Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Uzbekistan

Noah Tucker

Key Findings

According to international estimates and statements made by regional authorities, some 500 Uzbekistani citizens and up to 1,000 ethnic Uzbeks from around the region (primarily Southern Kyrgyzstan) have traveled to Syria or Iraq to join the conflict there. In spite of overwhelming public and official attention on ISIS and its recruiting, ethnic Uzbeks appear to be drawn primarily into several groups united with the Syrian Islamic Front and Jabhat al Nusra, all groups currently at war with ISIS.

While only a small portion of the public is vulnerable to recruitment, overcoming ubiquitous conspiracy theories fed by Russian and local media that blame the United States for the ISIS threat and for the conflict in Syria is likely the primary challenge for the US government and other international partners in creating anti-ISIS messages that resonate with the Uzbek-speaking public. Even respected Uzbek Muslim activists who speak out against ISIS first have to counter conspiracies that deny the group’s actions (and videos portraying them) are real or that ISIS itself even exists.

Uzbekistan’s shift in tactics to use trusted religious figures genuine popular influence like Hayrulla Hamidov to counter ISIS recruitment reflects one of the most resonant public responses to ISIS messaging and is likely to be significantly more successful than past strategies. New support for ISIS by some members of hardline Uzbek Salafist networks on social media – as well as the group’s previously documented strategy of targeting “recent converts” and Central Asian migrant workers with little or no background in Islamic studies – reaffirms the need for articulating theological responses by figures viewed as legitimate and authoritative.

Noah Tucker is a CAP associate and managing editor at Registan.net. He received a B.A. in History from Hope College and a M.A. in Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies at Harvard University. Noah is the lead researcher on the Central Asia Digital Islam Project and previously worked on the Harvard/Carnegie Islam project.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author only and do not represent the Central Asia Program.
Overview: Messages, Narratives and Social Media Presence

In spite of the fact that more ethnic Uzbeks fight in groups allied against ISIS, their place in the discourse of Central Asians about the conflict in Syria is not an accident. For roughly a year between 2013 and 2014, just as many in the region were becoming aware for the first time that their compatriots were participating in the bloody Syrian war, for a short time ethnic Uzbeks became the most visible Central Asian contingent inside ISIS and remain the only group from the region to have developed its own sophisticated messaging operations targeted at co-ethnics in their own language. The Uzbeks in ISIS created a media service called KhilofatNews, several video studios, and related social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki and video-sharing sites including YouTube and Vimeo. ISIS Uzbeks reject secular state borders in the region and target co-ethnics in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and those working in Russia or other countries. The videos the media operators released never made concrete claims about the number of Uzbeks who had joined the group, but they triggered a wave of alarm across the region and helped put a Central Asian face on the organization for the first time. Most of these services ceased to function by late 2014 and the early Uzbek spokesmen for ISIS have all disappeared in the fog of war – based on observation for the past three years, the average lifespan of Central Asian militants in the conflict zone is perhaps six months. ISIS messaging continues to spread in jihadist sympathizer networks in Uzbek, however, shared in groups popular with migrant laborers by militants operating personal profiles on social media and by sympathizers – including IMU supporters – who promote ISIS official messages in Russian (sometimes offering their own translations), and share materials that have already been created, including abundant mainstream media coverage of the group’s military operations.

Evidence available from social media continues to fail to support claims of thousands of Central Asians fighting for ISIS, but could likely support estimates made by the Uzbek Muftiate that several hundred Uzbekistani citizens have joined the group. Although official Uzbek-language messaging has been disrupted or shut down, their brand presence on social media remains ubiquitous and messaging in Uzbek is widely available. Messages targeted at Uzbeks by ISIS social media operators and sympathizers highlights the spectacular violence the group engages in to advance its goals and the participation of Uzbeks in it. Widespread coverage of media operations by ISIS’s official media wing, al-Hayat, and international and local media attention on ISIS military operations in both Iraq and Syria help the ISIS brand to dominate online discussions of the conflict and its potential effects on Central Asia. The overwhelming majority of Uzbeks on social media reject ISIS narratives and are appalled by graphic content advertising the group’s violent tactics. But attention on ISIS rather than on multiple other groups in the Syrian conflict that include Uzbeks in their ranks facilitates
ISIS claims that they have replaced al Qaida as the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadist movement and are a political embodiment of a transnational Sunni Muslim identity.

Uzbek language coverage of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts – including international outlets like BBC Uzbek and RFE/RL’s Uzbek service as well as popular Uzbekistan-based media – for example, focuses almost exclusively on ISIS and ignores other Uzbek-led groups and battalions that appear to have larger numbers of Uzbeks in their ranks and conduct more active messaging operations on social media in narrow jihadist sympathizers networks. Wide coverage of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s pledge of bayat (allegiance) to ISIS further enhances the public impression that ISIS dominates the Uzbek jihadist movement and that Central Asians who join the Syrian/Iraqi conflict join ISIS almost exclusively, arguably distorting the public’s already limited information on the nature of the Syrian conflict and the ways in which their compatriots are drawn into it.

Although the vast majority of Uzbeks online avoid jihadist sympathizer or Salafist networks, they continue to be exposed to ISIS messaging through coverage in the mainstream media. Even the vast majority of organized Salafist networks online, led by Uzbek emigres living and working primarily in the Middle East, rejects terrorism and ISIS and challenge its supporters and sympathizers online.

In spite of this general trend, ISIS has had some notable success in winning individual sympathizers among Uzbeks online even without its organized media outlets. In early and mid-2015, for example, a highly-networked and high-betweenness centrality hardline Salafist figure who identifies himself only as “al-Kosoniy” on several platforms changed from cautiously supporting jihadist ideas to actively promoting ISIS and advancing theological justification for conflict with Shias and other non-Suni religious groups on Facebook. Although he reveals very little about his real identity, al-Kosoniy is a respected member of some Salafist networks and has a larger – and broader – Facebook network than any of ISIS’s now-defunct official profiles ever gained. While he does not advertise any official position in an Islamic institution, to date al-Kosoniy is the most influential Muslim figure on social media to adopt a position supporting ISIS from perhaps any of the Central Asian states.

**State Responses to ISIS Messaging**

The overwhelming focus on ISIS in mainstream media coverage is likely also related to the fact that regional states with significant Uzbek populations (including Russia, where Uzbeks make up the largest group of labor migrants) primarily respond to ISIS messaging by exaggerating the group’s threat to the region. This approach appears to be designed to pressure the public to support incumbent regimes and current policies or, in the case of Russia, to support an argument that the Central Asian states need to join Russia-led international organizations to protect their security. State-supported media and state responses do little to acknowledge or address the problem of recruiting among migrant laborers – where the states admit that most recruiting takes place – but instead often portray ISIS as an imminent existential threat to their territorial sovereignty that should be countered by military means, arrests and assassination. Exclusive attention on ISIS allows Central Asian governments with Uzbek populations to argue that they are part of a grand coalition that faces a common enemy and to demonize the rest of the Syrian opposition, other Islamic groups and figures, and, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Uzbeks as a group.

In the months before the March 30, 2015 presidential election in Uzbekistan, for example, state-approved media regularly reported unsubstantiated rumors that ISIS was actively targeting Uzbekistan and was gathering an invasion force on the border of Turkmenistan. Several popular Uzbekistan-based publications republished and translated Russian articles that initiated these
rumors. Uzbekistani authorities frequently claimed to uncover "ISIS flags" inside Uzbekistan, including reports that one was allegedly installed on the roof of the parliament building in Tashkent during a wave of what the government claimed were ISIS-related arrests of up to 200 people in and around Tashkent. State-approved media interpreted these events as signs that the group was already active inside the country, but upon closer examination the evidence supporting many of these claims became deeply problematic and had drawn indignation and mockery from some Uzbek social media users.

Throughout the second half of 2015, reports emerged in state-approved and Russian media attempting to link Hizb ut Tahrir – the non-violent political Islamist group that Tashkent authorities have accused of involvement in nearly every incident of domestic political violence since 1999 – of cooperating with the Islamic State or its members of leaving the country to join ISIS in Syria. These reports ignore the detail that HT and ISIS mutually reject one another and HT in particular rejects ISIS’ claim to have the authority to declare and a rule a Caliphate – ample evidence shows that ISIS militants follow a policy of executing members of any other Islamic group that reject their authority. Multiple studies and outside expert assessments have shown that the Uzbekistan security services frequently use allegations of membership in a banned organization to fill arrest quotas or to prosecute anyone targeted by local authorities because of political opposition or even economic rivalry. In January 2016, for example, the trial began for an Armenian Christian businessman who was accused, along with several of his employees, of ISIS membership based on no more evidence than a beard he grew as part of an Armenian mourning ritual after the death of his younger brother and a retracted confession that Avakian stated had been made while being tortured during interrogation. His family and neighbors confirm that local authorities had been trying to pressure him to sell a successful farm that he owned for several months before his arrest.

Overall, Uzbekistan’s response to the threat of suspected Islamist extremist groups has been consistent for the past decade and a half – the tactics adopted by the National Security Service (NSS) have not been significantly adapted to counter a specific threat from ISIS. Migrant workers returning from Russia are frequently arrested on suspicion of supporting extremist groups and popular ethnic Uzbek imams living outside the borders of Uzbekistan have been targeted for assassination in plots that much of the public believes are initiated by the Uzbekistani security services. These include widely respected imam Obidxon Qori Nazarov, who was shot in exile in Sweden in 2012 but survived; Syrian opposition supporter “Shaykh” Abdulloh Bukhoriy, who was shot to death outside his madrasah in Istanbul in December 2014; and Kyrgyzstan-based imam Rashod Qori Kamalov, who announced in December after the Bukhoriy attack that he was warned by Turkish security services that they had uncovered evidence of an assassination plot against him – his father, prominent imam Muhammadrafiq Kamalov, was killed in an Uzbekistani-Kyrgyzstani joint security services operation in 2006 that sparked significant public protest in Southern Kyrgyzstan.
The second-largest ethnic Uzbek population in the region resides in Kyrgyzstan, where they have been frequently targeted in ethnic violence and are commonly associated with Islamic extremism by nationalist politicians. Kyrgyzstani state responses have similarly focused almost exclusively on ISIS in addressing the Syrian/Iraqi conflict and targeted the ethnic Uzbek minority in the south on charges of collaborating with ISIS. In January 2016 Kyrgyzstani security services alleged they had uncovered several cases of citizens traveling to fight in Syria with ISIS, at least one of whom proved to be an ethnic Uzbek who fled the country after serving three years in prison on false murder charges following the 2010 ethnic conflict. In 2015 Osh authorities arrested above-mentioned Rashod Qori Kamalov, the most prominent ethnic Uzbek imam remaining in the country after the 2010 conflict, originally on charges of supporting militant groups in Syria. Kyrgyzstani authorities provided no evidence beyond “expert testimony” interpreting the imam’s “physical gestures” and facial expressions to support only lesser charges including “inciting religious extremism.” Nevertheless, two courts convicted Kamalov, sentencing him first to five years in a modified prison regime and then increasing the sentence to 10 years in a high-security prison on appeal in November 2015.

Finally, Russia-based media targeted at Central Asia, particularly state-owned and supported outlets and official statements, consistently present ISIS as a pressing threat to the region’s borders: reports through most of 2015, for example, claimed that ISIS had recruited “thousands” of supporters in Northern Afghanistan and was preparing to attack the region; separate articles feature Russian “security experts” who speculate that an ISIS invasion will force Russia to intervene militarily in the region – only to defend members of the Eurasian Economic Union, however. Russian online media reports stress that Uzbek migrant workers are heavily recruited in Russia and that these groups are tied to organized crime, sometimes offering specific details about alleged recruiting organizations and locations but typically reporting no law enforcement response.

Public Responses: 1) Conspiracy theories and anti-US sentiment

Public responses on social media to stories about ISIS are overwhelmingly negative, and many take the group seriously as a threat to the region. Comments in response to stories about ISIS atrocities or even in response to material promoted by ISIS supporters express fear of an ISIS advance and often cite “peace” (tinchlik) as the most important aspect of the status quo in the country. A significant number of these responses also tie the potential advance of ISIS to conspiracy theories that claim the group is a puppet of the United States and Israel and an American plot, often citing al Qaida as a “precedent.” Fueled by Russian and Uzbekistani government messages, as well as conspiracy theory material from Middle Eastern networks, users cite these conspiracies perhaps more often than any other response and often connect Russian media reports about alleged U.S. attempts to “destabilize” the region to the rumored advance of ISIS toward Central Asia. These arguments resonate with messages promoted by Uzbek-language ISIS supporters, who frequently claim that ISIS is a Muslim response to U.S. and Western aggression.

Uzbekistani users frequently echo several of the government’s most often-used slogans, emphasizing the value they place on “peace and stability” (tinchlik va osoyishtalik) and expressing their strong preference for life under the rule of Islam Karimov if the “Islamic State” is the alternative. Much of the state’s messaging campaign appears to have been designed in the beginning to convince voters that stability and security in Uzbekistan depended on Karimov during the erstwhile campaign period leading up to the 2015 president election, when ISIS coverage first intensified in the national press. It is difficult to determine how many of these comments represent popular opinion and how many are state-run information operations, but their volume and
frequency, even sometimes from political dissidents, likely indicates that they represent a genuine public sentiment.

Social media activity and commentary among Uzbekistanis indicate that many, if not a majority, of users believe that ISIS and most other Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) are created, funded or supplied by the United States, Israel, and other Western states. Uzbek social media users widely believe and share conspiracy theories that argue that ISIS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi is a former Mossad agent, that U.S. Senator John McCain attended meetings with ISIS leadership, that al Qaida itself was a U.S. paramilitary puppet and the 9-11 attacks were a “false flag” operation designed to create negative public opinion about Muslims and provide a pretext to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. Jihadist operators and sympathizers frequently find themselves in the awkward position of arguing with other Uzbeks that al Qaida or other militant Islamist organizations are real and capable of carrying out attacks. These conspiracy theories at times originate in Middle Eastern forums and even from Western outlets, such as InfoWars, but in the Uzbek internet space most often come from Russian media.

Israel supports other Islamist extremist organizations – such as Syrian al Qaida affiliate Jabhat al Nusra – in order to claim that they are the only “true” Islamic military force.

Public responses: 2) ISIS as an internal threat to Muslims

Uzbek social media users who self-identify as Muslims and participate in Islamic devotional groups more often respond to ISIS messages as an internal dispute within Islam, one that they see as threatening to their own freedom to practice their religion and that they fear will likely lead others to associate Islam with what they see as unconscionable violence perpetrated by the “Islamic State” against other Muslims. Theologically literate Muslims who stand against ISIS ideology and tactics from a scriptural standpoint have some of the strongest and most resonant voices condemning the group online; in contrast to state messaging in

The small minority of Uzbek social media users who support ISIS – particularly on Odnoklassniki, the network most frequently used by migrant laborers in Russia – portray the group as the primary opponent of the United States and recruit Uzbeks online to join ISIS with the promise that they will fight the United States in Iraq. Uzbek ISIS supporters on social media blame the United States for the oppression of Central Asian governments and portray ISIS as the “Muslim counterforce” to Western imperialism and local authoritarianism all at once. These users sometimes echo conspiracy theories that the United States or Israel supports other Islamist extremist organizations – such as Syrian al Qaida affiliate Jabhat al Nusra – in order to claim that they are the only “true” Islamic military force.

In late 2015 and early 2016, a number of prominent Uzbek reformist Muslims in exile changed their social media profile pictures to make a public stand against ISIS.
Uzbekistan, reformist (or Salafist) Muslim groups who are often viewed with suspicion by regional governments may be the most articulate opposition to ISIS on social media.

Many Uzbek Muslim social media users seized on the February 2015 video release of the execution by fire of Jordanian Royal Air Force pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh to demonstrate that ISIS tactics flagrantly violate the teaching and traditions of the Prophet, who according to multiple hadiths forbade his followers from killing even an animal or insect by fire. These hadiths resonated strongly with Uzbek Muslims, who frequently cited them following the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in response to multiple videos depicting Uzbeks burned alive by mobs of attackers. These and other responses express horror at the violence committed against innocents and protected categories of people, noting especially that their treatment of prisoners, women, and children violates Islamic law as Uzbeks understand it.

Other self-identified devout reformist Uzbek Muslims on social media have adapted a theological criticism frequently used in the Middle Eastern information environment, identifying ISIS with the Kharajite heresy in the early history of Islam. Although the average Central Asian Muslim lacks the deep theological and historical background for this parallel to make sense without extended explanation, it resonates highly among dedicated Reformist/Salafist devotional groups who are often primary targets for recruiting by ISIS and other Syria-based VEOs.

Several influential Uzbek reformist religious leaders have condemned ISIS, notably including now-imprisoned Kyrgyzstani imam Rashod Qori Kamalov. Immediately after Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared himself Caliph of all Muslims in July 2014 and announced the “Islamic State,” Rashod Qori preached a Friday sermon in his mosque in Kara-Suu condemning Baghdadi and citing scriptural and historical precedent from the period of the rashidun (the “rightly-guided caliphs”) that he argued proved no man could appoint himself Caliph. Video of the sermon shared on YouTube and on multiple social networking sites has attracted over 38,000 views, exceeding the total for most Uzbek-language ISIS material. Paradoxically, it was the video of this exact sermon that was used by state prosecutors in Kamalov’s trial in the fall of 2015 to advance charges that he supported extremism.

Even Uzbeks in self-identified Islamist groups publicly oppose ISIS. As mentioned above, Hizb ut-Tahrir activists have particularly condemned ISIS and worked to draw a clear delineation between their own vision of the Caliphate – which they advocate creating by consensus of believers – and reaffirm that the group rejects violent means for political change. Uzbek Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Kyrgyzstan use Facebook to publicly refute statements by Kyrgyzstan’s security services (GKNB) that the group has pledged to support ISIS in Syria. Other Uzbek Facebook users who support a global Sunni Muslim identity but reject ISIS’s claim to represent it have started a campaign to “take back” the ancient Black Banner of the Prophet (the flag used by ISIS), arguing that they too have a right to reject “colonial” national symbols without appearing to support a group they regard as heretical terrorists.

Efforts even by respected reformist Muslim activists online to counter ISIS messaging by drawing attention to contradictions between the ruthless tactics used by...
the group and Sharia law are often complicated by the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories and broad distrust of all Western media. In a typical interaction of this type, the administrator of the Facebook group “Islam va Siyosat” (Islam and Politics) translates into Uzbek excerpts from a report detailing an ISIS bomb attack on a marketplace in Iraq just before Eid al Fitr celebrations that killed more than a hundred bystanders and injured dozens more. The administrator calls the group “#Қаллакесарлар” (cutthroats, barbarians) and challenges anyone to defend their tactics in light of Islamic law. In the long thread that followed, not a single user offered support for ISIS or attempted to defend their tactics, but many attacked the administrator for “being so gullible as to believe what you read in the world media,” and insisted that the story was fabricated as part of a grand conspiracy to associate the Islamic faith with violence and terrorism. Similar dialogues frequently occur on social media in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan – faced with the unsettling possibility that a group like ISIS could carry out unspeakable horrors in the name of Islam, many Uzbeks and others from Central Asia choose to believe that these horrors simply never happened, and sometimes go as far as to even deny that the group exists at all.

Uzbekistan shifts counter-messaging tactics to align with resonant public responses

Following the March 2015 presidential election, the Karimov government abruptly shifted tactics on ISIS counter-messaging, switching from selected leaks from the National Security Services that warned ISIS attacks were imminent to allowing the Directorate of Muslim Affairs (also known as the Muftiate) to downplay the threat and characterize the ISIS conflict with other Muslims as a fitna – an intra-Islamic conflict, heresy or conspiracy. With this, the government’s public messaging switched from emphasizing military measures to defend Uzbekistani territory to preventing recruitment. The anti-recruiting emphasis had begun already in February 2015 with the largely failed (but widely publicized) launch a new Muftiate-authored glossy pamphlet titled The ISIS Fitna (ISHID Fitnasi). The launch was previewed on Sayyod.com, one of the most popular Uzbek language pop-culture media outlets among both Uzbekistani and those living abroad, and advertised widely in the press following a conference that involved national and local state-approved imams and other local government figures. When these efforts failed to gain public traction, the state took the unprecedented step of releasing Hayrullo Hamidov, a highly respected Islamic poet and teacher jailed on dubious terrorism charges in 2010, and made him the face of the anti-ISIS campaign – again enlisting the assistance of Sayyod.com This tactic achieved broad and immediate resonance, attracted significant attention, and prompted an official response from IMU and other dissenting Islamic figures.

Within weeks of his release Sayyod published Hamidov’s first new poem since his imprisonment in 2010, “The Iraq-Syria Fitna, The ISIS Fitna.” The poem follows the outline of many of the arguments described above from religiously observant users – in rhythmic verse he condemns the group as an ultraviolent schism that has turned against all other Muslims and compares them to the Kharajite heresy, saying “Everywhere bullets and shells are flying/Oases that once prospered are now burnt and dying/Islam has utterly no connection to this... Those still alive cry out Rasulolloh! (’Save us, Prophet of Allah!’)/This revolting business is more than they can stand/The tulip fields are watered now with human blood.”
The state’s decision to shift tactics and begin to use respected religious figures – even if they have to be released from prison first – to counter extremist messaging is not without foundation. IMU and ISIS supporters on social media frequently appeal to Uzbekistani to revolt against the rule of Islam Karimov and support an Islamist state as a specific response to the oppression of religious freedom, widespread arrests of observant Muslims, and persecution of women wearing hijab. A potential mark of success for the state’s mixed tactic – both promoting and policing expressions of Islamic faith – is that a surprisingly high number of social media users counter these extremist arguments in exactly the way state-controlled Muftiat would hope – some post photos showing newly-constructed mosques with full parking lots or pictures of people praying in state-run mosques. Others counter that they see women wearing hijab but have never seen a woman pulled off the street and arrested for violating a dress code. These responses, however, are meaningless to regime opponents who have personally experienced oppression or had to flee their homeland because their beliefs or outward expressions contradicted “state-approved” definitions of which mosques they could attend, whose sermons they could listen to, or what definition of hijab they understood to be sacred. The state’s choice to promote Hamidov as a spokesperson for “Uzbek” Islam (as opposed to “foreign” Islam) has the potential to be interpreted by many as hypocrisy after imprisoning him for almost five full years on charges that he, too, was a “terrorist.” In response to claims that the Uzbek citizens enjoy religious freedom under Karimov, one prominent ISIS and IMU supporter countered that one of his closest friends was framed for an attack on a state imam and imprisoned because he was an outwardly observant Muslim.

**Policy Takeaways: Challenges for Uzbek anti-ISIS messaging**

As in other states in the region, an exclusive focus on ISIS in the Syrian/Iraqi conflict and its potential effect on Uzbeks in Central Asia obscures the intra-Islamic conflict and ISIS attacks against other organized militant groups fighting Syrian government forces. Responses to ISIS messaging that highlight the group’s violence against other Muslims are among the most resonant – treating ISIS as the only non-state Islamist faction in the conflict both glosses over its internecine tactics and bolsters its claim that it is the only “truly Muslim” group opposed to Assad in Syria or the only one representing a global Sunni identity.

State policies in Uzbekistan and Russia of exaggerating ISIS’s ability to pose a military threat to the territory of the Central Asian states similarly only facilitates the group’s claims that they represent a unified Sunni political movement and the false dilemma argument that citizens of Uzbekistan must accept an authoritarian regime and Russian political dominance or support ISIS – exactly the message promoted by ISIS supporters aimed at citizens unhappy with authoritarianism and political and cultural dominance by external powers.
While only a small portion of the public is vulnerable to recruitment, overcoming ubiquitous conspiracy theories fed by Russian and local media that blame the United States for the ISIS threat is likely the primary challenge for the United States and its partners in creating anti-ISIS messages that resonate with the Uzbek-speaking public. Persuading Uzbeks that external states are reliable partners with a shared interest in combatting a common threat and assisting in the development of strong ethnic Uzbek communities and institutions – particularly in Kyrgyzstan and among migrant workers in Russia and elsewhere – is the first task before other messaging is likely to resonate.

Uzbekistan’s shift in tactics to use trusted religious figures like Hayrullo Hamidov who have genuine popular influence to counter ISIS recruitment reflects one of the most resonant public responses to ISIS messaging and is likely to be significantly more successful than past strategies. New support for ISIS by some members of the hardline Uzbek Salafist networks on social media reaffirms the need for articulating theological responses by figures viewed as legitimate and authoritative.

Past regional government policies that resulted in the arrest, exile, or assassination of respected Islamic scholars who opposed violent extremist groups and political violence but were critical of their own government have significantly narrowed the field of religious authorities available to assist in anti-ISIS messaging. While Uzbekistan released one of its most influential Islamic figures from prison to improve its anti-ISIS campaign, Kyrgyzstan almost simultaneously imprisoned its most popular ethnic Uzbek imam who had already publicly condemned ISIS. Cooperation between independent religious figures and states need not be direct or coordinated, but strict restrictions on independent Islamic discourse of Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan make it difficult for grassroots anti-ISIS dialogue to develop. Restrictions on religious freedom also open opportunities for ISIS supporters to argue that there is an inherent conflict between Muslims and secular government authorities.