Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Kyrgyzstan

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Key findings

Although most of the small number of citizens participating in the Syrian conflict appear to be ethnic Uzbeks fighting in or allied with Jabhat al Nusra (ANF), in Kyrgyzstan public and state attention, as well as social media discussion about the conflict, focus almost exclusively on ISIS, casting the potential expansion of the Islamic State as the country’s primary security threat. Overall, online activity by Kyrgyzstani citizens self-identified with ISIS, including recruiting operations and media messaging, is exponentially lower than neighboring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or Kazakhstan. In spite of this contrast, public and state discourse about the alleged ISIS threat – facilitated as in Tajikistan by a relatively free but deeply partisan media environment – is fervent, fractured, and conspiratorial: public participants in the social media discourse about ISIS in Kyrgyzstan not only dispute the numbers of citizens who have joined the group, but whether or not it exists at all.

Kyrgyzstan’s uniquely competitive and partisan media environment and past discourse, particularly around perceived competition between Russian and the United States over the Manas Transit Center, have created an environment in which many Kyrgyzstani social media users and popular pundits portray the country as a center of global “geopolitical” competition. Within this environment, many have warned that Kyrgyzstan is the “prime target” for ISIS expansion in Central Asia since late 2014 and argue that Kyrgyzstani citizens are uniquely vulnerable to recruitment, although the country lacks a border with any other state in which the group’s militants are active and its population is targeted by recruiters online far less often than in neighboring states.
These messages are frequently accepted and repeated by social media users, often locating them within a narrative that argues ISIS is a “project of the United States” and it is the oft-cited U.S. “desire to destabilize the situation in Kyrgyzstan” that allegedly makes the country a high-profile target. Productive public debate on social media about ISIS continues to be almost impossible in the region because there is no general agreement on whether or not the group and its messages are real, whether it is an Islamist militant group or a U.S. government operation, or why the group’s ideology appeals to some Central Asians.

State responses to the ISIS threat have had little effect on improving the factual accuracy of public discussion and have been consistent with the post-Soviet approach to religion, treating religious activity as a potential threat that must be managed and monitored by the state. Responses by state officials to the July 2015 discovery of an alleged terrorist cell and the first ISIS video message targeting the country have outlined an initial strategy for counteracting the threat of extremism that relies on identifying and eliminating “foreign influence” from “Kyrgyz Islam,” specifically targeting practices visible in public space, including women wearing hijab. State reactions are less conspiratorial and divided than those among the public reflected on social media, but focusing only on external cultural markers and ascribing the appeal of Islamism as a political system to “foreign influence” has done little to counteract conspiracy theories (many of which blame the United States for ISIS expansion) or to engage with Islamist criticisms of corruption, inequality and injustice that resonate with marginalized groups within the population targeted by recruiters.

Overview: Kyrgyzstan and ISIS

Kyrgyzstani government estimates of the number of citizens who have traveled to Iraq and Syria to participate in the conflict there – primarily, it claims, in the ranks of ISIS – vary from 200 to over 400, and domestic pundits have at times offered estimates that exceed this number significantly. As of February 2016, however, only a single Kyrgyzstani citizen has publicly identified himself as a member of ISIS, and the group has released only one short video message targeting the country. A small number, 5 to 10, of unidentified ethnic Uzbek Kyrgyzstaniis have also appeared in ISIS videos. The independent UK-based International Center for the Study of Radicalization, which tracks foreign fighter flow into Syria and Iraq using a multi-source methodology, estimated that only 100 citizens of Kyrgyzstan were participating in the conflict as of early 2015: observations of Central Asian jihadist media conducted for this project would support these lower numbers. Most Kyrgyzstani citizens participating in the Syrian conflict appear to be ethnic Uzbeks fighting in or allied with Jabhat al Nusra (ANF), whose Uzbek battalion is led by Southern Kyrgyzstani commander from Osh.

Public and state attention and social media discussion about the Syrian conflict, however, focus almost exclusively on ISIS and treat the potential expansion of the Islamic State as the country’s primary security threat. In July 2015 the Kyrgyzstani National Security Service (GKNB) claimed, without offering any significant evidence, that it killed most of the members of the region’s first ISIS cell in a Bishkek raid. It said also they disrupted terrorist attacks allegedly planned on the public and against the Russian air base at Kant, asserting that longtime political enemies associated with the ousted Bakiyev regime and Russia-based organized crime networks had “merged” with ISIS to plan the attacks. Overall, online activity by Kyrgyzstani citizens self-identified with ISIS, including recruiting operations and media messaging, is exponentially lower than neighboring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or Kazakhstan but public and state discourse about the alleged ISIS threat – facilitated, as in Tajikistan, by a relatively free but deeply partisan media environment – is fervent, fractured, and conspiratorial: public participants in the social media discourse about ISIS in Kyrgyzstan not only dispute the numbers of citizens who have joined the group, but whether or not it exists at all.
According to research by the Digital Islam Project, identifiable Kyrgyzstani participants in the Syria conflict are primarily politically and economically marginalized ethnic Uzbeks from southern Kyrgyzstan whose messaging, recruiting, and social media activity is primarily in the Uzbek language and largely ignored by the Kyrgyzstani media. Little domestic coverage has appeared acknowledging that al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate has a Central Asian battalion led by an ethnic Uzbek from Osh, Amir Abu Saloh, who previously assumed the nom-de-guerre Abu Saloh Oshiy. Paradoxically, high profile cases of ethnic Uzbeks accused of joining or supporting the Syrian conflict are often, according to many local and international experts, based on very weak evidence and with strong political incentives to continue prosecutions against southern ethnic Uzbek figures of social significance rather than targeting real violent extremist networks. These targets have included influential moderate imam Rashod Kamalov, the only high-profile Uzbek imam in the south who was not successfully removed in the power shift that occurred in the aftermath of the ethnic conflict in 2010.

In spite of all the state and media attention on alleged recruiting activities by ISIS within the country, only a single semi-official ISIS recruiting message has been produced that targets the Kyrgyzstani public directly in any language, in sharp contrast to the group’s efforts to recruit Uzbekistani, Kazakhstani, and Tajikistani members. The July 2015 message, released by al-Furat Media Center, a semi-official ISIS studio mostly associated with Russian language messages from fighters from the Caucasus (and which also produced earlier messages by defected Tajikistani Colonel Gulmurad Halimov), depicted only a single narrator, a young Kyrgyz man who mixed native Kyrgyz with Arabic scripture fluently. In contrast to typical ISIS videos, the recruiting message was filmed in a quiet wooded setting, showed no weapons, and depicted no violence or conflict; the content concentrated on eschatological themes and urged Kyrgyz Muslims to abandon "man-made laws" like “so-called democracy” that allegedly force Muslims to compromise strict interpretations of basic religious duties (specifically citing beards and hijab) and to emigrate to the “Islamic State” in order to avoid eternal damnation.

The video emerged at a fortuitous moment for the Kyrgyzstani security services and their effort to make a case that ISIS is an imminent threat to the country: only days before, GKNB special forces killed six people in two parallel operations in Bishkek and its suburbs and arrested several others. Following the operation, security officials announced they had uncovered an ISIS flag in one of the raided residences – both of which were tied to former convicts who had no demonstrated prior links to militant Islamist groups. They claimed they had uncovered plans to launch attacks on public prayers during the next day's Eid al Fitr celebrations in Bishkek's central square and against the Russian base at Kant, but offered no evidence to support these claims other than a few weapons and a modest quantity of ammonium nitrate (commercial fertilizer). Days later, security officials further claimed the group, which they described as “an ISIS cell,” was similarly tied to a longtime political opposition member and former MP Maksat Kunakunov from ousted President Bakiyev's Ata Jurt party and a known organized crime figure with links to vor v zakone (thief-in-law, a full member of the Moscow-based
Brother's Circle crime syndicate) Kamchi Kolbaev named Tariel Djamagulov, who allegedly planned to finance the Islamic State’s activities in the country with a series of bank robberies.¹

**Kyrgyzstan’s Unique Media Environment: The “Island of Democracy” as the “Center of Geopolitics”**

Difficult to verify claims that ISIS has become a clear and present danger inside Kyrgyzstan did not emerge in a vacuum and have not been limited to security officials. Since late 2014, many Kyrgyzstani pundits and some politicians have warned that Kyrgyzstan is the “prime target” for ISIS expansion in Central Asia and argue that Kyrgyzstani citizens are uniquely vulnerable to recruitment, although the country lacks a border with any other state in which the group’s militants are active and its population is targeted by recruiters online far less often than neighboring states. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the “evidence” providing rationale for many of these theories is not rooted in responses to activities of the militant extremist groups or intelligence about them, but instead are based in the widespread assumption, frequently evoked by the country’s media and politicians, that Kyrgyzstan is at the center of a great-power conflict between Russia and the United States (and to a lesser extent China and now the expanding “Islamic State”).

Within the Kyrgyz online and social media environment, this notion of centrality in a great-power conflict is often referred to in shorthand with the Russian term geopolitika (“geopolitics,” usually with connotations and other language that echo the Putin administration’s concepts of unipolar vs. multipolar geopolitics and Alexander Dugin’s Fourth Political Theory). The country’s partisan media, suspected Russian information operations, and local politicians alike frequently attribute domestic developments – ranging from significant political upheavals like the 2005 and 2010 “revolutions” and outbreaks of ethnic violence to small protests or even the existence of homosexuals in Kyrgyz society – to great-power politics; the hyperbolic discourse about the alleged imminent advance of ISIS fits a political narrative of perpetual victimhood but also highlights the vulnerability (as Nick Megoran has elaborated) that many ethnic Kyrgyz feel as a tiny, post-colonial state heavily dependent on foreign aid.²

Popular discourse surrounding Manas Transit Center played an important part in locating Kyrgyzstan at the center of the “geopolitical struggle” for more than a decade before the US ended its lease in 2014; popular rumors included claims that the United States had deployed nuclear weapons to the base in order to conduct a nuclear first strike on Iran, that Iranian forces had targeted the base for a strike against the United States, and that the US intelligence services orchestrated the 2005 and 2010 coups against Akaev and Bakiyev in order to prevent the base (subsequently referred to as a transit center) from closing. After the lease agreement concluded in 2014 and Kyrgyzstan’s parliament declared it would not be renewed, the pundits and social media users have continuously predicted the United States would orchestrate a “third revolution” against the Akayev regime, potentially using Islamist terrorist groups as catalysts, citing “the US revolution in Ukraine” and later the electricity protests in Yerevan as “evidence” of American plans to “sow

1 Kyrgyzstani security services have in the past frequently made uncorroborated claims that attempt to link political opposition figures or domestic unrest to international Islamist militant groups, including unsupported claims that the 2010 ethnic violence, which also featured a primary role for organized crime figures who control the country’s robust drug trafficking networks, was planned by the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in collusion with ousted members of the Bakiyev regime.

2 Scott Radnitz’s recent work on the instrumentalization of conspiracy theories by Kyrgyzstani politicians is an excellent study of the role these myths play in the Kyrgyzstani information environment and the way they are often perpetuated by actors within the state itself.
“chaos” in the region; a routine diplomatic shipment in April 2015 sparked a firestorm of speculation that the US Embassy in Bishkek was importing weapons or counterfeit money to supply protestors who would overthrow the government.

The appointment of senior civil servant Ambassador Richard Miles at Charge d’Affaires ad interim in Bishkek gave birth to the nickname “father of revolutions” and the “ambassador of chaos” on Kyrgyzstani social media and forums because his term as ambassador to Georgia coincided with the “Rose Revolution” in 2003. The announcement of Ambassador Sheila Gwaltney’s appointment prompted Vesti.kg to describe her as “like a Gray Cardinal, a sort of Lady X, who is behind the revolutions that have occurred in the territory of the former USSR” and social media users to predict she would usher in a “Rainbow revolution” in Kyrgyzstan because of a track record of supporting gay rights.

Discourse about ISIS and its allegedly imminent threat to the security of Kyrgyzstan takes place firmly within this context and is influenced by actors who promote a decidedly Russo-centric view of geopolitics. Among the most popular source of what is claimed to be unique “insider information” on ISIS’s plans for Kyrgyzstan is independent “religion expert” Kadyr Malikov, who operates a small think-tank called Religion, Rights and Politics and has been a frequent face of “anti-homosexual” measures in line with those passed in Russia. Malikov has long been a primary source for reports that speculate that Kyrgyzstan is an unknowing host to a large number of extremist “sleeper cells,” and by October 2014 Malikov led speculation in the press that these cells were now “turning toward ISIS”; popular tabloids like Bishkek Russian-language Delo No cite claims by Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and the Russian Orthodox site Pravoslavie.ru that the U.S. and Western intelligence agencies fund and control ISIS in order to “destabilize the situation” and prevent Muslim-majority countries from falling out of the “unipolar geopolitics dominated by the United States.”

In January 2015, Kyrgyzstani press and social media exploded with discussion when Malikov said his “sources” had informed him ISIS designated $70 million to specifically “destabilize the situation in Southern Kyrgyzstan” and in the rest of the Ferghana Valley. Although the claims were repeated throughout the region and captured broad public attention, no evidence (or even a source) has ever been presented to support them. In a strange turn of events, in November 2015 Malikov claimed that a street attack, classified by police as an “act of hooliganism” was in fact an assassination attempt by ISIS supporters he claimed were determined to silence him because of his “opposition” to the group. Several of the country’s more popular Kyrgyz-language media outlets issued harsh criticism for the Interior Minister for not “acknowledging” that the attack was an “act of terrorism” before any evidence from the investigation was released, demonstrating perhaps how willing some actors in the media environment are to accept uncorroborated claims that ISIS militants are active inside Kyrgyzstan.

Public Responses

Public responses to ISIS on Kyrgyzstani social media are shaped by this uniquely (in the region) partisan media environment: The July 25, 2015 release of what many believe to be the first Kyrgyz-language ISIS video message and the claim by security services that they had disrupted the kind of “sleeper cell” predicted for months by Malikov and other pundits sparked conspiratorial responses from many Kyrgyzstani social media users. Productive public debate about ISIS continues to be almost impossible in the region and Kyrgyzstan in particular because there is no general agreement on whether or not the group and its messages are real, whether it is an Islamist militant group or a U.S. government operation, or why the group’s ideology appeals to some Central Asians.
As a growing body of academic research has found in other contexts as well, in spite of the proliferation of eyewitness evidence created by social media, social networks and digital media are not exempt from the social and political debates that define discourse and determine accepted narratives in other contexts. No amount of evidence is sufficient to sway deeply held opinions in many cases, and the suspicion that all media is often falsified – as well as a sometimes misguided awareness that information can be released online as part of state-sponsored information operations – leads many Kyrgyzstani social media users to immediately discount digital evidence that does not conform to their previously held beliefs.

The three hour shootout and subsequent residential fires in central Bishkek between security services and suspects later identified as alleged “ISIS cell” members was widely documented by neighborhood residents and eyewitnesses as it happened, posting videos and photographs to social media of a police operation that many felt was chaotic and poorly planned. Videos uploaded by eyewitnesses to the beginning of the raid show that few measures were taken by police to protect the public and police were slow to cordon off the area even after the shooting began. As state and security service officials began to hail the operation as a success that demonstrated Kyrgyzstan’s ability to combat terror, many social media users cited the videos and the long criminal records of many of the suspects as evidence that the raid was more a symbol of ineffective policing.

In what was likely an effort to counteract these rumors, police released their own video that successfully drew social media attention showing the aftermath of the raid, including graphic footage of dead bodies of the slain suspects and the ISIS flag and the weapons purportedly found in the residence. Responses to the evolving claims of security services that well-known opponents of the Atambayev government had suddenly been linked to a Syria-based terrorist organization that planned a spectacular attack on the country and against a Russian air base were met with suspicion and at times with open contempt: the influential political science scholar Aleksandr Knyazev, a strong defender of Russian interests in the country, mocked the claims that a few career criminals could have possibly planned to “attack an enormous Russian air base with a couple of sacks of fertilizer” and cited it as one of many examples of regional governments manipulating public perceptions of the ISIS threat for political purposes, including efforts to convince Russia to grant more military aid.

In response to the July 2015 release of the first ISIS message targeting Kyrgyzstan, social media users and Kyrgyzstani commenters on Kloop – the blog and social media outlet that first broke the news of the video a full day before other media when its journalists discovered it on Twitter – ignored the distinct shift in messaging tactics from ISIS and fall into two camps: those who react with what appears to be genuine fear, including speculation that the wooded setting and lack of weapons may indicate it was filmed inside the country by secret members of the Islamic State, and a large
proportion of users who descend deep into the well of contradictory conspiracy theories to the point that some argue that the video itself does not exist. Kloop’s editor and founder, Bektour Iskender (above), was so inundated by irate conspiracy messages in response to the article that he was prompted to post one at length to his personal Facebook page. The response accused Kloop of creating the video themselves with “USAID funding” in order to “take revenge” on Kyrgyzstan for denouncing its cooperation agreement with the United States, citing the high production values for the video and the speaker’s “excellent diction and grammar” as “evidence” that it was an elaborate hoax. Other Facebook users claimed that the video was created by the Russian Federal Security Service to justify stationing additional troops in Kyrgyzstan or opening a new military base in the country, or that the video and “Facebook trolls” sharing the news are evidence of the “3.7 million dollars” that the United States had supposedly invested in information operations in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan’s domestic media environment plays a role in driving distrust online – while media is relatively more free in Kyrgyzstan, many popular outlets are controlled by political elites themselves and their allies, frequently feature paid content, and are perceived by the public as deeply biased. As documented by academic research in other contexts, social media users frequently become “instant experts” and armchair forensic video analysts in ways that frequently reverse victimhood or reinforce social hierarchies instead of challenging them. This process has been documented from the early development of social media long before the Arab Spring brought participant documentation in social media to the world’s attention.

Kyrgyzstani social media, particularly the longstanding domestic forum Diesel.ekal.ek (the country’s most popular social media platform), is a primary site in which community of users can twist narratives around and interpret evidence to fit their previously held beliefs: users marshal amply available supporting articles from the Russian internet and information operations to argue that ISIS is supported by Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel and that threats or attacks against these states are twisted around to represent evidence of the conspiracy because “that’s part of the act.” In these narratives, the terrorist threat against Kyrgyzstan is regarded as real but the identity of the true aggressor is switched from ISIS to the United States and the very absence of evidence to support these claims is held up as the best possible evidence of conspiracy.
State Reactions to ISIS

State responses to the ISIS threat have done less to steer public discussion than in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in no small part because Kyrgyzstan’s media environment is more pluralist than neighboring states and state-owned outlets and state-approved messages have far less influence, especially on social media. In spite of this difference, state responses in Kyrgyzstan have been nearly identical to those in neighboring states and consistent with the post-Soviet approach to religious freedom, treating religious activity as a potential threat that must be carefully managed and monitored by the state. Responses by state officials to the alleged ISIS cell and video messaging, particularly from Prime Minister Temir Sariyev, have outlined an initial strategy for counteracting the threat of extremism by identifying and eliminating “foreign influence” from “Kyrgyz Islam,” specifically singling out practices visible in public space, including hijab and beards. This approach has received consistent support from sectors of the Kyrgyz-language media as well as Russia-funded local projects that embrace a return to some more resembling Soviet-style governance and values. Support for those same values is also visible in social media discussion, which has since the events of summer 2015 consistently had factions attributing Kyrgyzstan’s vulnerability to terrorism to claims that since the post-Soviet transition, “mosques now outnumber schools.”

Statements by PM Sariev criticizing hijab as a “foreign adaptation” and news that hijab may be banned in schools in Kyrgyzstan beginning in the fall of 2015 provoked an international backlash among reformist Muslims on social media and within Kyrgyzstan’s own parliament. Though the extent to which Kyrgyzstani authorities may attempt to enforce restrictions on Islamic dress in public spaces remains to be seen, many social media users expressed resentment at the implication that what they saw as an expression of piety indicated support for terrorism or a betrayal of their national identity.
Even as state responses strike many as tone-deaf and essentially identical to an outdated Soviet approach, Kyrgyzstan’s relatively pluralist political climate, facilitated by social media, allows political opposition figures, including some ethnic Kyrgyz politicians, to criticize the ruling government’s actions against Uzbek leaders from the south. Former chairman of the National Opposition Movement and sitting MP Ravshan Jeyenbekov, for example, posted a video to his personal Facebook page of a Rashod Kamalov sermon (already widely circulated in Uzbek networks) in which he condemns the Islamic State, questioning government charges that Kamalov recruited for the organization. Jeyenbekov argued in response to pushback in the comments to his post that Kamalov’s only “crime” was his criticism of corruption within Kyrgyzstan’s law enforcement organizations.

Policy Takeaways

Although state reactions in Kyrgyzstan are markedly less conspiratorial and divided than those in the public reflected on social media, by focusing only on external cultural markers and ascribing the appeal of Islamism as a political system to “foreign influence” officials have done little or nothing to counteract conspiracy theories (many of which blame the United States for ISIS expansion) or to engage with Islamist criticisms of corruption, inequality and injustice that resonate with marginalized sections of the Kyrgyzstani population.

Instead of addressing these grievances, particularly among Uzbeks in the south, for whom imam Rashod Kamalov was perhaps the most influential figure left in a position of authority following the 2010 ethnic conflict, they are conflated with ISIS as a source of
“foreign influence” and treated as an isometric threat.

The state must learn to differentiate between reformist Muslims, peaceful Islamists, and foreign-sponsored violent extremist organizations. The Kyrgyzstani state’s refusal or inability to do this – especially among ethnic minority populations – will likely do little to help ensure domestic stability, although it should also be emphasized that ISIS messaging resonates at such low levels among the public that it is extremely unlikely that the group itself could mobilize support outside of isolated small groups or individual, lone-wolf operations.

The relative freedom of the Kyrgyzstani media environment, combined with its stark politicization, leaves many citizens without sources they could agree on to present them with objective information. Non-commercial and apolitical media could become an important tool in combatting rampant conspiracy theories that distort the country’s information environment and make it difficult for citizens to make informed choices and participate in grassroots efforts to counteract mobilization by extremist groups of all stripes.