



Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalisation

Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°83
Osh/Bishkek/Brussels, 3 October 2016

I. Overview

Kyrgyzstan models itself as Central Asia's only parliamentary democracy, but multiple challenges threaten its stability. Divided ethnically between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and geographically north and south, the state is deeply corrupt and fails to deliver basic services, in particular justice and law enforcement. Its political institutions are under stress: the October 2015 parliamentary elections had a veneer of respectability but were undermined by systematic graft at the party and administrative level, and presidential elections will test state cohesion in 2017. The 30 August suicide car bomb attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek underscored Kyrgyzstan's security vulnerabilities. There is need to prevent and counter the threat of growing radicalisation by bolstering the credibility of its institutions and adopting a more tolerant attitude toward non-violent Islamists.

In the absence of political pluralism, a reliable state and economic opportunities, growing numbers of citizens are taking recourse in religion. Islam has become a central factor in public life since the end of the Soviet era. The 39 mosques of 1990 are more than 2,300 today. Islamic civil society organisations, more than doubled since 2000, increasingly substitute the state in providing services. They promote a variety of versions of Islam: some are tolerant; others much less so. While they partly fill the vacuum created by state weakness and corruption, they focus on religious and social matters; few are politically active. Nonetheless, as instability and religious radicalisation deepen, Islam and politics increasingly intersect. It is not that a single form of political Islam is on the rise, but different parts of the population are associating faith with identity in ways that can fuel political polarisation or looking to it for answers when state institutions fail them. This can lead to increasingly radical forms of Islam and in some cases violent extremism.

Many ethnic Kyrgyz are attracted to nationalism and treat religion as part of their national identity. The state endorses a form of Islam based on the moderate Hanafi tradition common in Central Asia and treats Salafism as a threat. However, some economically or socially marginalised Kyrgyz seem drawn to more radical, often imported or externally sponsored, versions of Islam due to alienation from the state or desire for moral support. Poor education enhances vulnerability to teachings of so-called non-traditional Islam, and unemployment feeds feelings of defiance. This is also true for many ethnic Uzbek citizens of Kyrgyzstan, who are frequently poorly

integrated and inadequately represented in politics, the civil service and security organs, from whom they often face prejudice.

Both Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks are often drawn to stringent versions of Islam and even consider Syria for personal and social reasons, not to pursue a domestic agenda. There is growth of strong religious feelings among women of both ethnicities, who face even greater social or economic disadvantages or domestic abuse, and an uptick in their numbers looking to Syria.

While Kyrgyz nationalists claim ethnic Uzbeks turn to extremist Islam for political reasons and revenge for 2010, when more than 400 mostly Uzbeks were killed in ethnic violence, there is growing evidence that both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are finding recourse in more radical forms of Islam. Thousands of both are being drawn to non-violent Islamist groups, such as the proscribed Hizb ut-Tahrir, but some are also attracted to more violent ideologies and groups.

The government says some hundreds of citizens fight with the Islamic State (IS) or other jihadists in Syria. Social workers and community activists cite numerous cases of ethnic Uzbek women and youths who go or have planned to go (some have been detained). IS and its Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) ally treat Kyrgyzstan as a recruiting ground, as prolific online propaganda shows.

IS has not claimed responsibility for an incident in Kyrgyzstan, and the attack on the Chinese embassy was linked to an al-Nusra affiliated Uzbek-led group in Syria and Uighur separatists. The security services claim regularly to have foiled IS plots, and security sources have alleged a Hizb ut-Tahrir tie to ethnic Uzbek separatist plans. But the assertions are sometimes unsubstantiated and appear to be justification for the harassment of already marginalised communities. As the security services use shoot-to-kill tactics in many operations, real intelligence is lacking. Police torture and extortion are well documented, especially in the southern provinces.

At the least, however, the trend lines are worrying. The rise of Islamic organisations as service providers reflects state failure to deliver on basic issues. The widespread tendency of many Kyrgyz and Uzbeks but also authorities to link faith issues to political loyalty and identity exacerbates the risk religious arguments and divisions will become bound up in ethnic frictions or used to justify further severity against Uzbeks in particular. The mix of state fragility and ethnic frictions can potentially drive Kyrgyzstan's marginalised citizens toward banned organisations.

Instead of papering over regional and ethnic fault lines, the state should encourage more open debate on sensitive issues. Closing dialogue with religious groups and criminalising believers outside a narrow definition of state-approved Islam is short sighted. It should engage religious leaders, male and female, ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz, to reduce divides that contribute to radicalisation and not pinpoint radicalisation as more sinister among Uzbeks than Kyrgyz. And it should resist demands that could compromise rights of women, minorities and children.

II. Filling the Vacuum: Religion in Kyrgyzstan¹

Islam has been prominent in public and private life since the Soviet era ended. There has been a near 60-fold increase in registered mosques, some built by local businessmen, others funded by Turkey and Saudi Arabia.² While sanctioning traditional Hanafi Islam and working with the state-approved Muftiate's self-governing council, the government expresses concern about the rise of non-traditional Islam, which has numerous names – Salafi, fundamentalist, Arabic, Wahhabi – and is closely associated with Saudi support. There is wide belief in society that non-traditional Islam is gaining support of youth at the expense of the Kyrgyz national identity and that this has potential political implications.³ In 2014, a new government position on religion recognised “extremism” as a threat to the state (see Section V below). 1,945 extremists (7.4 per cent women), were registered with the internal affairs ministry in 2015. The security services say 508 men, women and children – 70 per cent ethnic Uzbeks, 24.9 per cent women of both ethnicities – have left for Syria, but privately indicate this is an underestimate.⁴

The actual threat Salafism, but more specifically violent jihadist groups linked to IS, pose is contentious, complicated by unreliable security-service claims and ethnic rifts. Certain is that religious groups of varied ideology increasingly fill a vacuum created by state failure to offer effective services, religious issues are becoming tied into high Kyrgyz-Uzbek tensions since the 2010 violence (Section III.A) and marginalised women of both ethnicities are turning to religion as a coping mechanism. Its activity may still be limited, but IS appears to be targeting Kyrgyzstan for recruiting, as repressive government responses exacerbate tensions.

A. *The Decline of Secular Authority*

Socio-economic factors are important in the growth of both traditional and more radical forms of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. A senior Muftiate member said radical groups “recruit in places where people are suppressed and subjected to violence, social injustice and economic problems”.⁵ Religious leaders, teachers and security officials in all seven provinces highlighted lack of educational opportunities, secular and religious, as a national concern and identified decline of services, poor governance and ethnic tensions as the context in which radicalisation occurs. Religious youths, even university graduates, are discriminated against.⁶ The lack of reform feeds anti-establish-

¹ This briefing, based on research in all seven Kyrgyzstan provinces, with focus on the south, ethnic communities and women, was conducted October 2015-April 2016.

² “Концепция государственной политики Кыргызской Республики в религиозной сфере на 2014-2020 годы” [“The concept of the state policy ... in the religious sphere for 2014-2020”], presidential website.

³ Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking official, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁴ “В ЦА МВД КР Состоялось Заседание Общественного Совета по Вопросам Экстремизма и Терроризма” [“Public Council Session on Extremism and Terrorism Issues ... in ... internal affairs ministry”], press release, 22 December 2015. In 2005, women were 1.1 per cent. “508 кыргызстанцев находятся в зонах боевых действий” [“508 Kyrgyz citizens in combat zones”], *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 15 January 2016.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, December 2015.

⁶ Crisis Group field research, imams, female religious and community leaders, teachers, local and senior politicians, civil servants, analysts, students, academics and security services, Batken, Bishkek, Chui, Issyk Kul, Jalalabad, Naryn, Osh and Talas, October 2015-April 2016.

ment sentiment, particularly among young people and lends credence to criticism of the government.

Since the Soviet collapse, the social and physical infrastructure has become threadbare. The health and education sectors are outdated, underfunded and riddled with corruption. Confidence in the similarly afflicted police and courts is low.⁷ The average monthly salary is 13,649 soms (roughly \$190), and just under a third of the six million citizens live below the poverty line.⁸ The UN Development Programme (UNDP) estimates annual corruption at \$700 million, some 11 per cent of GDP. Unemployment, masked by seasonal, often agricultural jobs and migration to Russia, is officially 8 per cent, but in reality much higher.

With earning a wage outsourced in effect to Russia, remittances were 30.3 per cent of GDP in 2014, but their dollar value declined by 25 per cent in 2015 due to the som's fall. Officially, 458,660 work in Russia, but experts suggest the true number is closer to one million. The economic lifeline is vital. "Our country is saved by migration", a social worker from Batken explained, "but it has destroyed the family as an institution, and children are left behind".⁹

The poorly performing government and its institutions have been unable to repair the damage to public confidence that resulted from the political turmoil of 2005, when President Askar Akayev was ousted, and 2010. As the ability to provide essential services drops, Islamic organisations step in.¹⁰

Kyrgyzstan, like other ex-Soviet republics, experienced a post-independence resurgence of long-suppressed national and religious identities. The national identity question causes friction in a multi-ethnic state, however, and a common religious identity is not powerful enough to bridge tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, though both have turned to religion in increasing numbers.¹¹

⁷ Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 150, *Kyrgyzstan: The Challenge of Judicial Reform*, 10 April 2008; 201, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, 3 February 2011; Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°76, *Kyrgyzstan: An Uncertain Trajectory*, 30 September 2015.

⁸ The poverty line is 31,573 soms (about \$450) per year. "Poverty Level in the Kyrgyz Republic", National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, June 2016.

⁹ "Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)", World Bank, 2014. "Итоги социально-экономического развития в январе 2016г. представлены в ходе пресс-конференции" ["Socio-economic development January 2016"], National Statistical Committee, 10 February 2016. "Break the Corruption Chain Campaign Starts in Kyrgyzstan", UNDP, 9 December 2014; "Информация об итогах социально-экономического развития Кыргызской Республики за 2015 год" ["Social-economic development"], economy ministry. "В Кыргызстане насчитывается более 200 тыс. безработных" ["There are more than 200,000 unemployed"], Kabar, 25 March 2016. "Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook", Migration and Development Brief 26, World Bank Group, April 2016. "Сведения в отношении иностранных граждан, находящихся на территории Российской Федерации, в половозрастном разрезе (по странам гражданства)" ["Factsheet, foreign nationals in Russia by gender (by nationality)"], Federal Migration Service, Russia, 5 April 2016. Some 39 per cent of migrants are female. Crisis Group interview, Osh, March 2016.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, 20 January 2015.

¹¹ Ethnic, linguistic and religious composition has changed since the Soviet collapse. In the 1989 census, ethnic Kyrgyz were 52 per cent of a 4.36 million population, Russians 22 per cent and Uzbeks 13 per cent. Russian was the main city and town language, Kyrgyz native language for most ethnic Kyrgyz. Russians were mainly in the north and bigger southern cities. Uzbeks have historically been in the Ferghana Valley, Osh and Jalalabad provinces. The National Statistics Committee said

B. Religion and Local Fault Lines

The service-provision role of Islamic organisations underscores governmental shortcomings and lack of credibility and has long-term political and social implications. Since 2000, Islamic civil society entities have more than doubled, to over 2,000. Some have liberal outlooks; others are led by people who would support imposition of Sharia (Islamic law).¹² Concerns about alleged Saudi funding were used in part to justify proposals to control the NGO sector more strictly.¹³ Crisis Group, however, has found no indications of links to groups promoting violence. Some NGOs, but not all, could be useful in preventing the growth of extremism, but efforts to build an inclusive civil society should also be part of a broader political strategy.

Increasingly families opt to have even crimes dealt with by local or religious leaders rather than the police and courts.¹⁴ This indicates deep lack of confidence in if not rejection of the state. Many institutions that step in for the state are local NGOs, whose work communities widely appreciate. But some have unclear funding and promote a strict Salafi doctrine the government considers threatening not only the moderate Hanafi Islamic tradition, but also the state itself, which cannot control its growth and reach. A former senior official said, “we are very concerned with visible Islamisation All sorts of tendencies, all currents have come to us Saudis think we are under their wing Turks operate with Arab money Democracy gave Islamists an opportunity; I fear this”.¹⁵

A 2013 nationwide survey of NGO leaders found 20 per cent approval of Sharia, with support strongest in the south.¹⁶ The rising interest in Islamic law and governance can be partly attributed to a perception that the slow, corrupt secular system does not dispense justice.¹⁷ An Islamic activist working with women said:

People see there is no justice and conclude it can only be found in God. Islam gives them a framework to behave, tells them how to live, what is wrong and right and gives direction. You can't find that in real life now; [they] are lost.¹⁸

the 2014 population was 5.89 million: 72.8 per cent Kyrgyz, 14.5 per cent Uzbek, 6.2 per cent Russian. Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are Muslim, Russians mostly Orthodox Christian.

¹² “Состояние и перспективы развития неправительственного сектора Кыргызстана – Отчет по исследованию” [“The State and Perspectives of Development of Non-Governmental Sector of Kyrgyzstan”], The Association of Civil Society Support Centers, 2013. “Неправительственные организации и процессы принятия решения органами власти” [“NGOs and Decision-making Processes of the Institutions of Authority”], National Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2014.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Western official, Bishkek, December 2015.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, November 2015.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, UN official, ex-senior official, Bishkek, November 2015, April 2015. Emil Nasritdinov and Nurgul Esenamanova, “Религиозная безопасность в Кыргызской Республике” [“Religious security in Kyrgyzstan”], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014.

¹⁶ “Состояние и перспективы развития неправительственного сектора Кыргызстана – Отчет по исследованию” [“The State and Perspectives of Development of the NGO Sector”], Association of Civil Society Support Centres, 2013. Highest support was in Batken, 62 per cent, Osh, 44 per cent and Chui, 29 per cent. 48 per cent “absolutely”, 24 per cent “rather” disagreed. A 2016 survey found every sixth NGO head surveyed of 314 organisations believed laws must comply with Sharia; one in three did not support democracy. These views were most prevalent among newer NGOs. Medet Tuulegenov, “Гражданское общество Кыргызстана: как часто о нем говорят и чemoно становится?” [“Civil society: how often is it talked about, what is it becoming”], AKIpress, 13 May 2016.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Kyrgyzstan: The Challenge of Judicial Reform*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Naryn, March 2016.

There is risk that frustration with government may blur the line between socially useful Islamic activism and extremist ideologies. The appeal of strict interpretations of Islam and of banned organisations as diverse as IS and the non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir lies partly in the hope they can bring order out of chaos and is not confined to marginalised communities. Educated urban youth dissatisfied with the state may also see radical Islam as an alternative. A university teacher said some students support IS with no apparent consideration of its brutality. They may never be motivated to violence, but their tacit support is worrying: “I have [students] who support [IS], they admire and support what they do. They say they are the groups who will finally install order. They think they are fighting for justice ... [and] are trying to create a just and fair Muslim caliphate”.¹⁹

C. *Education*

Many parents send children to religious schools due to the state system’s falling standards, corruption and a learning environment some see as violent, because of rampant bullying. Younger teachers are perceived to have bought their credentials. Elderly, experienced teachers are nearing retirement, and because the salary is as low as 6,000-7,000 soms a month (\$90-\$110), few graduates consider a teaching career.²⁰

Trust between the state system and parents is broken. Many parents want religion and ethics incorporated into the curriculum and discrimination ended against girls with headscarves. An increasing number choose withdrawal from the system. Religious leaders stress that both secular and religious education are vital. A northern imam said, “secular school quality has dropped drastically. That has to change, or we will have more and more parents willing to send their kids to madrasas”.²¹ The state must find a way to help religious parents and their children value secular education; the Muftiate should make clear that girls deserve equal opportunities. Formally ending the not always observed scarf prohibition in secondary schools would help enforce religious women’s right to education.

D. *Social and Economic Factors*

Society has been adversely impacted by unemployment, migration and a trend of fewer women in the work force. The children of economic migrants are often left with extended family who may not have resources to care for them.²² A social worker said few families escape economic hardship:

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, political science lecturer, Bishkek, October 2015.

²⁰ “Some kids decide to come to madrasa themselves; others are sent by parents. The reasons are obvious: they want to improve their behaviour and protect them from the negative activities in the secular school We have racketeering and fights in schools, even girls do that Schools can’t control them”. Crisis Group interview, female religious teacher, Talas, March 2016. “The education system is so bad; teachers are not qualified because they bought qualifications I am really afraid for our future”. Crisis Group interview, female religious student, Batken, March 2016. Crisis Group interviews, social workers, Osh, March 2016.

²¹ “Teachers still give lesser grades to the girls with headscarves”. Crisis Group interview, female religious teacher, Talas, March 2016. Crisis Group interview, Karakol, Issyk Kul, March 2016.

²² Irina Malyuchenko, “Labour Migration from Central Asia to Russia: Economic and Social Impact on the Societies of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan”, Central Asia Security Policy Brief 21, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Academy, Bishkek, February 2015.

There are entire villages in Nookat, Aravan, Batken and Leilek districts where almost every family has at least two or three members working abroad. They leave their children to brothers, sisters, parents, and they are without any supervision and control. Nobody cares for the behaviour part of their upbringing. Even parents here in Kyrgyzstan don't pay attention to their children; they are busy trying to make a living and to support their families.²³

Economic opportunities for youths is a nationwide issue impacting Kyrgyz and Uzbek alike. Successive governments have relied on migration as a safety valve, while masking their failure to develop the economy. Kyrgyzstan has neither the technical or skills base to make swift improvements, but the government and donors should focus as a short- to medium-term measure on keeping children in school and making technical- and third-level education more accessible.

Religion's role in young people's lives reflects stark choices: no jobs and role by which to define themselves, or something to do and respect from an authoritative peer group.²⁴ The government and donors should support the valuable local work of religious groups that espouse non-violent, non-discriminatory views. It is no substitute for economic empowerment but is an outlet for youths who might otherwise be attracted to radical ideas and banned groups.

III. **Recourse in Islam: Ethnic Divides**

Both ethnic groups take recourse in religion, but the trend is entangled with Kyrgyz-Uzbek tensions. Against the backdrop of a deep ethnic and regional divide, religious Uzbeks are widely portrayed as a threat to the state's integrity, while in politics dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz, Islam has been incorporated into the "patriotic" identity in a way that justifies patriarchal Kyrgyz traditions. Secular Uzbeks consider newly post-Soviet devout Kyrgyz the group most likely to hold rigid Islamic views.²⁵ Their identity has a distinct anti-Western, anti-liberal bias that resonates with trends in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union (though in many of these places traditional values are embodied by Orthodox Christianity). Women's rights have been undermined, debate about their social role punctuated by remarks that even highly educated ones such as judges should stay at home.²⁶

Though different reasons motivate Kyrgyz and Uzbeks to use radical and extremist ideologies to bolster their social and political identities, there are common threads. Recruitment is broadly similar for ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz and women. Unofficial *jamaats* (prayer groups), peer groups, family and social media all play roles, as does migration for Uzbek and Kyrgyz men.²⁷

The ouster of President Bakiyev, a southerner, and ethnic violence in 2010 illustrated a fault line between not just Kyrgyz and Uzbek, but also north and south. Many

²³ Crisis Group interview, Osh, March 2016.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, politician, Bishkek, September 2014.

²⁵ Ibid. Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Aravan, April 2015.

²⁶ Nurzada Tynaeva, "Исхак Масалиев указал на феминизацию судебной системы Кыргызстана" ["Ishak Masaliev pointed out the feminisation of the judicial system"], Knews, 12 April 2016. Videos have been posted on social media of Kyrgyz men attacking female migrants in Russia for dating foreigners.

²⁷ Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria Calling*, op. cit.

ethnic Kyrgyz in both regions accept that Uzbeks harbour separatist ambitions, but there are other aspects to the dichotomy. Many northern Kyrgyz suspect southern Kyrgyz of seeking to monopolise power; their elite often portrays them as less educated and sophisticated, more prone to crime and overly influenced by Uzbek culture. Many southern Kyrgyz resent this. Many politicians, north and south, call the geographical divide a third-party ruse to destroy Kyrgyz unity. Practically, however, the dichotomy is illustrated by the way political power and crucially the presidency have alternated between northern and southern leaders.²⁸

A. Ethnic Uzbeks

An Islamic identity is deeply rooted in Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbek community, yet some Kyrgyz frame Uzbeks' faith as a form of dissent and threat to the state. Even before 2010, the relationship between the state and devout Uzbeks was tense.²⁹ While ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks both follow the Hanafi school, the historical development of their Islamic identity has been different.³⁰ In 2010, after Bakiyev's ouster, ethnic tensions spilled over in Osh and Jalalabad amid allegations that Uzbeks wanted to secede. The violence left 470 dead, almost three quarters ethnic Uzbeks, and more than 2,800 homes destroyed, mostly Uzbek; 75 per cent of the detained were Uzbek. The security forces' role in the violence is murky.³¹ Uzbeks, some 14.5 per cent of the population, have since retreated before the abuse of the predominately Kyrgyz police and from many areas of public life. That they brought violence on themselves, and "patriotic" Kyrgyz blocked secession is a fixed narrative among Kyrgyz.³²

Despite sharing the same faith, animosity prevents nationalist Kyrgyz from recognising legitimate Uzbek grievances or framing their discontent as other than un-

²⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncertain Trajectory*, op. cit.

²⁹ The death of Rafik Kamolov, an influential ethnic Uzbek imam in Kara Suu, a market town near Osh, in August 2006 was critical for state relations with devout Uzbeks. The family mosque is a focal point for the densely populated Uzbek community area. Special Forces killed him in an anti-terrorist operation after months of IMU-attributed violence in Kyrgyz and Tajik parts of the Fergana Valley. The family reportedly has not proven Hizb ut-Tahrir ties. In 2015, Rashid Kamolov, who took his father's duties, was convicted of IS recruiting and other charges and sent to prison. Nurbek Bekmurzaev, "Kyrgyzstan vs. the Islamic State: the capacity of the new concept of state policy in the sphere of religion to curb the threat of religious radicalism", *PULS Magazine, Religion and Security in Central Asia*, no. 10 (2015), pp.7-10; "Kyrgyzstan: Popular imam Kamolov's conviction increased to 10 years", Fergana, 26 November.

³⁰ Shoshana Keller wrote of the nineteenth century Tsarist expansion into Turkestan: "The Khanates ... were rather different [from the Kazan Khanate] in that for centuries they had formed one of the intellectual centres of Islam. While there were nomadic Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Kazakh groups throughout the region, the settled populations ... had much closer ties to Iranian and Arab culture than to that of the Turkic steppe". *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Praeger, 2001).

³¹ Crisis Group Asia Report N°193, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, 23 August 2010; Briefing N°102, *Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses*, 27 April 2010. "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010", 3 May 2011. "Where is the Justice? Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and its Aftermath", Human Rights Watch, 16 August 2010.

³² "Концепция укрепления единства народа и межэтнических отношений в Кыргызской Республике" ["The policy concept for national unity and inter-ethnic relations"], presidential decree, 10 April 2013. The police are less than 6 per cent minority. Crisis Group Briefing, *Uncertain Trajectory*, op. cit.

gratefulness. The government, because it invests in the Kyrgyz nationalist narrative, is complicit in perpetuating the idea Uzbeks are a separate class of citizen and does little for ethnic reconciliation. A presidential adviser said Uzbeks must speak Kyrgyz if they want to be part of society or else remain on the margins, in low-paying jobs, fodder for recruitment by religious extremists.³³ Alternative means of preventing this marginalisation have not been offered.

Against the backdrop of deep suspicion, ethnic Kyrgyz security officials and some politicians fear Uzbeks will seek revenge for the 2010 events in the south and that their faith provides a framework for not recognising state legitimacy. Ardent Kyrgyz nationalists exploit these fears. A senior police officer in Osh said, “in 2012-2013, we found a lot of leaflets in Uzbek that said, ‘we will take revenge’ ... they want to take revenge, and they radicalise ... many join Hizb ut-Tahrir”.³⁴ However, he also acknowledged the larger picture has complex aspects, including insufficient secular and religious education, poor economic circumstances and harassment of the Uzbek community, that undermine outreach efforts to prevent or counter extremism. A social worker touched on multiple factors behind Syria migration:

There was a case in 2015 in Suzak district, when one Uzbek woman and her four children were stopped while trying to leave. ... she said she was going to a holy land, and her husband was waiting for her. She also said she was promised \$1,000, and the more people you bring, the more money they will give. But then she said she was prepared to stay in Kyrgyzstan if someone can find her a job.³⁵

The Uzbek community’s own interpretation of its radicalisation highlights factors that make an Islamic justice and governance system an attractive alternative and are equally applicable to ethnic Kyrgyz who become radicalised: uneducated, unemployed youths, disenfranchisement from the state, injustice and no rule-of-law. An ethnic Uzbek activist in Osh province said:

In Aravan several youths planning to go to Syria were detained. When you talk to these people, you realise they have lost touch with the modern world ... are separated from society; it is the fault of society and the government People do not have confidence in the government because it is not interested in their problems. ... For women, the situation is pitiable: no education, very limited experiences, totally dependent.³⁶

Religious Uzbeks present a soft target for corrupt officials. The U.S. State Department noted: “Activists reported that police targeted vulnerable defendants from whom they believed they could secure a bribe, particularly ethnic Uzbek defendants accused of crimes related to the possession of banned religious materials”. Dissatisfaction with government among Uzbeks shows a level of fear and resentment largely absent even for most marginalised and vulnerable Kyrgyz. “The bureaucracy and state structures lack legitimacy”, an Uzbek businessman said. “People are frustrated by the state’s lack of justice, so seek truth in religion. They believe that if the gov-

³³ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Osh, March 2016. A female religious leader interviewed in Osh that month said, “almost all Hizb ut-Tahrir are Uzbeks ... because [it] wants a ... caliphate. [Uzbeks] don’t like our society; they want to interfere in politics; they don’t recognise our state”.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Jalalabad, March 2016.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, March 2016.

ernment does not protect them, they must defend themselves”.³⁷ But a narrative that Uzbeks are more prone to radicalisation and animosity to the state by virtue of ethnicity risks ignoring rising radicalisation among ethnic Kyrgyz and supports damaging ethnic and regional stereotypes.

B. *Radicalised Kyrgyz*

Ethnic Kyrgyz at risk of being radicalised and exposed to extremist ideas are often, but not always, economically on society’s margins. Financial incentives can play a part in joining a banned organisation or going to Syria but are not decisive; politicians who say people only leave for the money ignore why radical doctrines became attractive in the first place.³⁸ A senior interior ministry official attributed the uptick in overt religious expression to a sense of political, social and economic injustice, coupled with desire to live an accountable moral life. But, he stressed, there is no unstoppable conveyor belt to violent jihadism/extremism: “Many international organisations describe their lectures and projects as ‘combating violent extremism’ but we don’t have violent extremism like the terrorism in France. We must work against extremism”, he said, “because [it] is the ideological basis for violent extremism. I would ask organisations to spend funds on the things we need[: prevention] in the context of our reality”.³⁹

A female religious community leader and madrasa teacher believed “many have lost hope, can’t see a future, don’t believe they can be helped. Many Kyrgyz who become religious are poor or struggling to pay debts. Being religious helps them see their financial state [as God’s will]”. An unemployed woman pursuing Islamic studies with a community group offered another motive: “Everything is bought and sold today. People like us, without money, without networks, can’t compete. This life is a struggle, so I am preparing for the next one”.⁴⁰ In this environment, there is a fear that inadequate secular education and few jobs open vulnerable believers to recruitment by a more radical agenda. An Islamic activist who works with an influential NGO that provides religious study opportunities and counsels those on the brink of joining banned organisations added:

Because so many are coming to Islam, radical organisations take advantage ... and tailor their recruitment to it. ... People who want to learn about Islam often don’t know how to differentiate schools of Islam, and when someone starts teaching them one, they think this is the sum [of Islam] ... when people join those groups, it is so hard to bring them back.⁴¹

According to a government religious affairs adviser, youths are most likely to see Islam as an alternative political identity and potential ruling system. Government response has been muddled. Some politicians privately criticise its growing social and political influence; others believe it shows Kyrgyz “good ways to live”.⁴²

³⁷ Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2015). Crisis Group interview, Osh, 4 April 2016.

³⁸ Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria Calling*, op. cit.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, December 2015.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, December 2015; Naryn and Issyk Kul, March 2016.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Talas, 17 March 2016.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, September 2014. “Islam is spreading not only in the south, but all over Kyrgyzstan. I like that Islam is bringing good ways for people to live, and it is showing them

IV. Recourse in Islam: Gender Issues

Ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek women share many reasons with men for seeking out Islam as an identity and way of life but face additional challenges. While men may begin studies with regulated, state-approved imams and madrasas; women's options are much reduced.⁴³ Those in rural areas or conservative households will be unlikely to have jobs, finish secular education or even be allowed to leave the house without permission. The idea they may be intellectually curious or philosophically engaged with spiritual questions has little traction with many male religious leaders.⁴⁴

Attending a prayer or study group can offer vital support; for some women it is the only way to do anything independent of the home. They may also use religion to disassociate from difficult family circumstances, domestic violence or strong social pressure in traditional communities.

Prayer and study groups also offer poor women vital support. A women's group in the north that works closely with the Muftiate and receives Western government funding gives a \$40 monthly children's allowance. Its leader was realistic: "Many come for the allowances. They can't leave, because they think we will stop paying for their kids; \$40 is not bad for food and clothes". A religious leader working with women of both ethnicities in Osh cited financial exposure as a key reason why women, especially those left behind with children because of migration, are "easy targets, since they need to feed their children Women are left without any protection, their rights violated, their spiritual life is ruined". The state, he added, has nothing to offer.⁴⁵

The pressures and frustrations of daily life make some women receptive to the call of Syria. In 2014, an Uzbek woman preparing to leave Osh for that country said she was tired of her husband, who did not follow Islamic ways and abused her. Another in her prayer group said Syria was violent, but the war was God's will, and if her children died there, they would have a place in heaven. Both planned to take advantage of local corruption to obtain passports.⁴⁶

A. Domestic Abuse and Rights for Women

The Muftiate and state should cooperate to end formal yet unregistered marriages and marriages of children. When a marriage (*nikah*) is in a mosque with an imam, a woman lacks the legal status and protection for children and property she would obtain in an official marriage and is vulnerable to abandonment and instant divorce. "When couples divorce, and that happens often, the woman is left with nothing", a social worker said.⁴⁷ Similarly, informal village councils should be obliged to report violent or sexual crimes involving women and children.

The government and Muftiate should condemn bride kidnapping, when girls and women are abducted, sometimes raped and pressured to marry. It is illegal but prevalent, rarely reported, even more rarely prosecuted and, despite claims, not a tradition.

good examples to live by.... [If an Islamic party emerged in the future,] I will support it, because I am a Muslim". Crisis Group interview, Ata-Jurt member of parliament, Bishkek, March 2015.

⁴³ The state does not recognise diplomas from madrasas. Madrasas vary significantly in funding sources and curriculum. Some are free; others charge around 1,000 soms (\$14) monthly for food.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Bishkek, April 2016.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Naryn, March 2016; Osh, 29 March 2016.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group Briefing, *Syria Calling*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Osh, 30 March 2016.

The domestic violence record is dismal. Often women are unaware of their rights, and police are unscrupulous when investigating.⁴⁸ A study on dynamics in ethnic Kyrgyz households in the south shows that older women play an unsettling role in restricting rights and freedoms of younger female family members. The head of a women's refuge centre there said, "there are cases when husband's mothers beat up new daughters-in-law [so badly] they need hospitalisation".⁴⁹

Female religious leaders, politicians and analysts warn that the oppression and violence some women face at home is a significant reason why they seek religious outlets, which sometimes lead to radical and extremist groups. In Kyrgyzstan, few are available except radical, unofficial prayer groups and banned organisations that take advantage of the harassed, under-educated and poor. The government and donors should promote secular and religious education for all. Domestic NGOs already working with religious women and girls would particularly benefit from increased donor support. Religious women say they are discriminated against and excluded from secular society and underserved by the Muftiate. The Spiritual Directorate of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims should reopen the Muftiate's female department. Such departments work unofficially in some regions with limited decision-making power. An ex-employee of one in the south explained:

I deal with women, so am not fully Kazyat [territorial structures] staff. I don't get paid and have no input on Kazyat work It was stupid to close the women's departments. Women play a huge part in Islam in our country. They don't want to recognise that. We have saved many women from extremism and Syria. Women work with women. They closed the department because they don't want to let women be leaders, didn't want to pay a tiny salary, 3,000 soms [\$46], to women.⁵⁰

Mosques are considered all-male. Female rooms or separate mosques with female imams could improve the situation, as would recreation and study centres for religious women, with optional childcare. Such services would diminish the appeal of unofficial prayer groups and banned groups and the risk of "women becoming radicalised by accident".⁵¹

⁴⁸ "Call Me When He Tries to Kill You", Human Rights Watch, October 2016. "Women don't even know they can write a letter to the law enforcement organs Many come to us, because they have tried, and it didn't work. One got so sick of being beaten by her husband that she complained to the police. They ... released him soon after he gave them some money and invited them for lunch. He came home and beat her up so bad she is handicapped. Law enforcement corruption is forcing women to be victims". Crisis Group interview, social worker, Jalalabad, March 2016.

⁴⁹ "Gender Scoping Study. Prepared in the framework of the 'Bai Alai' – Small and Medium Enterprise Development Programme in Alai and Chon-Alai", PIL Research Company, 2016. Crisis Group interview, Jalalabad, 31 March 2016.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Osh, March 2016.

⁵¹ "We need mosques and *namazkanas* (prayer rooms) for women, because there were cases when men were angry when women were reading Namaz in mosques". Crisis Group interviews, female religious student, Batken, March 2016. European Union official, Brussels, May 2015.

V. IS Connections and Other Actors

The authorities profess to fear Salafism's political potential. Hizb ut-Tahrir, though banned, has thousands of members, north and south, among both ethnic groups. It says it wants to achieve a caliphate peacefully, but Kyrgyz authorities say they have connected it to other terrorist organisations, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and IS. Following the 30 August suicide car bombing at the Chinese embassy, ethnic-Uzbek led group linked with al-Nusra and Uighur separatists have come to the forefront of security concerns.

Hizb ut-Tahrir does not appear to be involved with Syria recruiting, but there is plausible concern that it (and Tablighi Jamaat) are at times unwitting stages on the way to jihadist groups and extremist violence or their tacit support.⁵² Like other Central Asian states, Kyrgyz authorities consider Hizb ut-Tahrir extremist, with links to violent organisations, and its members a political and security threat. Linking it to pro-violence groups like IMU and now IS serves as a tactic to further demonise it.

IS released its first propaganda and recruitment video addressing Kyrgyzstan Muslims in July 2015, a week after a major, but murky anti-terrorist operation in Bishkek. A militant speaking Kyrgyz without accent urged Muslims to move to IS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq and join jihad there as precursor to challenging Kyrgyz authorities. The government and Muftiate reacted immediately by sending preventive materials to mosques all over the country.⁵³

On 6 September, the Kyrgyz security services said they had identified the suicide car bomber of the Chinese embassy as an ethnic Uighur member of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The plot though was masterminded by Tavid va Jihad, led by a 26-year-old ethnic Uzbek Sirojiddin Mukhtarov from Kara-Suu, Osh province, aligned with al-Nusra in Syria. A senior Kyrgyz defence official said in late 2015 Tavid va Jihad is almost 100 per cent ethnic Uzbek with just a handful of ethnic Kyrgyz from the northern provinces, as the organisation closed its doors to ethnic Kyrgyz from the south after the violence in Osh in 2010.⁵⁴

Mukhtarov was reportedly an assistant imam at the Nariman mosque in Kara-Suu who received his religious education in Syria before returning to Kyrgyzstan and

⁵² Crisis Group interview, religion expert, Kyrgyzstan, September 2014. Tablighi Jamaat, founded in 1926 in India and non-violent, is banned in every Central Asian state but Kyrgyzstan. Hizb ut-Tahrir, non-violent but seeking to establish a caliphate, is banned in all five. Their doctrines are at odds with the concept of a nation state and Kyrgyzstan's secular constitution. Alex Alexiev, "Tablighi Jamaat: jihad's stealthy legions", *Middle East Quarterly*, no.1 (2005), pp. 3-11.

⁵³ Operations in Bishkek and Lebedinovka village on 16 July resulted in the deaths of six militants and seven arrests. In Bishkek, there were explosions, exchanges of automatic gunfire and grenades as the suspects resisted. There were no civilian casualties. The authorities said the militants were IS members. "Ликвидированные в Кыргызстане террористы были боевиками ИГИЛ" ["Eliminated terrorists in Kyrgyzstan were IS militants"], *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 16 July 2015. "ИГИЛ впервые опубликовал 'послание народу Киргизии'" ["IS published 'the message to the people of Kyrgyzstan' for the first time"], Kloop, 26 July 2015. "Сариев призвал общественность сообща бороться с экстремизмом и терроризмом" ["Sariev urged the public to fight extremism and terrorism together"], RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service, 28 July 2015.

⁵⁴ ETIM is now known as the East Turkestan Islamic Party. Tavid va Jihad is also known as Jamaat al Tavid wal Jihad or Katibat al Tavid wal Jihad and was previously known as Jannat Oshklari. "ГКНБ: Установлены организаторы и исполнители взрыва в посольстве Китая в Бишкеке" ["GKNB: Financiers and implementers of the explosion in Chinese embassy in Bishkek identified"], AKIpress, 6 September 2016. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, December 2015.

leaving once again for Syria to fight. The same official also said the group had ethnic Uighur members who identified themselves on their passports as ethnic Uzbeks. The organisation in Syria has a Uighur wing, but these are often young, inexperienced and die quickly, he added. A senior officer with the interior ministry questioned Tawhid va Jihod loyalty to al-Nusra saying they shared the same aims as IS and the IMU – a caliphate in the Ferghana Valley.⁵⁵

The IMU had a small sleeping presence in southern Kyrgyzstan for much of the last decade. Recently some members have emerged as recruiters and fixers in Central Asia for those wishing to reach Syria. There is no evidence Hizb ut-Tahrir members do this. They and IMU members in the south sometimes attend the same mosques, but no formal organisational links are known. More worrying are IMU-IS links. Syria appears to have given IMU and its offshoots new purpose. The IMU and Afghanistan's Taliban have old, now troubled, links. In 2015, the IMU refused to recognise the new Taliban leader, Akhtar Mansoor. In a video posted by its Furqon TV, a figure identified as its spiritual leader, Sheikh Muhammad Ali, stood before the IS black flag and pledged loyalty. Days later, IMU leader Usman Ghazi said the "Taliban cannot be trusted", and another video showed him and his fighters taking an oath to IS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁵⁶ Though the IMU is fragmenting, with some factions aligned to IS, others to the Taliban in districts near Tajikistan, Kyrgyz security services say it does not diminish the threat.

VI. State Responses to Religion

As shown, a wide spectrum of beliefs challenge the Kyrgyz government to differentiate between genuine threats to the state, those with links to violent organisations and others who simply do not conform to the state-approved version of Islam. The government does not appear willing or able to examine the nuances, however, and pursues a policy of mistrust and suspicion toward most non-Hanafi believers. Efforts to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism are compromised by badly conceived, insensitive practises, such as billboards in Bishkek negatively portraying niqab-wearing women. Interior ministry officials and police tasked to fight terrorism and extremism say their work is hindered by structural problems within the ranks such as a culture of impunity and corruption and limited resources.⁵⁷

Islam's impact was minimal on the 2015 elections but is likely to grow during the five-year parliamentary cycle. Though the constitution forbids religious parties and religious groups from pursuing "political goals", attitudes are changing. The government and politicians seem ambivalent about Islam's relationship to national and political identities. Some politicians use religious gestures to bolster their reputa-

⁵⁵ Ibid. Crisis Group interview, interior ministry official, December 2015.

⁵⁶ "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's spiritual leader, Sheikh Muhammad Ali formally pledges loyalty to the Islamic State, video, 31 July 2015, https://ia801304.us.archive.org/31/items/0021_Ramazonda2/0021_Ramazonda2.mp4. "IMU spells out grievances with Afghan Taliban", Gandhara, RFE/RL Afghan service, 4 August 2015. "IMU declares it is now part of the Islamic State", ibid, 6 August 2015.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior security officials, Bishkek, 11 December 2015, Osh, March 2016. http://zanoza.kg/doc/341553_miliciia_ishet_hyrganov_sorvavshih_banner_kayran_elim_kayda_baratabyz.html.

tions, while the security services target religious and ethnic minorities. The government presents Salafism as a monolithic threat, not acknowledging its diversity, so mistakenly limits engagement with Salafi followers.⁵⁸

The government mapped a policy on religion in 2014 that called the Hanafi school the basis for national Islamic identity and was praised by the Muftiate.⁵⁹ However, the government failed to consult with stakeholders and civil society, and the policy's goals to reform religious education, increase expertise and counter radicalisation have been only partially implemented due to, inter alia, a dearth of funding, enabling legislation, and political will. Not all stakeholders were familiar with a follow-up June 2015 action plan, whose broad objectives included improvements to religious studies in secular schools and vaguely-worded ambitions such as better state-level policies.⁶⁰ Neither document adequately addresses challenges facing religious women, who have less power within the Muftiate since their department was closed in 2014. Local imams have diverse views about the rights and role of women, but few question their lack of representation within the Muftiate.⁶¹

The security services present both opportunity and challenge to the policy and donor communities. Though some officers at both senior and local levels understand the root causes of radicalisation, international best practises and what works in their localities, their efforts are undermined by brutality, corruption and underfunding within the security services and the framing of non-Hanafi schools as alien and threatening.⁶² They cannot change the system from within.

VII. Conclusion

Poverty, the need for many to migrate to support a family and decline of government ability to provide services have undermined belief in democracy. In partial response, growing numbers look to Islam for political identity and a source of authority. Many

⁵⁸ "International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 – Kyrgyz Republic", U.S. State Department, 28 July 2014. Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016. Mushfig Bayram, John Kinahan, "Kyrgyzstan: Religious Freedom Survey, November 2014", Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, vol. 35, issue 1, 2015.

⁵⁹ Zairbek Baktybayev, "Государство взялось за религию" ["The state is taking over religion"], RFE/RL, 4 February 2014. Religious extremism was described as "adherence to extreme religious views and actions aimed at unconstitutional change of the existing order, undermining integrity and security of a state, fostering social, racial, national, religious, class and tribal hatred, destroying human personality and threatening human health and life". "The concept of the state policy", op. cit. In a March 2014 critique, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE noted "the inherent vagueness of terms such as 'religious extremism', and the risk of excessive restrictions on human rights and fundamental freedoms not linked to violence due to the broad scope of this term", recommending "to refer instead to the concepts of terrorism and violent extremism ... and to sharply distinguish these terms from religion(s), and religious activities as such".

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, religious expert, Bishkek, April 2016; senior interior ministry official, Bishkek, January 2016. The action plan notes need for donor funding. "Утвержден План действий по реализации Концепции государственной политики Кыргызской Республики в религиозной сфере на 2014-2020 годы" ["Plan on implementation of ... state policy ... in the religious sphere for 2014-2020 was approved"], State Commission for Religious Affairs, 26 June 2015. "Below freedom of religion or belief standards: State Policy in Kazakhstan, arbitrary protection in the Kyrgyz Republic", Norwegian Helsinki Committee, December 2014.

⁶¹ Crisis Groups interviews Bishkek, February 2016, Naryn and Jalalabad, March 2016.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Bishkek, January 2015, Osh, March 2016.

of these face exclusion or discrimination. Religious Uzbeks are viewed with deep suspicion, and religious women of both ethnicities have few options. Hard-line interpretations of Islam also undermine the rights of children of both ethnicities. The environment is favourable for radical groups that reject the nation state, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, and those with a violent agenda, such as IS.

The most effective response is to look for political solutions with the goal of winning over communities and so reducing extremists' space. A conflict prevention or peacebuilding lens makes more sense than framing the response as "Countering Violent Extremism" (CVE), a term that may alienate the communities needing help and give an excuse for more repressive policies if reconciliation fails. Steps could be to increase political consultation with community leaders, including Uzbeks, women and apolitical Salafis; reopen the Muftiate's women's branch; and reduce prejudiced policies against the communities most likely to support or acquiesce in extremist ideologies.

Kyrgyzstan and its partners need to address such weaknesses as high unemployment, inadequate education and absence of rule-of-law because a state that fails in basic obligations can never be stable. Corruption and ethnic exclusivity among police, particularly in the south, must be confronted to regain the Uzbek minority's trust. Such measures, even if they require much time to complete, are at least as important for reducing the risk of violence from religious radicalisation as security-oriented measures. Addressing them is a precondition to preventing extremism in Kyrgyzstan. This will not be possible without political will and good coordination between the Muftiate, government, police and the two groups outside power structures: Uzbeks and women. With the degree of political will in Bishkek uncertain, it is particularly important for internationals to urge prophylactic action prioritising inclusion now, rather than heavy security measures later.

The trajectory is not promising, but a beginning is needed. Frank talk about women's rights and ethnic diversity would be a place to start. Donors should help by emphasising projects that promote jobs and equal educational opportunity. And to diminish the appeal of radical ideas and extremist organisations before potential recruits seek them out, government and donors should make more effort to work with moderate, established Islamic organisations and others, including non-political Salafis, that are already doing much good local work.

Osh/Bishkek/Brussels, 3 October 2016

Appendix A: Map of Kyrgyzstan

