syria to receive military training in the hopes of preparing “for the next round with the Kyrgyz.”¹³ Hizb ut-Tahrir leaders in Osh also began capitalizing on the renewed religious sentiment by advocating a revolution to overthrow the “apostate regime” in Bishkek and to replace Kyrgyz nationalism with sharia (Islamic law). Hizb ut-Tahrir also reportedly provided money to families whose sons were “martyred” in Syria.¹⁴

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Group Recruitment

Violent extremist groups increased their recruitment efforts in Central Asia after 2010 and encouraged Kyrgyz citizens, particularly Uzbeks and women, to join jihads in Afghanistan and Syria. The continued instability and drug trafficking in Afghanistan as well as the US announcement in August 2010 that it would withdraw its troops from the country in 2014 gave these groups a “morale boost.”¹⁵ They also began to target women with an appeal to their traditional gender roles as wives and childbearers. Gradually, however, they elevated the status of women in their messaging by recognizing women as militants in their own right, thus reflecting a tone of empowerment.

Among the organized violent extremist groups in Kyrgyzstan that have been active since 2010, five are important.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation)

Founded by diaspora Palestinians in 1952, the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement recruited new members more actively than any other Central Asian violent extremist group after the violence in 2010. The movement first became active in Central Asia in the 1990s when the region opened its doors to foreign religious groups. At that time, it gained popularity among Central Asians who in the Soviet period did not study Islam and were attracted to Hizb ut-Tahrir’s promotion of the new idea of a “pure Islam” in which all Muslims are obliged to work toward the reestablishment of an Islamic Caliphate.

Although Hizb ut-Tahrir members rarely engaged in violence, Kyrgyzstan followed all of the other countries in Central Asia as well as Russia and China and banned the movement in 2006 on grounds that it preaches the overthrow of the secular government. All of the region’s governments are concerned about Hizb ut-Tahrir’s ideological and operational alliances with militant groups abroad. For example, a Hizb ut-Tahrir leader once stated that “[our] aims and the IMU are for the Caliphate in Central Asia, but the ways to achieve a Caliphate are different just as one doctor might use surgery while another uses herbs.”¹⁶ Hizb ut-Tahrir is also supporting the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, which may facilitate Hizb ut-Tahrir’s role in recruiting Kyrgyz citizens for the war in Syria.¹⁷

For Kyrgyz and other Central Asians who are interested in religion but have little knowledge about it because of the Soviet legacy of enforced atheism, Hizb ut-Tahrir’s claim of religious purity provides an attractive model. In addition, the group’s promotion of state-owned services and resources, such as public transport, health care, farmland, and “guaranteed employment for all citizens,” has appealed to “born-again Muslims” who rekindled their faith in the post-Soviet era.¹⁸ However, Hizb ut-Tahrir’s appeal has been particularly strong for Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan and southern Kyrgyzstan. This demographic group is attracted to the vision of a society that does not emphasize ethnicity, as well as to the prospect of a single Islamic state in Central Asia that would amalgamate Uzbeks with their compatriots in Uzbekistan and make Uzbeks the plurality in that state. Approximately 40 percent of Central Asians are Uzbeks. This is perhaps the main reason that Hizb ut-Tahrir recruitment saw a major uptick in recruitment in southern Kyrgyzstan after the alienation Uzbeks in the region felt in 2010.

However, since 2010, Hizb ut-Tahrir has also for the first time become active in recruiting in majority ethnic Kyrgyz areas of northern Kyrgyzstan. The lack of credible religious leaders to counter Hizb ut-Tahrir’s ideology is one reason for the movement’s success in northern Kyrgyzstan. The state religious institutions that do function are largely perceived as corrupt and an ineffective counterweight to Hizb ut-Tahrir. Since 2010, Kyrgyzstan has replaced its Grand Mufti six times, the fourth deposed in 2012 on tax-evasion charges and the fifth in 2014 after a video showed him engaging in sexual acts with a teenage woman on New Year’s Eve.

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As of 2013, it was reported that nearly 10 percent of Hizb ut-Tahrir's approximately forty thousand members in Kyrgyzstan were women and that the group offered financial stipends for unemployed women or women with multiple children whose husbands were absent.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's focus on recruiting women in Kyrgyzstan is significant. The movement believes that Central Asian women are the center of the family and can easily convince relatives to join and pass membership directly to their children. Women are also less likely to be suspected of spreading extremist messaging and can substitute for husbands who labor in Russia or are in prison. As of 2013, it was reported that nearly 10 percent of Hizb ut-Tahrir's approximately forty thousand members in Kyrgyzstan were women and that the group offered financial stipends for unemployed women or women with multiple children whose husbands were absent.¹⁹ Nonetheless, women who have defected from Hizb ut-Tahrir report that the male *amirs* (leaders) offer no opportunities for women to contest the movement's ideology, including its position that millions of Muslims and non-Muslims may need to be killed to create a Caliphate or that women must abide by conservative dress codes and cover themselves from head to toe.²⁰

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The most violent extremist group that has operated in Kyrgyzstan and continues to seek Kyrgyz recruits is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the international offshoot of which is the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The IMU emerged when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and orthodox Islamic scholars, who had received support from the Soviet government to discredit the more popular and liberal *hanafi* scholars, became active politically in the Fergana Valley region of Uzbekistan.²¹ Their young followers provided security and law enforcement and implemented a strict version of sharia in towns where the Soviet retreat left a power vacuum.

These youths later incorporated into their ranks vigilantes from throughout the Fergana Valley, including veterans from Islamist opposition groups in Tajikistan's civil war from 1992 to 1997. In 1998, they announced the formation of the IMU (previously the Adolat Uyushmasi, or Justice Union) and declared a jihad to overthrow the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and establish an Islamic state in the Fergana Valley.²² The IMU operated from bases in Tajikistan's portion of the Fergana Valley and received safe haven with the Taliban in Afghanistan. In 1999, the IMU carried out several attacks in Uzbekistan's capital of Tashkent, kidnapped the mayor of Batken and several hostages in southern Kyrgyzstan and released them for a \$500,000 ransom, and kidnapped an official from Japan's Interior Ministry and four Japanese geologists in Batken and released them for a ransom of over \$2 million. From 1999 until 2001, the IMU continued launching attacks in the Fergana Valley, which included kidnapping twelve mountain climbers, four of whom were Americans, in Batken who later escaped or were released after a secret payment. However, pressure from Uzbekistan's and Kyrgyzstan's air assaults on IMU positions forced the IMU to retreat to Afghanistan by September 2001. There it received permanent safe haven from the Taliban after IMU leader Tahir Yuldashev pledged loyalty to Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

In the wake of its invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the United States declared the IMU a terrorist organization and bombed IMU bases in northern Afghanistan. In 2002, the IMU fled to Pakistan, where it since has received safe haven from the Pakistani Taliban. Since 2010, however, US and NATO forces have increasingly reported IMU attacks in northern Afghanistan near the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The Pakistan Taliban and IMU have also jointly carried out several brazen attacks on prisons and airports in northern Afghanistan and Pakistan in the last several years. On May 31, 2013, to take one example, a suicide IMU operation involved two Uzbeks and one Kyrgyz national at the governor's office in the relatively peaceful city of Panjshir, north of Kabul.

After the violence in 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan that the IMU spokesman blamed on "global infidel conspiracies," the IMU adopted a strategy to recruit Central Asians, especially women. At first, the IMU targeted women as companions for Central Asian men who fled to

Afghanistan to join the IMU. IMU messaging, however, has shifted to portray women as militants in their own right:

- In 2011, a video showed the weddings of militants in the tribal regions of Pakistan and told mothers “not to be sad but proud” when their children reach “martyrdom.”
- In 2012, for the first time a video of a German-speaking woman with her face covered by a burka praised women’s role in jihad, and other videos recommended that women “marry fighters and raise their children with a jihadi upbringing.”
- In 2013, the first martyrdom video featuring a female suicide bomber was released.
- In 2014, the IMU complained about recruits “forgetting” about Afghanistan and Central Asia because of the Syrian conflict but continued to show women and children training in its videos.²³

The IMU declares that it will carry out “future conquests in the Mawarounnahr region”—an ancient name for modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. However, whether the IMU will be able shift from Pakistan and Afghanistan, where families are now “settled,” and return to Central Asia is an open question and also key concern. The IMU no longer has bases in the Fergana Valley as it did in the 1990s, but it is increasingly active in Badakhshan Province, along the Tajik border in northern Afghanistan, which is a key drug trafficking route into the Fergana Valley. The IMU’s current leaders are well-known drug traffickers rather than charismatic religious ideologues like Tahir Yuldashev and could regain influence in Central Asia through their drug trafficking proxies in the region and target recruits from extremist groups in the Fergana Valley.

In addition, the IMU offshoot, the IJU, was involved in a plot including Kazakh and Kyrgyz returnees from Syria in 2014. It planned to bomb the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Bishkek and carry out attacks on Kyrgyzstan’s Independence Day. That it did makes it clear that IMU and IJU are still a threat within Central Asia.²⁴

Jaysh al-Mahdi (Army of the Redeemer)

Jaysh al-Mahdi is the most recent violent extremist group to have carried out attacks in Kyrgyzstan since 2010. Its militants pledged allegiance to the Taliban in 2010 and killed several policemen in a Bishkek car bombing and bombed a Bishkek sports center in 2011. Its plans to attack a Jewish center were foiled, however.²⁵ Once its leader was arrested in Bishkek in 2012, the group ceased activity. The group remains notable, however, because it was fully homegrown, was composed of ethnic Kyrgyz, and obtained weapons and materials on the black market to carry out its deadly attacks.

Jamaat Ansarullah (Society of Supporters of God)

Jamaat Ansarullah is a militant group operating in Tajikistan and over the border in northern Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province. Many of its leaders fought for the IMU and for Islamist opposition groups during Tajikistan’s civil war, from 1992 to 1997. Tajik prosecutors allege that the IMU and Jamaat Ansarullah vie for the same recruiting pool of disaffected Tajik migrant workers in Russia, including those who returned home and are now jobless.

Jamaat Ansarullah first carried out an attack in 2010, when it claimed responsibility for an al-Qaeda-trained member’s suicide bombing at a police station in Khujand, a city in Tajikistan’s northern province of Sughd in the Fergana Valley. Sughd also includes two enclaves of Vorukh and Chorku, which are completely surrounded by Kyrgyz territory and are key drug storage and transit points that the IMU controlled in the late 1990s. In August 2014, Jamaat Ansarullah threatened to attack Kyrgyz border guards in these enclaves after a series of clashes between Kyrgyz and Tajik

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border guards and civilians on both sides of the border.²⁶ The statement suggests that Jamaat Ansarullah may seek to capitalize on Tajik nationalism and the growing anti-Kyrgyz sentiment in Sughd to recruit new members. Moreover, there is potential for the group to serve as an intermediary between traffickers in the IMU in Badakshan, Afghanistan, and those in Vorukh and Chorku while taking advantage of the minimal level of Tajik government control in the two enclaves.

Sipohi Kyrgyzstan (The Guard of Kyrgyzstan)

Sipohi Kyrgyzstan is newly formed in 2014, composed of ethnic Kyrgyz, and operates alongside Jamaat Ansarullah in Badakshan. Likely a small group, it deserves attention because of the possibility that the IMU or individual Kyrgyz and Tajik militants and drug trafficking cells will seek to establish a presence in Central Asia after the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan.²⁷

Lack of Education

Although discussion of violent extremism since 2010 has often focused on organized groups that use religion as the basis of their ideology to recruit members, it is important to recognize that under-education and ignorance are key factors that enable leaders to manipulate and mobilize people to carry out acts of violence. Many violent extremists in Kyrgyzstan, including those who participated in the 2010 unrest, do not operate under a formal group structure with group names, a clear leadership, membership requirements, or permanence. Kyrgyz often use the term *myrk* (loosely translated as ignoramus) to refer to the types of individuals prone to violent extremism because of their lack of education and unemployment, their abuse of drugs and alcohol, and the ease with which politicians, religious leaders, and the media can incite them to violence.

Myrks may be religious bigots, hyper-ethnic nationalists (including in some cases those loyal to Russia rather than Kyrgyzstan), male chauvinists, or a combination of multiple affiliations. Increasingly, these different types of groups come together and engage in violent extremist acts. What is called the Feminist SQ incident is an example of the synthesis of religious, nationalist, and male chauvinist forms of extremism: On March 8, 2014, which is International Women’s Day, Feminist SQ, a feminist organization run by a group of young human rights activists, attempted to raise awareness on the alarming growth of gender-based violence. At Osh Bazaar in Bishkek, which hosts networks of Tablighi Jamaat²⁸ members in addition to traders from all over the country, Feminist SQ prepared questions on women’s rights and provided brochures on violence prevention resources. After a short time, a mob of thirty people, mostly men, gathered around the event and started insulting members of Feminist SQ.

The mob had apparently confused the female gender symbol of Feminist SQ with that of a Christian cross and said to the young activists: “Why do you have crosses at your booth?” “Are you not Muslims?” “You see that kalpak? ²⁹ It makes me Kyrgyz. If you’re Kyrgyz, you must be Muslim!” They also stated that March 8th should not be celebrated because “it is not a Muslim holiday.” The men grabbed the activists, spit on them, and forced them to repeat verses from the Quran while publicly shaming them. The women in Feminist SQ tried to escape to a local district court building, but the court’s staff demanded they leave the building. When the police finally arrived and stopped the mob, some activists were reported to have been nearly beaten to death.

Myrks are also involved in the following types of activities:

- Participation in extremist ethno-nationalist and religious gangs—and sometimes a combination of the two—that beat up gays and women’s rights advocates for being too Western or non-Kyrgyz.
- Reviving polygamy and justifying “bride kidnapping” with the backing of unaccredited and often uneducated imams who bless such “marriages.” The myrks claim that such marriages are a Kyrgyz tradition. Nonconsensual marriage, however, was uncommon

in Kyrgyzstan until late in the Soviet period, when the costs of weddings and mutual family gift giving became exorbitant.³⁰ Some offer the Kyrgyz literary epic, *Manas*, as evidence that Kyrgyz culture never accepted kidnapping-for-marriage.³¹

- Producing videos for the Internet in which they bully, and in some cases beat, Kyrgyz women who have relationships with men of other nationalities.
- Joining the ranks of the approximately one hundred Kyrgyz youths, mostly from southern Kyrgyzstan, who have traveled to Syria and established “family jihad” communities with dozens of other Central Asians in northern Syria.³²

To many, the growing number of myrks in the country is of as much concern as the more structurally organized violent extremist religious groups that tend to gain most of the headlines in the international press.

Regional Powers

Finally, the violence of 2010 and subsequent developments in the states of the former Soviet Union highlight the role that regional powers play in creating conditions conducive to violent extremism or reducing the risk. With respect to Kyrgyzstan, the policies of China, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia are most important to understanding the level of concern about violent extremism in the region.

China

China is “winning with silence” in Central Asia while serving as the region’s “business broker.”³³ It has not responded to frustrations in Kyrgyzstan that Chinese companies, which have more than \$3 billion in contracts in the country, employ Chinese laborers at the expense of local labor and are swallowing up the region.³⁴ Political and economic elites in Central Asia nonetheless often see China’s massive infrastructure projects and willingness to put business ahead of politics as a welcome alternative to Russia’s coercive economic integration model and US programs that come with strings attached related to human rights and democracy. This has allowed China to gain increasing influence not only in Kyrgyzstan but throughout Central Asia as well.

Many of China’s initiatives to counter violent extremism, however, could have a negative impact if adopted in Kyrgyzstan. China’s security troubles in its westernmost region of Xinjiang, and the fear that Uighur militants will use Kyrgyzstan as a rear base, may lead China to pressure Kyrgyzstan to adopt policies in coordination with China and possibly through institutions of the Beijing-led SCO. China’s “antiterrorism crackdown” in 2014 has extended beyond suppressing militancy to also include imprisonment of antigovernment Uighur activists and their sympathizers. China also has programs that “test” whether government officials, including Muslim Uighurs, are “secular” (as mandated by law to serve in government) by, for example, providing free lunch during the fasting month of Ramadan and punishing those who do not eat.

Some evidence suggests that Kyrgyzstan may follow China’s directives, including potentially bad practices. For example, in January 2014, Kyrgyz border officials killed eleven Uighurs, who were crossing illegally into Kyrgyzstan from China, despite the lack of conclusive reports about whether the Uighurs were militants, hunters, or refugees.³⁵ Nonetheless, having China’s or the SCO’s support for programs to counter violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan could enhance their impact. Most of China’s policies are considered heavy-handed, but the provincial government in Xinjiang has shown open-mindedness and explored cartoons and other creative ideas to promote what it calls ethnic harmony among youth. Cooperation with China on countering violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan may thus prove beneficial in certain instances.

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Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the largest investor in Kyrgyzstan ahead of Turkey and China.³⁶ Its direct investments amount to more than \$1 billion in sectors such as banking, construction, and energy. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages are mutually intelligible, and the two countries share a 1,200-plus kilometer border and a nomadic history. Kazakhstan is thus a key stakeholder in Kyrgyzstan, though the two countries have what some may call a friendly rivalry.

What Kazakhstan has that Kyrgyzstan does not have is resources, a large landmass, and a clear-cut national program for progress. These differences are crucial insofar as they allow Kazakhstan to trade with and provide economic support to Kyrgyzstan, serve as a buffer between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, and offer Kyrgyzstan (as well as the region) a vision for the future—as embodied by Kazakhstan’s strategic plans for 2020, 2030, and 2050. Kazakhstan’s launch in 2013 of its own agency to provide official development assistance, Kaz Aid, as well as the hundreds of scholarships it provides to Afghan university students to study in Kazakhstan, shows that the country has a broader interest to project its influence to counter violent extremism and secure regional stability.

Moreover, Kazakhstan has shown leadership in founding the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2002. CICA brings together twenty-six member-states on the Asian continent—including states often at odds, such as Israel, Iran, Palestine, India, and Pakistan—and seven observer states, including the United States. It is another example of the role Kazakhstan can play in coordinating strategies for trust-building and conflict prevention in Central Asia and especially in Kyrgyzstan.

In spite of these economic strengths, Kazakhstan has seen elements of violent extremism, including in 2011 with the first series of terrorist attacks in the country. Most notable is the estimated 150 Kazakhs, including women and children, fighting or living in Syria and Iraq with the group that calls itself Islamic State (formerly ISIS). Kazakhstan would show strong initiative to partner with other countries in Central Asia to counter violent extremist ideology and recruitment.³⁷

Russia

Many Kyrgyz believe that Russia played a behind-the-scenes role in facilitating, if not directly inciting, the overthrow of Bakiyev in April 2010, which preceded the ensuing ethnic riots in June.³⁸ Russian President Vladimir Putin did not approve of Bakiyev seeking loans from China when Russia was offering Kyrgyzstan the same funding. Putin also did not approve of Bakiyev’s so-called pro-Western policies, such as allowing the United States to maintain a transit center for US troops moving in and out of Afghanistan in the town of Manas near Bishkek even after Bakiyev accepted \$450 million in aid from Russia to close down the same base (Bakiyev only downgraded the facility by calling it a transit center after receiving Putin’s aid).³⁹

According to many in the region, the 2010 overthrow of Bakiyev was a Russian-inspired Color Revolution to counter the uprisings that installed pro-Western politicians in Serbia in 2000 (Bulldozer Revolution), Georgia in 2003 (Rose Revolution), Ukraine in 2004 (Orange Revolution), and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (Tulip Revolution). Kyrgyz observers are concerned that if another Kyrgyz leader does not adopt pro-Russian policies, Russia could again respond with force to achieve its desired political objectives in Kyrgyzstan, much as it did in Ukraine in 2014. If this were to happen, civil war could result and allow violent extremists to increase their influence in the country.

Russia now holds rights to Manas Air Base near Bishkek, which the United States vacated in July 2014 when its lease expired, and stations troops at six other bases in Kyrgyzstan. Some

Kyrgyz observers fear that Russia will use its military presence to pressure Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors to fall in line with Russia's geopolitical objectives, including establishing a Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union in the former Soviet republics. Kazakhstan and Belarus joined in May 2014, and Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are expected to follow suit.

The Russian military presence raises the specter of Russian troops leaving these bases as part of a Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization response to a national or regional security crisis—whether real or manufactured. Kyrgyz observers can foresee Russia fomenting a Crimea-like scenario that requires military intervention to “protect” any of the several pro-Russian government regions of Central Asia, such as northern Kyrgyzstan. Other such regions include Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan, northern Kazakhstan, and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast in Tajikistan. At the very least, Russia's widespread military presence in Kyrgyzstan is a deterrent to the Kyrgyz government's becoming too close to the West, and the threat of instability in the country could open up an avenue for violent extremism similar to the unrest in 2010 after Bakiyev's ouster.

Uzbekistan

Kyrgyzstan saw in 2010 that Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, does not prioritize “defending” Uzbeks who want to flee southern Kyrgyzstan or are affected by violence there. Since 2010, Uzbekistan has closed most border points with Kyrgyzstan to prevent outflows of migrants from Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan, and Karimov has not overtly spoken out on behalf of diaspora Uzbeks. There is concern in Kyrgyzstan, however, that a successor to Karimov may be more inclined to boost his (or her) legitimacy by appealing to pan-Uzbek nationalism and intervening militarily in Kyrgyzstan to “protect” Uzbeks in the event of another ethnic or political crisis or after a border conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and possibly in coordination with an external power like Russia. Any such incursion could, as in 2010, create a power vacuum that provides openings for violent extremism.

Despite rivalries with Uzbekistan and the potential for state conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the two countries have various ways to collaborate in countering violent extremism. Uzbekistan, for example, has implemented a program in which youths convicted of crimes are placed under the guidance of a local *mahalla* (neighborhood) religious leader rather than being sent to prison. This program prevents the potential for prison recruitment and radicalization and offers youth a second chance.⁴⁰ Kyrgyzstan, which has seen groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir recruiting in its prisons, could benefit from sharing knowledge on such a program with Uzbekistan.⁴¹ At the same time, Uzbekistan's often overreaching counterterrorism policies that target the political opposition as security threats are believed to lead to further radicalization and would need to be resisted by Kyrgyz counterparts.

The Golden Middle

Many leaders in Kyrgyzstan's religious, academic, and civil society communities recognize that the country is vulnerable to violent extremism. They observe that people in Kyrgyzstan are becoming increasingly religious and that violent extremism organizations are taking advantage of this interest after seventy years of Soviet-styled atheism. They also note the lack of knowledge about religion and how such groups “instrumentalize” religious themes in their recruitment and activities.⁴² Although past instances of violence, such as the clashes in Osh in 2010, involved mostly ethno-nationalists and criminal networks, concerns now are that violent extremist organizations will use the pretense of religion to galvanize myrks and others in any future breakouts of violence.

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Afghan Scenario

Between 2014 and 2016, the United States will be withdrawing most of its troops from Afghanistan. Because the Afghan political and security situation are, in late 2014, showing signs of further instability, the Taliban could take control of some areas of the country, just as antigovernment militants did in Iraq after the US withdrawal in 2011. The Taliban could acquire some of the \$6 billion of arms and weaponry that the United States is leaving to the Afghan national security forces. Whether the Taliban would target Central Asia with these weapons is a subject of debate. Some Central Asian and Pakistani analyses suggest that Central Asian violent extremist groups like the IMU would take advantage of the Taliban's coming to power and target Central Asia. According to this view, even if the Taliban tries to establish economic and diplomatic relationships with Central Asian governments to enhance the Taliban's legitimacy and international recognition, Central Asian militants may operate independently of the Taliban and pursue their own strategies.⁴³

In Kyrgyzstan, the main issue is not so much who will come to power in Afghanistan, but how continued instability there could fuel drug and arms trafficking into southern Kyrgyzstan's Fergana Valley. The Taliban, IMU, and allied militant and criminal groups, such as Jamaat Ansarullah, could forge alliances based on mutual economic interests—if not ideologies—with politicians who want a return of power to the south and the economic and political advantages that come with such power. Osh and, in particular, the two Tajik enclaves in southern Kyrgyzstan, Chorku and Vorukh, are notorious drug trafficking hubs that militants in northern Afghanistan rely on as much as some southern Kyrgyz leaders do.

If Central Asian militants and criminals and anti-Bishkek politicians come together, it could create a perfect storm of forces that leads to the ouster of the northern government in Bishkek, similar to 2010 but with more violence. This scenario of criminal, political, and marginalized ethnic militias coming together to oust a government is what happened in Mali in 2012. That conflict began when weapons from stockpiles of deposed Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi flowed to minority ethnic Tuareg militias in northern Mali, who felt marginalized by the central government based in the south of the country. They recommenced a rebellion to oust the government from its garrisons in the north, but within months, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allied militias established alliances with local northern politicians and religious leaders, defeated the Tuareg militias, and occupied northern Mali. The conflict was finally defused in February 2013 when France led a coalition of countries in West Africa to force AQIM out of the region and restore peace through a tenuous new power-sharing agreement.

Focus on Wahhabism

Kyrgyz religious and civil society leaders also tend to be concerned about the role of foreign-imported religious ideologies and religious groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir in indoctrinating youths who have little knowledge of religion and creating an opening for recruitment into violent extremist organizations. Consider the role of *wahhabism* in Kyrgyzstan.

One of the most contentious newer religious influences in Kyrgyzstan is wahhabism, which connotes in particular the Saudi state-sponsored religion and is often called *salafism* elsewhere. It is a highly conservative interpretation of Islam that first spread in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s when Persian Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia began to fund the construction of mosques and madrasas throughout Central Asia. It calls for Islamic practice based on the ways of the *salafs*, or devout followers of Islam's Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, is hostile toward Sufism and syncretic brands of Islam that combine elements of local tradition, and allows followers to practice *takfir* (labeling people as non-Muslims and, in some cases, legitimizing their murder).

Central Asian governments often consider anyone who practices Islam outside official structures as a wahhabist, implying that their religious inspiration is not native to Central Asia. Many Central Asians also consider wahhabist rejection of secularism and other schools of Islam, including Central Asia's most widespread school, *hanafism*, to be a threat to traditional culture. For example, wahhabists in Kyrgyzstan, including Tablighi Jamaat members, often preach that Kyrgyz should adopt Arab-Islamic names; wear hijab or niqab for women or grow a beard for men; abstain from nationalistic music, dance, and sports; and follow conservative social mores that exclude women from public life. This latter approach toward women, in particular, stands in stark contrast to the elevated role of women during the Soviet period and the role of women in nomadic Kyrgyz society.⁴⁴

The growing numbers of wahhabists in Kyrgyzstan are often youth who are recruited in the hundreds of unregulated and Pakistani- and Middle Eastern-funded madrasas in the country or who receive scholarships for religious training abroad in South Asia or the Middle East and return home. The belief is widespread that these madrasas carry a hidden agenda to teach youth extremist ideology and facilitate their transport and entry to Syria. According to the head imam in Kara Suu, near Osh, "Wahhabist imams promote themselves as experts because of their knowledge of Arabic, Internet skills, and veneer of profound knowledge of Islam," but they succeed only because their propaganda and its ideology are not being contested.⁴⁵

An expert formerly with UN Women in Bishkek says that wahhabist institutions are growing because of the absence of government-funded programs that provide similar educational or social services, especially to youth whose parents are laborers in Russia, and that the wahhabists target women for the same reasons that Hizb ut-Tahrir does. Wahhabist institutions, however, often teach only religious education and minimal Arabic language, so students are left largely unprepared for the types of jobs needed to prosper in a modern economy. Women are particularly vulnerable because of a vicious cycle that the expert at UN Women identified: Extremist imams teach men that women are less valuable than men; men then abuse women; and finally women seek help from the same extremist imams, who encourage them to join extremist groups that have little respect for women's rights.

Combating Intolerance

One way to combat violent extremists who use religious rhetoric to recruit followers is through dialogue between leaders in the secular and religious communities. Leaders and influential members of these communities have not only the power to develop solutions to countering violent extremism at the local level but also networks and influence with policymakers in Kyrgyzstan (and in the region) to affect the way the country addresses violent extremism.

Jamila Frontbek, one of Kyrgyzstan's most ardent supporters of the rights of women to wear hijab in public and founder of a Muslim women's nongovernmental organization, explains that the lack of education about religion and religious practices provides fertile ground for extremist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir to claim that their textual interpretation of religious doctrine is "pure" and "correct." Specifically, at the time of the inauguration of the Scientific Research Institute for the Study of Islam in Bishkek in June 2014, an official in Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry acknowledged that the country "does not have enough of a scholarly basis [on religion] for work to fight against extremism." The institute's director, Mаметбек Myrzabayev, said that "the popularization of alien religious ideas and views is a challenge facing our society." Nazira Kurbanova, a history professor at Arabaev University in Bishkek and renowned regional expert on women and extremism, observed that extremism can only be combated effectively with new ideas that counter those of the extremists.

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Not only do these experts see the need for understanding religion and its role in society as an approach to countering violent extremism, Kyrgyz youth also express the need for a new approach rooted in educating society at large. At the Kyrgyz National University's tenth Peace Game, held in Bishkek on June 25, 2014, which Myrzabayev and Kurbanova attended, a twenty-one-year-old student from Batken in southern Kyrgyzstan, Nurtay, shared his view with forty other students and dozens of spectators and ten judges.⁴⁶ He said that extremism is spreading, especially as the result of the Internet, but it is also important for secular people with little or no religious background to understand that "Islam is not another word for extremism."

One of the largest hurdles in countering violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan is the mistrust between religious people and secular communities. One reason for this mistrust, suggested Nurtay at the Peace Game, is that "people confuse religion and extremism because they grew up during the Soviet period when religion was outlawed and considered an evil." Nurtay was referring to secularists who follow the Soviet legacy of *svetski*, a "state without faith." During the Soviet period, the government sought the elimination of Islamic religious life from the public view but condoned religion in the home and family life. As a result, "proper Muslim behavior" and religious observance revolved largely around rituals, such as circumcision ceremonies and funerals. Many Kyrgyz associated Muslim-ness with their ethno-national identity as Kyrgyz but did not believe that participation in public practices, such as daily prayer in the mosque or fasting during Ramadan, were required for one to be Muslim. Even self-avowed atheists claimed to be Muslim so long as they participated in religious life through rituals.⁴⁷

The Muslim civil society groups in Kyrgyzstan today, however, now tend to take a more conservative view. Their promotion of public displays of religion, such as women wearing hijab or men growing a beard, are sometimes considered threatening to secularists, who fear a younger generation whose way of experiencing Islam is much different than during the Soviet era. It is common, for example, for secularists to express fear when they see their children "are becoming interested in religion." Nurtay explained at the Peace Game "that secular people tend to see extremism as a woman wearing hijab or a man growing a long beard." Those who adhere to these religious practices, however, claim that the secularists are intolerant and want to return the country to the Soviet era. They suggest that antireligious attitudes, too, can be a form of extremism.

However, both of the secular and religious constituencies have a strong interest in countering violent extremism, a problem they both acknowledge exists and is at risk of growing. Neither want the various violent extremist groups in the country to continue to operate without their ideas or methods being countered. They recognize a mutual problem and are willing to work together to better define how violent extremism differs from tolerant, or moderate, religiosity and to develop strategies to combat the exploitation of religion by extremist groups. This cooperation between secular and religious communities in Kyrgyzstan is what one young female religious student described as finding the "golden middle" (*zlotaya ceredina*) between Kyrgyz nomadic traditions and the contemporary religious trends to counter violent extremism.

Recommendations

- International organizations, such as the OSCE and NATO, should explore potential opportunities to coordinate counter violent extremism programs and educational initiatives with other regional organizations, such as the CICA.
- The US government should support the efforts of Kyrgyzstan to maintain sovereignty and should work with Kyrgyz universities, think tanks, and civil society to empower women to play a leading role in countering violent extremism and preventing conflict.
- The Kyrgyz government and civil society organizations should work with international partners, including the US government, and neighboring governments, religious and civil

society groups in Central Asia to identify best practices at countering violent extremist ideology and warding off intolerant influences entering the region from abroad.

- The Kyrgyz government should promote a national identity inclusive of various religious, cultural, and ethnic affiliations and convey this from the top levels of government to the most local and marginalized communities.
- Secular and religious people should begin dialogues to better define violent extremism in the context of Kyrgyzstan and to develop strategies to combat violent extremism in coordination with groups often overlooked in such efforts, especially women from remote areas and youth.
- Women civil society leaders should find ways to strengthen the capacity of families, especially among mothers, to better understand signs of radicalization of youth in their communities and to develop community-based approaches to addressing such concerns.
- Religious leaders should provide examples that distinguish hanafi and other tolerant brands of Islam from less tolerant approaches and develop ideas and methods with secular and religious experts for countering the intolerant ideas of violent extremist groups.
- Experts on countering violent extremism should work with civil society groups in Kyrgyzstan to share their knowledge of violent extremism and ways to incorporate CVE interventions into human rights, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding projects.
- Youth should develop ways to identify extremist ideology on the Internet and exercise their creative ideas to launch campaigns to promote tolerance and diversity.

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