What Happens When Your Town Becomes an ISIS Recruiting Ground?

Lessons from Central Asia about Vulnerability, Resistance, and the Danger of Ignoring Perceived Injustice

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Ravshanhon with her grandchildren in Nariman, a small town in the Osh region approximately 40 minutes from Aravan. Her daughter and three other grandchildren were lured to Syria three years ago on the promise of what she believed was just a seasonal job in neighboring Kazakhstan. Now they are trapped in a prisoner of war camp, but Ravshanhon cannot learn where exactly they are located because they do not know themselves. Photo Credit: Noah Tucker.
According to estimates produced by the Soufan Group in late 2017, the conflict in Syria and Iraq that began in 2012 drew more foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union than from any other region of the world, including the Middle East. Long-standing networks connecting Chechen and Dagestani fighters to international jihadi groups make it comparatively easy to understand the number of fighters from the Russian Federation in the Middle East, but the numbers of Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Tajiks are harder to explain. How did groups in the Middle East that primarily recruited in Arabic and English draw Central Asians at all, and what did Central Asian volunteers believe awaited them in a foreign civil war unfolding in two countries to which they had no cultural, linguistic, or historical ties? On a more local level, why do countries show distinct regional and demographic patterns that favor some of their most remote regions? “Hotspots” include the isolated mining and oil-drilling cities in the Kazakh desert (Zhezkazgan, Aktobe, Atyrau), the agricultural deep south of Tajikistan (Khatlon province), and southern Kyrgyzstan’s Ferghana Valley communities, which are cut off from the rest of the country by a high mountain range and were isolated from surrounding states by strictly closed borders during the height of the recruiting period (2012–2015).

This study is a preliminary attempt to answer these questions by linking prior research on the recruiting tactics of militant Islamist organizations working to recruit Uzbeks—including ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates or associates—with fieldwork research on the ground in one of the communities that has been most vulnerable to that recruiting. This study draws on two sets of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with local youth in the village of Aravan in southern Kyrgyzstan in the fall of 2016 and again in late 2017 and early 2018. The sessions were intended to lay the foundation for broader work that would create evidence-based approaches to policies for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region, and to begin to outline why current CVE efforts may have fallen short in a community that has been identified by the Kyrgyzstani security services and outside evidence as uniquely vulnerable to recruiting to the Syrian conflict. Underlying all of these efforts, we want to offer an emic perspective on a problem all too often viewed “from 10,000 feet” by outside analysts writing about geopolitics, global movements, and regional security.

In particular, our sessions were designed to investigate how youth in this particular area of Southern Kyrgyzstan explained their community’s vulnerability to violent Islamist recruiters, as well as learn about their own personal experiences of losing neighbors, classmates, friends, or family members in the Syrian conflict and the motivations for leaving of those close to them. Questions and interviews were also structured to test the likely applicability of some approaches to CVE programs based on prevailing outside explanations for Aravan’s vulnerability to recruiting and identify local approaches and resources that might be more successful in this and similarly structured communities.

Context: Aravan and Syria

Aravan is a small city of around 17,000 (2009 census) located in an eponymous district southwest of Osh in Kyrgyzstan. Although the Aravan district makes up less than 2% of the total population of Kyrgyzstan, according to official estimates it supplied around one-third of all Kyrgyzstani fighters to Syria and Iraq, with neighboring communities in the greater southern region providing more than half the total. While these numbers are estimates that are often contested and considered problematic, there is general agreement that, per capita, Aravan has suffered more from recruiting than any other community in the country. There are four general characteristics that set Aravan apart from other Kyrgyzstani cities and are sometimes suggested as partial or full explanations for why so many residents joined the war in Syria: geographic isolation, demographics, economic hardship resulting from a recent conflict, and a period of marked “religious revival.”

Aravan is most readily distinguished from neighboring communities by its geographic isolation. A mixed population with a firm ethnic Uzbek majority,
it is located on a kind of artificial land peninsula surrounded on three sides by the border with Uzbekistan, which remains closed. During the period of peak recruiting to the Syrian conflict—while Islam Karimov was still alive and President of Uzbekistan—the border was delineated with a high barbed wire fence and regularly patrolled by heavily armed border guards with dogs. Shepherds or other civilians who strayed across the border were often detained or even shot. A single road leading to Osh is the community’s primary connection to the rest of Kyrgyzstan.

This geographic isolation is new. Until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Aravanis could travel across the border with ease. The ethnic composition of towns and which side of the border they fell on was similarly inconsequential. For Aravanis, these issues became deeply meaningful during and after the ethnic conflict that broke out in nearby Osh and Jalalabad—and a string of villages between these two cities—in June 2010. Aravanis took cooperative action to prevent the conflict from spreading to their city, steps that have been hailed by Khamidov, Megoran, and Heathershaw as demonstrating successful inter-ethnic elite negotiation and cooperation mechanisms. This made Aravan different from some of the surrounding villages, which were gutted by a conflict that temporarily displaced more than 100,000 people and left some 10,000 homeless. But while Aravan escaped conflict and physical destruction, the economic consequences of the short conflict were deeply felt: much of the regional agricultural bazaar in Osh and other businesses that employed Aravanis or sold their goods were burned to the ground. The total closure of border crossings to Uzbekistan at Dostyk (Osh) and Kara-Suu, which were critical for trade, was a severe setback for the economy of the whole region, particularly for ethnic Uzbeks who had relied on cross-border trade networks with their larger group of co-ethnics in Uzbekistan. The economic circumstances, border closure, heightened ethnic tension in Kyrgyzstan, and fear of “detention and ransom” schemes practiced by police in the aftermath of the conflict drove a large proportion of Aravan’s young males to embark on labor migration in order to earn a living, primarily heading to Russia, where demographics have created a significant demand for immigrant labor.

In parallel to—and perhaps influenced by—the above trends, Aravan is a frequently cited example of “Islamicization of everyday life” or “Islamic revival” in Southern Kyrgyzstan in the independence period. As previously explored in detail by scholars like Julie McBrien, David Montgomery, Alisher Khamidov, Asel Doolotkeldieva, and Asel Murzakulova, Aravan and similar communities in its vicinity have been on the leading edge of a trend in which residents have made changes to their everyday life, style of dress, patterns of speech, and social networks in order to conform more closely to what they consider correct interpretations of Islamic scripture and tradition. In a community where, 25 years ago, public life consisted of secular community gatherings, life-cycle rituals, and holidays that were often marked with music and vodka, the outward signs of religious devotion are increasingly visible. Men’s beards are longer and more common; simple Islamic skullcaps have often replaced traditional ethnic Uzbek square hats (do’ppa) or Kyrgyz tall peaked qolpoqs. Women wearing headscarves that cover their necks and hairline (described as hijab) have become the norm. Weddings now feature a sermon by a local cleric instead of music or alcohol, and social and working lives are often structured around the schedule of daily prayers and meetings of devotional groups that provide religious education and mutual support. In Aravan, alcohol has been voluntarily removed from the shelves of almost every store and is no longer served in most restaurants. While other “dry towns” have been legislated by committed local residents through their local authorities, in Aravan this reflects not an act of city government or a campaign by the local imam but “organic” social change.

**Methodology**

The study was carried out in two phases, the first and largest of which was entirely in Aravan. Six focus groups with a total of around 50 participants were held in Aravan in August–October 2017; the semi-structured sessions gave participants the opportunity to respond to and
discuss the same core group of questions. The groups were gender-representative (though held separately in most cases), included individuals aged between 15 and 40, and were primarily ethnic Uzbek (and conducted in Uzbek). The second round was more focused, building on the experience of the first round, with a group of 12 Aravanis (both Kyrgyz and Uzbek), six of whom participated in a second round in which they also interacted with Kyrgyzstani citizens from Bishkek, and three of whom later participated in a regional round in which they interacted with peers from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as well. These later rounds were conducted in Russian, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz, with translation available in each language. Only the comments of the Aravani participants from those focus groups will be considered in this study.

Supplementing these groups are semi-structured interviews and interactions with government officials at the national level, security and government officials at the local level in Aravan, and NGO employees, local scholars, and religious figures at both levels, as well as a series of interviews with families from across Kyrgyzstan that have lost a member in the conflict in Syria. The primary sessions, which are the focus of this paper, began with questions about religious belonging, identification, and how participants evaluate claims of religious authority to determine what is true or right from an Islamic perspective. Specifically, they examined to what extent respondents turn to printed religious texts or consume religious information online.8

The second set of questions that will be examined in this study interrogated these specific issues: 1) Who do you know who went to Syria? 2) How were they recruited? Did you or anyone else have any prior indication that they would leave or that they supported a militant Islamist group? 3) Were they recruited in person, or did online communications play an important role? 4) To which resources did you turn in order to prevent a person close to you from going, or to which resources would you turn if someone very close to you announced their intention to fight in Syria and you wanted to prevent them from doing so? 5) Would you notify the police if someone very close to you divulged their intention to go to Syria to join the conflict, particularly if you were sure that they would be killed if they went?

The structure of the second wave of focus group interviews (conducted with RFE/RL and filmed) followed the first three general questions in the extremist recruiting subset, but with the added element that participants were shown short video interviews with the family members of several fellow Kyrgyzstanis who had been killed or trapped in Syria and given the opportunity to respond and discuss.

Popular Hypotheses for Participation in the Syrian Conflict: The “Salafi” Explanation

During preliminary research for the first round of fieldwork, conducted in 2016, a single explanation emerged among sources in Kyrgyzstan but outside Aravan when asked to explain the large number of Aravanis who joined the conflict in Syria: “They have a Salafi imam in one of their mosques. He has recruited a lot of Salafis, and Salafis go to Syria.”

The “Salafi mosque” explanation was prevalent even among ordinary Uzbeks living in nearby Osh who believed that they were themselves being falsely accused of being “Islamic radicals” by some Kyrgyzstani politicians searching for external actors and “third forces” to whom to assign blame for the conflict. This explanation appears to rest on several other assumptions about Aravan and the recruitment process that feature prominently in state discourses about the problem and have been used to guide or construct government-funded CVE policy:

A) That the Islamicization of everyday life visible in communities like Aravan, which entails implicit or explicit renunciation of traditionally common local practices (e.g. drinking alcohol, experiencing life cycle rituals as parties rather than as sacred occasions, etc.), is the result of “foreign” or external influences that must be coterminous with a different
school of Islamic jurisprudence—namely “Salafi” or “Wahhabi” teaching—likely represented by some type of foreign agent, often assumed to be a local who “studied abroad” and returned to preach “foreign” doctrines at home;

B) That there is (frequently or predominantly) a direct link between recruiting to the war in Syria and “Salafi” beliefs—that is, people who go to Syria are “Salafis”, and

C) That Kyrgyzstanis primarily go to Syria for religious reasons.

As will be discussed in the final section, the failure of local-level data to support these explanations may indicate that some current CVE efforts are misdirected and should be reconsidered.

Focus Group Results

The Aravani focus groups quickly revealed an extreme contradiction between the emic and etic experiences of the crisis that the community faced. Two things became clear during the interview process. Firstly, recruiting touched the whole city. Nearly every resident of Aravan we interviewed personally knew someone who had gone to fight in Syria, either someone from their everyday networks or a prominent member of the community who was familiar to all of them, like the businessman who owned a large metal-working shop on the central bazaar and took his wife and children to Syria. Secondly, not a single participant cited “Salafi imams,” “Salafi networks,” Salafism, or foreign religious leaders as a driver in recruiting. Indeed, it became apparent as soon as fieldwork began, in collaboration with local partners who were lifelong Aravani residents and closely connected to Aravan’s Islamic community, that there was no “Salafi imam” or mosque.

Aravani participants in the project found it humorous that outsiders regarded them as Salafis—particularly the first focus group session, which was held in a local restaurant sometimes called the first “Salafi” establishment in Aravan, since men and women are segregated at tables (following normal Ferghana Valley culture) and smoking and drinking are both banned on the premises. Rather than reflecting foreign values, participants believed this corresponded to the dictates of their own “authentic” traditions and Islamic scripture that was a key part of their own traditional values, even if older generations had not—in the different political context of the Soviet Union—always adhered to them. Participants, nearly all of whom knew someone personally who had been recruited to Syria, saw no inherent connection between their religiously observant neighbors (or themselves) and the individuals they knew who went to Syria, nor did they identify them as having been members of some kind of other sect of Islam. Similarly, local security services did not point to a “foreign imam” or any other type of key recruiting network in the small city.

Overwhelmingly, participants viewed the flow of their neighbors to Syria negatively and expressed a desire to participate in or support cooperative mechanisms that would prevent recruiting. The single most common key factor they identified in the recruiting process was migration to Russia—with the notable exceptions of high-profile residents who left with their whole families, like the prominent businessman mentioned above. Most of the stories respondents cited were of friends who disappeared while working in Russia and later reappeared in Syria. This added to the common perception that it was difficult or impossible to determine when even a close friend or relative began to consider leaving for Syria or began to be recruited. Participants frequently listed community mechanisms, family influence, and trusted local advisers who could have been mobilized in counter-recruiting, but these were helpless to act when community members were in Russia and physically cut off from them—a separation that also made it far more difficult to detect a person’s intentions or the networks influencing them, even if the individual was a close family member. While a causal relationship between migration and recruitment is unclear, it is clear that both AQ-affiliated groups and ISIS devoted specific recruiting resources to ethnic Uzbeks working in Russia, both online and in real life. The likelihood that an Aravani would be exposed to recruiting—particularly to in-person recruiters who could fund and facilitate their travel to the conflict zone—was significantly higher in Russia because both
sets of violent extremist groups had strong online and offline networks there and specifically targeted labor migrants as a comparatively vulnerable population.

Very few respondents described having an experience where the recruit voiced their intentions or gave any prior indication that they were considering going to Syria. In the overwhelming majority of cases, Aravanis learned of the person’s intentions only after the fact, when they were contacted from Syria or Iraq or saw a video of a person they knew in Syria (such videos were often distributed by the recruits using messenger applications). Among the families we interviewed that had lost their children or close relatives in Syria, respondents often mentioned deception on the part of their loved ones, who hid their true destinations and intentions. Mohidilhon, a mother from Osh, related the story of her daughter-in-law, who claimed she was taking her children to a relative’s wedding in Uzbekistan. Only much later, when they attempted to verify that she had crossed into Uzbekistan, did the family learn from border control agents that the daughter-in-law had taken her children to the airport and boarded a flight to Turkey, re-establishing contact weeks later in Syria.¹¹

Through this and many other stories related by our participants, a pattern emerges: many residents were recruited by people close to them. Husbands took their wives, or wives followed their husbands, brothers convinced their brothers, and classmates were recruited by other classmates already in Syria. Clusters of personal acquaintance often appear to have been far more significant than religious

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¹¹ Focus group participants frequently cited the local mosque community as a resource they could turn to for support if they feared someone close to them was becoming radicalized.

Photo Credit: Noah Tucker
affiliations or even beliefs. Very few cited the influence of general online propaganda, but many mentioned the influence of direct online connections via messenger applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram that facilitated recruiting ties between Aravanis already in Syria and their friends, neighbors, or classmates at home. From the focus groups, it became apparent that online communications played a key role in embroiling the Aravan community in the conflict, not—as had been posited or observed previously—via traditional social media, but rather through media that reflect real-life personal connections between individuals and that facilitate direct one-on-one communication. While motives are, from the outside, often assumed to be primarily religious, many participants articulated that going to Syria was the only available “act of protest” in a system that they viewed as both inherently corrupt and unjust. Rather than being attracted to a specific religious theology or sectarian identity, going to Syria was a way to combat injustice in the world, whether political, economic, or even familial. (I will return to this point below.) One participant cited a young man in her neighborhood who tried to arrange a marriage with her sister. When her parents refused, he went to fight in Syria as an act of youthful rebellion, to show his dissatisfaction with “unfairness” in life and perhaps to recover from a perceived slight to his masculinity. Analysis of recruiting narratives aimed at Central Asians by jihadist groups and responses from these focus groups and other interviews reveal that “justice” is a key part of the discourse on both sides: oppressors will be destroyed and the haughty brought low, ethnicity and national identity will be erased in a community where Muslim identity supposedly levels all differences and invites all to equal status. Economic justice means an end to corruption and swift punishment for the corrupt, whose resources will be redistributed, and no father will ever refuse to give his daughter in marriage to a loyal soldier of the Caliphate—who will never be limited to only one wife.

Some of our interlocutors, especially those who were themselves pious Muslims, theorized in the abstract that those who went must have misunderstood the concept of “jihad” because their belief that the war in Syria and Iraq could be legitimate jihad must be based on poor religious education. Many agreed that a lack of religious education and even general awareness of other religions might be a key factor in the vulnerability of Aravanis who were recruited. In response to a question along the lines of “If you learned that someone close to you intended to go to Syria and you could ask anyone in the world to speak with them and explain why they were making a mistake, who would you choose?” respondents most frequently identified the local imam of the Friday Mosque, Ahmat qori, whom they cited as someone with deep religious knowledge but also close ties to the community; he is viewed as a trusted figure who would be listened to. Others cited a personal acquaintance whom they trusted, showing a distinct preference for the value of personal relationships, piety, and knowledge demonstrated intersubjectively in the community over abstract authority or credentials, even when the life of a loved one was at stake. This again indicates that for our participants, this was an issue of interpersonal ties lived out in community in both its causes and solutions, rather than an abstract issue caused by aberrant theology that could be solved by outside experts.

In rare cases, someone’s intentions became clear before leaving. One woman from Aravan recounted that when a cousin’s husband left for Syria with his first wife and children, the second wife—after moving back in with her own parents—grew angry, believing she had been left behind and had no future prospects. As such, she became determined to follow him to the conflict zone. Her whole family attempted to talk her out of leaving, to no avail, and eventually agreed to seize her passport to prevent her from leaving the country. After the first round of focus groups in 2016, it appeared to be a significant success story of local intervention—but in 2017 she applied for a new passport, claiming her original was lost, and successfully left for Syria in spite of the best efforts of her family. This highlights a lack of trusted communication between affected families and local authorities that will be discussed further in the next section.
The most difficult cases for any of the participants to find rational explanations for are those in which entire families—often relatively well-off and highly regarded in the community—abruptly disappeared and then reappeared in Syria. These were the exceptions, rather than the rule; notably, while many of the young men who went alone to join the conflict were recruited into an Uzbek brigade in Jabhat al Nusra that was famously led by one of the first local residents to join the conflict in Syria, those who were well-off and left directly for the conflict zone with their whole families overwhelmingly seem to have joined Islamic State. A participant who had himself conducted a large number of focus groups for a local CVE project stated in several sessions that he believed that the possibility of living in an alternate political order—an Islamic State or caliphate—had drawn a significant popular following during the peak period of recruitment and was a significant motivating factor for some of those who left. Disillusioned with the perceived injustice of the post-conflict opportunities for ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, they had come to believe that they would be better represented in a government in which Islamic identity was the key to governance and belonging.

Participants frequently believed that for many who left, the primary explanation was a prioritization of the afterlife: those who left believed—erroneously, according to our participants—that fighting in Syria guaranteed them a place in heaven. Participants cited cases, especially in more recent years, in which those who left were already marginalized in their communities, having joined criminal gangs, got into trouble with the law, or accumulated unsustainable debt. According to our participants, many who went to Syria did not seem to understand what they were getting into and saw the ungoverned spaces in Syria as a kind of “frontier” territory where they could find adventure, escape problems, or reinvent themselves. All of these broader interpretations meant that neither we nor our participants could identify a single “profile” for the dozens of residents who had left, but a common factor was an extreme dissatisfaction with the status quo and a dim view of the prospects for a future in which the recruits remained in Aravan or continued working in Russia. Dissatisfied with their lives the way they were and having given up hope of making things better in their current surroundings, the call of Syria—at its simplest—was the opportunity to re-invent oneself and be part of the great “adventure” of re-inventing the whole world. On the individual level, as Peter Bergen puts it, it seemed like the chance “to be the hero in your own story.”15

This leads to what is perhaps the most significant finding for current CVE and law enforcement efforts to counteract violent extremist recruiting in this context. In response to the question about whether they would contact the police if they learned someone close to them was planning to join the conflict in Syria, in the larger first round not a single participant indicated that they would be willing to involve the police, even if they knew that their inaction would result in their loved one’s death. Below is a notable exchange in response to this question (names have been changed):

Q: If you learned that someone close to you or a relative planned to go to Syria, would you turn to the police?

Shohruh: Allah save us from this situation. I am afraid to talk about this with the police.

Moderator: Why?

Bahrom: Because he will [falsely] make you into an accomplice?

Shohruh: No, I am not afraid of that. If someone close to me planned to go to Syria, I think I would not be afraid for myself. I am afraid that I would make him suffer a lot at the hands of the police.

Azizbek: Like you said [earlier], he will come out [of the police station] as an invalid.

Shohruh: Yes. I am afraid of that.

Bahodir: It is better he will go there [to Syria] if he wants it for himself.

Bahrom: If they go to Syria, they will die and their dead body will return, if it will return. Or if they come back alive, they will be taken away by security officers, which will lead to torture and maybe being left an invalid.

Moderator: So you say it is worse for him to return alive?

Bahrom: Yes. It would not be good if he returns alive.

Although one deeply grieved participant in the 2017/18 rounds of focus groups whose close friend was killed in Syria stated in retrospect that he wished he could have turned his friend in to the police before he left so that he would “at least still be alive,” others faced with the choice in the abstract responded more frequently along the lines above. They indicated an extreme distrust of the police, not only toward
them as ethnic Uzbeks (following the 2010 violence and the wave of kidnappings of ethnic Uzbek young men at the hands of police followed by ransom demands to their families, which many had heard about from nearby communities), but also that the police discriminated against practicing Muslims and were abusive toward citizens in general regardless of ethnicity. Whether or not this belief is founded on demonstrable evidence, the frequency with which the belief predominated in the focus groups was one of the most consistent results of this study. Even though some respondents spoke highly of police efforts to conduct CVE and prevent their neighbors from joining the conflict in Syria—and connected the outflow of members of their community to Syria with criminal networks, which they agree are the legitimate realm of the police—the distrust of police when it came to direct interactions remained.

**What Do These Results Tell Us About Current CVE Strategies?**

The additional survey work conducted in Aravan and evaluation of policies and statements from the Kyrgyzstani government show that current efforts to counter violent extremism focus on ideology and an ethnic national identity. This study and others like it indicate that these foci fail to resonate with Uzbeks in particular: their tenuous belonging as Kyrgyzstani citizens in a context that privileges ethnic Kyrgyz identity for full citizenship means they and other minorities are often poorly served in prevention programs that focus on ethnic national identity and belonging. This is particularly counterproductive since previous research has shown that VEO recruiters have identified Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbeks as primary targets and the present study has demonstrated the existence of personal networks that have

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*Figure 2. The Market in Aravan*

*Photo Credit: Noah Tucker*
played a significant role in pulling ethnic Uzbeks, in particular, into militant organizations based in Syria and Iraq.

Through the beginning of 2018, the response of Kyrgyzstani authorities to the threat of far-off Islamist militant groups recruiting its citizens has been to argue, in one way or another, that citizens should not believe the messages of these groups because they are not Kyrgyz and conflict with ethnic Kyrgyz values, which are not clearly defined and are a topic of considerable debate.

Perhaps the best example of this is a bulletin board messaging program launched first by a Bishkek-based NGO and then expanded nationwide by the administration of former President Atambayev. The bulletin boards had just been installed in Osh in Uzbek-majority residential areas as fieldwork for this project began in August 2016.

The left-hand side of the billboard depicts a group of women wearing distinctive ethnic Kyrgyz dress from the 19th century. In the two photos on the right-hand side, women understood to be “foreign” are shown dressed in a “foreign” style, wearing first white, then black, full facial veils that leave only a narrow slit for the eyes. The caption, with an arrow from left to right (which most interpreted to imply movement from a glorious past to a troubling future), reads “Oh My Poor Nation, Where Are You Headed?”

Among ethnic Kyrgyz young people, the billboards immediately became a subject of mockery because for many, the costumes portrayed as “true” Kyrgyz identity are just that—costumes. They are worn in “traditional” performances by schoolchildren in much the same way as American children dress up as pilgrims for Thanksgiving in grade school. As such, the billboards failed to resonate with the titular majority.

But for many in the non-Russian, non-Kyrgyz minority, the message was clear: there is only one way to be, and that is Kyrgyz. Those who embrace an Islamic identity instead of an ethnic Kyrgyz one are—as the rest of the government’s messaging makes clear—a threat to be countered. While the billboards were met with mockery and a snarky meme campaign in Bishkek, in a Tajik-majority village in Batken one was burned to the ground by angry citizens.

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**Figure 3. “Oh My Poor Nation, Where Are You Headed?”**

Photo Credit: Toby A. Cox
When we consider the data gathered in Aravan (described above), the campaign becomes not only ineffective, but potentially counterproductive. By reinforcing Kyrgyz ethnicity as a requirement for full belonging in Kyrgyzstani society, the billboards and the broader policy they illustrate serve only to further alienate those who already doubt their ability to belong on the Kyrgyzstani political landscape or who place their religious identity and what they perceive to be its demands above their ethnic belonging.

Approach 2: “A War of Ideas”

A second method our research showed to be extensively used by the state and its elites (as well as by other states in the region) is attempts to counter “extremist ideology”—often conflated with “Salafism” or “Wahhabism”—with Hanafi identity. In Kyrgyzstan specifically, state-backed clerics often describe appropriate belief and identity as “Hanafi mazhab, Maturidi aqida” to include the scholarship by an obscure Central Asian cleric in the 8th century that they argue created a unique Central Asian interpretation of Islam, although focus group responses confirmed that few in Aravan had ever heard of Imam Maturidi or knew his work.

Responses from focus group participants—as well as the limited body of other survey work and scholarship from Southern Kyrgyzstan—make a strong case that this approach is theologically unpersuasive and fails to resonate with any group identity that Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan find meaningful—or of which they are even aware. Questions about religious identity posed in the first round of focus groups showed that respondents in Aravan not only did not have a strong sense that they were members of the Hanafi mazhab, but many were also unable to identify with certainty whether they were Sunni or Shia Muslims. This is not necessarily a sign of some type of religious ignorance, but rather indicates that while Sunni/Shia identity politics may play a large role in recruiting in the Arab world, where many potential recruits see Shia Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Syrian Alawites as a serious threat, sectarian identity appeals have little resonance with residents of southern Kyrgyzstan.

Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail in a second paper drawn from this research and has been elaborated in the literature review cited above, appeals to “Hanafi identity” fail to register with heuristics most interlocutors use to evaluate religious truth-claims. (Hanafi jurisprudence is built on an ever-increasing set of commentaries on primary texts, while members of the piety movement evaluate truth-claims based on the primary texts themselves.) This Hanafi-focused approach fails to engage the discussion in the language recruiters and potential targets use—instead, it demands that Kyrgyzstani citizens reject religious arguments from extremist groups on the grounds that they are made by members of a different group and are therefore automatically invalid. The results of this research and other work done in the region suggest that this is a deeply ineffective approach to countering VEO recruiting, and may in fact be ultimately counterproductive by further widening the trust gap between Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks and the authorities and inadvertently making it much easier for ISIS recruiters, for example, to argue that “being a real Muslim” is illegal in Kyrgyzstan and therefore faithful Muslims cannot live there.

We suggest that a much stronger approach would be to empower respected and established religious authorities who can engage with extremist groups on their own terms and point out the flaws in their interpretations of scripture and the ways in which they are often self-contradictory. Not only has the Kyrgyzstani government so far rejected this approach with ethnic Uzbek imams and religious authorities, but they have also elected to prosecute the most influential Uzbek cleric, who engaged with his congregants in an anti-ISIS sermon using exactly this methodology.

This approach is also suggested strongly by the results and analysis of the most comprehensive national-level study completed to date in Kyrgyzstan by the Research Institute for Islamic Studies, conducted by Emil Nasridinov, Zarina Urmanbetoeva, Kanatbek Murzakhililov, and Mamatbek Myrzabaev. Across multiple methodologies, their study found that religious networks often play a positive role in deterring youth from joining violent extremist groups or participating in other forms of violence, just as they found that personal experience of discrimination and injustice...
are the most important factors creating vulnerability to extremist recruiting.20

An Alternative Approach: Community Resources and Strong, Supportive Networks

While this project and others provide evidence that a few of the people identified by the participants as having “gone to Syria” do seem to have been motivated at least in part by belief or ideology—like the metal shop owner from the Aravan bazaar—a large portion of those who go or are prevented from going, like the abandoned second wife who hoped to follow her husband and his first wife to Syria, are pulled in or held back by people in personal networks that vary widely in structure, from family members to classmates to other members of criminal or semi-criminal subculture.

This finding is supported by one of the few general conclusions of seventeen years of global scholarship on countering VEO recruiting produced by military specialists, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and others from a wide variety of fields, many of whom have come to agree that a) there is no single profile—psychological, demographic, ideological, or otherwise—that can predict who will be drawn into a violent extremist group on an individual level, and b) more often than not, no matter their individual profile, people are drawn into organized insurgent or militant groups by their personal networks. As insurgency specialist David Kilcullen famously put it, “People don’t get pushed into rebellion by their ideology. They get pulled in by their social networks.”21 Or, as researcher Haroon Ullah recently described it, violent extremism and its ideology spread in a way very similar to biological viruses “like herpes—from close contact.”22

These preliminary results from Aravan, as well as other studies on recruiting patterns of Central Asians to Syria, such as the excellent work by Edward Lemon,23 provide ample evidence that real-life social networks need to become an area of focus for efforts to counter recruiting. The Aravanis we interviewed also overwhelmingly agreed that social and family networks in this local ethnic Uzbek context were both a cause and a cure: in cases our interlocutors observed firsthand, “bad” networks containing people already in Syria, petty criminals, or the “Islamized mafia” are seen as the primary reason that some people were pulled in; “good” networks include trusted local religious authorities and families who could take drastic steps to prevent a relative from going to Syria, like the mother who intervened by taking her daughter’s passport away. Even in the case of those recruited over social media, many respondents noted that recruiting happened via direct messaging between people who already knew one another in real life: personal connections appear to be a key feature and help explain why “hotspots” occur. (This echoes the findings of prior work by Lemon and Tucker analyzing online recruiting.)24 Rather than recruiting by casting a wide net over social media and drawing in potential recruits at random from across a wide geographic area, recruiters appear to focus on personal acquaintances with whom they have shared trust and experiences; one person who becomes convinced to join the war in Syria frequently pulls other members of their close network with them. While networks among Aravan residents explain some patterns in recruiting clusters, we should note that adding new individuals to their online or offline social networks in Russia also frequently appears to play a key role—having a common language, homeland, and religion with a friendly new acquaintance who later turns out to be a violent extremist recruiter is an experience often cited by Central Asians who are pulled into the Syria/Iraq conflict.

Interviews with teachers, students, and other community members indicate that CVE operations conducted by local (city- and district-level) authorities have quietly responded to exactly these concerns, working with teachers and community leaders to help them identify early warning signs and understand how current students are being recruited by former students, for example. Why, then, do national-level and political responses concentrate almost solely on religious networks and religious identity? The Soviet Union approached religion as a social phenomenon that must be carefully managed—an approach
that remains as a legacy common to nearly every post-Soviet state outside of the Baltics—and tied a single approved religious identity to each ethnic identity. That is, Russians may be Orthodox Christians and receive state approval or even funding, but they cannot be members of Protestant denominations or Jehovah’s Witnesses. The same general strategy has consistently been applied to Islam, in spite of the reality of multiple approaches and interpretations that have always competed for the right to represent “traditional” and thus “approved” Islamic faith.

While these issues have been discussed at length by this and other authors in earlier publications, I would like to theorize here an approach suggested by political scientist Eric McGlinchey in the first decade of the 2000s: support for radical political solutions tends to appear in Central Asia in areas where other political mechanisms have disappeared and among groups to whom they are not available. As I have argued elsewhere:

Radical Islamist groups are likely to be able to influence and potentially mobilize elements of the population in areas that fit two conditions: 1) Islam is a register on which people communicate and a point of reference in making personal and communal moral decisions; and/or 2) Some social groups within this first population feel significantly dissatisfied with, disengaged from, and unrepresented in the political process at the local or national level; they seek radical or revolutionary political solutions because they believe they face radical political problems.

With the transition from single-mandate districts that were at times demographically dominated by ethnic minorities and thus secured ethnic minority representation at the national level, the switch to a party-list parliamentary system and the aftermath of the ethnic conflict effectively ended the role of ethnic Uzbeks in the national political system. These political issues, as well as the possibility that the 2010 conflict and its aftermath had—and continues to have—a disproportionate negative economic effect on some communities (although members of all ethnic communities in the south suffered greatly) cannot yet in practice be discussed at the national level and led to criminal charges against a candidate following the 2017 presidential election. It could be argued that politics and political economy cannot be part of the answer in public discussion at the state level because that would acknowledge political problems that might require reforms that are effectively off the table. This leaves religion and religious identity as the only acceptable explanations for the problem of recruiting to violent extremist organizations. It is somewhat remarkable that this situation applies to Kyrgyzstan—a system with more political competition than any of its neighbors—almost as well as it does to other states in the region, and we would argue that it is an important barrier to constructing effective CVE programs or simply accurate evaluations of the underlying issues.

Even on the local level, where assessments in private are much more frank and acknowledge that personal and family networks are key to preventing recruitment, the gulf between these networks and the police remains troubling. Police working to interdict recruiting efforts and identify potential targets are missing significant indigenous community resources that could make their work far more effective.

When community prevention mechanisms fail, preliminary results from the present focus groups suggest that many ethnic minority residents agree that it becomes a problem that should be policed—especially since studies indicate a growing link between criminal networks and extremist recruiting that could inspire local attacks as well—but the gap in trust between Aravan residents and their police represents a final critical flaw that hampers policing. The link identified by our Aravan interlocutors between criminal elements—at least socially marginalized young people who are no longer connected to “good” networks that might have prevented them from making costly mistakes—implies that the best approach would be a working partnership between the police and robust community resources that could cooperate to prevent mobilization and police criminal activity once it begins to prevent further consequences.

Here, the Community Policing model or “policing by consent,” credited by many with helping slowly reduce both crime rates and inter-ethnic tension in analogous situations (like racially
divided Los Angeles or gang violence in the UK in the 1990s), may be useful to consider. This is not to say that the problem has been solved in the US or the UK by any means, where relations between minorities and police remain notoriously problematic and continue to be violent in many areas (and adoption of the community policing model is far from universal), but rather that these communities acknowledge costly mistakes and in the best cases make an effort to learn from them. Several of the participants in our focus groups, especially teachers who were shocked to learn how many of their students were communicating with peers in Syria over secure mobile apps like WhatsApp, expressed sincere willingness to cooperate with police to learn how to intervene lest their students be drawn into a far-off civil war.

Conclusions: Policy Takeaways

Overall, while these findings can only be preliminary and evidence-based policy instruments should be developed from larger-scale survey work across multiple affected communities in the region, I believe that this research fits well into a body of other scholarship that suggests that ethnic Uzbeks (as well as other groups in Central Asia) have strong indigenous community resources to combat Islamist militant recruiting.30

In a community that increasingly negotiates social norms and values in a religious vocabulary, we cannot ignore the fact that religious identity and religious arguments are used by violent extremist groups that claim religious authority and situate their own actions in an eschatological framework that justifies actions most potential recruits would never consider in ordinary circumstances. Perhaps most significantly, results from this study and others that have emerged from the Syrian conflict indicate that an important part of success in recruiting by groups fighting there is their ability to present claims about justice in an Islamic vocabulary that resonates with potential recruits: where in the West we might complain about inequality or discrimination, Aravanis and many other Central Asians see adolatsizlik (injustice). In an environment where there are few mechanisms for citizens to negotiate injustice with government leaders or even raise questions—particularly for those living in subaltern groups—discussion of injustice is dominated by insurgent organizations. Religious leaders who have earned the respect of their community can challenge the ideological claims made by militant Islamist groups like ISIS in an Islamic idiom, making them far more persuasive than police, government officials, or international actors, who are viewed with deep suspicion and often seen as discriminating against practicing Muslims or even acting in conspiracies against them. According to participants from Aravan, the strongest of these arguments appears to be that groups fighting in Syria routinely violate and misinterpret the Islamic principles that they claim the authority to enforce with violence—that they create injustice rather than justice—instead of superficial arguments that that they belong to a different group or ideological identity and should therefore not be heard.

In many cases, however, recruiting appears to have little to do with religious arguments or identity. Recruits are pulled in by personal networks rather than pushed in by ideology, to borrow the famous Kilcullen phrasing and the push/pull driver distinction used by USAID. Uzbek groups have robust community and family networks that, when intact, can act as counter-networks that combine multiple resources in an attempt to prevent young people from making grave mistakes—and the larger community is adamant that going to Syria is a grave mistake they wish they could cooperate with law enforcement to prevent or police. These community mechanisms are seriously disrupted by large-scale labor migration to Russia driven by lack of economic opportunities and fear of discrimination at home.

The stark lack of trust ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan display for local and national government—especially on matters related to religion—and their fear of abuse at the hands of law enforcement is grounded in bitter experience, especially of the 2010 ethnic conflict and the policing that followed. This is currently a serious obstacle to cooperation. Other analyses have frequently suggested that...
state weakness or a failure to deliver public goods are drivers of both religiosity and extremist recruiting in southern Kyrgyzstan in particular. However, the results of this study and the Nasrtdinov et al. national-level study completed this year suggest that both ethnic-minority and religious communities have strong resources of their own for combating factors that contribute to extremist recruiting, and that state actions have a negative effect due not so much to their absence or lack of capacity to act as to negative outcomes from concrete actions that citizens perceive as unjust or discriminatory. Reforms that treat all citizens equally in a single civic national community rather than differentiating between them according to ethnicity and religion could have the dual positive effect of both reducing factors that make communities more vulnerable to extremist recruiting and facilitating cooperation with law enforcement and other agencies that work to prevent and interdict recruiting.

Finally, it is worth noting that according to our respondents, many who went to Syria did not seem to understand what they were getting into and saw the ungoverned spaces in Syria as a kind of “frontier” territory where they could find adventure, escape problems, or reinvent themselves. This suggests that the lack of trusted media reporting on the Syrian conflict in the Uzbek language may have led to general misperceptions about the conflict itself and may continue to fuel conspiracy theories about the conflict, which previous research has suggested is a key feature of the tactics used by militant recruiters targeting Central Asians. Some participants described their own attempts to understand what was happening in Syria and the resources they turned to; even among these, conspiracy theories continued to play a significant role. Accurate information about the conflict, available in local languages, that challenges the conspiracies often used by recruiters could play an important role in developing innate resistance to the narratives used by violent extremist groups.


7. These changes are very similar to what anthropologist Wendell Schwab has termed the “piety movement” in Kazakhstan—a reformist Islamic faith that puts a great deal of emphasis on personal piety and living out Islamic faith in everyday life. While, as David Montgomery accurately described in 2007, it is not unusual for older generations to celebrate holidays like the Prophet’s birthday that are rejected by other communities, even toasting Muhammad with vodka (to which many Muslim communities are categorically opposed), members of the piety movement make determined efforts to bring their own daily life into harmony with the more “orthodox” beliefs and practices they see modeled in the more “orthodox” beliefs and practices they believe were imposed on them during the colonial experience of the Soviet period, during which they argue they become “Russified” (a’ruscha bo’lgan in Uzbek). At the same time, Russification is sometimes cited as a positive counter-identity to Islamic extremism; it is equated with being modern, scientific, and progressive. Those who reject Western-style dress or advocate a return to more traditional gender
norms and strict rules for socialization self-identify as “Muslims,” while their opponents refer to them as “extremists” or “Salafis.” While in other parts of Central Asia, competing Islamic groups can dispute the right to define national and ethnic identity (see W. Schwab, “Shariah Law and Ancient Turkic Traditions: The Rhetoric of Islamic Debate in Kazakhstani Media” [paper presented at the “Islam and Media in Central Asia” conference, The George Washington University’s Central Asia Program, Washington, DC, October 3, 2017]), the Uzbek diaspora in Kyrgyzstan cannot publicly advocate for the right to “do things the Uzbek way” (for example, segregating genders at public gatherings) and so discourse automatically appears limited to “Muslim” vs. “non-Muslim” in this micro-context.


11 An edited version of this interview will be available from RFE/RL as part of the Not in Our Name project (forthcoming), episodes 1 and 2.

12 Peter Bergen, who completed the largest study to date of crimes related to Islamist violence in the United States, based on the datasets compiled by the FBI and other organizations, has cited the Tsarnaev brothers (who conducted the Boston Marathon bombing and subsequent gun battle with Boston area police) as an example of this mechanism. While Tamarlan Tsarnaev may have been ideologically motivated to a certain extent, his younger brother, Dzhokhar, was a typical college student who attended parties frequently and was known as a marijuana dealer—neither religious nor ideological, he was pulled into a murderous plot by his allegiance to his brother. As David Kilcullen, a scholar of insurgencies of all types, famously put it, “People are not pushed into insurgencies by their ideology, they are pulled into them by their networks.” See Peter Bergen, United States of Jihad: Who Are America’s Homegrown Terrorists, and How Do We Stop Them? (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017); David Kilcullen, quoted in George Packer, “Knowing the Enemy: Can Social Scientists Redefine the ‘War on Terror?’” The New Yorker, December 18, 2006, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/12/18/knowing-the-enemy.

13 A recent recruiting video published by the Kazakh brigade in ISIS, for example, profiles at length a young blind man named Yerbol from Zhuezakazan whom the video claims not only found gainful employment in the “Islamic State” despite his disability—he is depicted working as a massage therapist for wounded militants in a battlefield hospital—but also received two wives.


15 Bergen, United States of Jihad.


21 Cited by Packer, “Knowing the Enemy.”


24 Ibid.; Tucker, “Central Asian Involvement.”


27 See Scott Radnitz for a description of the political function of single-mandate districts in negotiating local-level political issues, particularly for southern and minority communities: S. Radnitz, Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in

28 A campaign rally by an ethnic Kyrgyz candidate in the 2017 election at which he argued that ethnic Uzbeks were poorly represented by the previous administration resulted in criminal charges of “attempts to incite ethnic conflict.”

29 See Beysambayev, “Religioznyi ekstremism.”

30 Nasritdinov et al., “Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People.”