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VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY IN KYRGYZSTAN: A RISK ASSESSMENT

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ACRONYMS

HT	Hizb-ut Tahrir
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
PRC	People’s Republic of China
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
VE/I	Violent Extremism and Insurgency

MAP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws upon and synthesizes published sources to assess the current and prospective risk of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Kyrgyzstan. It is not the result of extensive field study and, thus, it cannot claim to offer an in-depth analysis of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan. Rather, it utilizes existing sources in order to provide an overview of key drivers, mitigants, actors, and trends related to VE/I in the country with the aim of informing the USAID's strategy and programs. The framework used to make this assessment is based on the *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, produced for USAID by Management Systems International (MSI).

Context. Ninety-one percent of Kyrgyzstani citizens self-identify as Muslims, but there is vast variance in their religious practices. Soviet atheism has left its mark on the people of the country, and many view their relationship to Islam as more cultural than spiritual. Those Muslims who are devout are also not uniform in their practice of Islam. Although many devout Muslims follow a form of Sunni Islam that is sanctioned by the state and upheld by the country's *Muftiate*, others have been influenced by foreign religious movements, including *Wahabbi* and *Salafi* traditions as well as the particular form of Islam embraced by Turkey's Gulen movement. Recent years have witnessed a rise in public expressions of Islam, but this does not seem to be the result of any particular religious movement's strength, but rather is an outgrowth of people's exploration of their faith in the context of a politically instable society.

There is no evidence of a strong tendency towards political Islam in the country. The only Muslim group that actively expresses itself politically is *Hizb-ut Tabrir* (HT). Although HT has a significant following in Kyrgyzstan, it remains a marginalized group, and there is no evidence that it is inclined towards violence. As a result of the growing religiosity in the country, politicians discuss Islam, especially in relation to its importance to Kyrgyz national identity, but there does not appear to be a substantial constituency for political parties based on Islamic values at present.

The country does have a history of political and ethnic violence. Over the last decade, there have been violent acts committed in connection with two successive regime changes, and there was a serious outbreak of ethnic violence in June 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks resulting in significant casualties. These events suggest both that people in Kyrgyzstan are capable of using violence for political means and that violence is becoming a more frequent occurrence in society. Furthermore, the most substantial acts of political and ethnic violence in the last decade have involved the mobilization of people based on their involvement in locally based patron-client networks. This phenomenon is troubling in that it suggests that there is precedent for group-level drivers of violent extremism to be deployed by interested parties. While such mobilization of patron-client networks has yet to be utilized by extremist groups, the potential for exploiting these networks certainly exists.

The Kyrgyzstan state is weak. In the few cases when the state has had to deal with VE/I since the 1990s, it has not demonstrated that it is capable of doing so. It has undergone two regime changes since 2005, and the central state presently is unable to exert its legitimacy in the south of the country, which is controlled by local politicians who are not sympathetic to the central government. The present government is also in the process of undertaking democratic reforms, and its emerging political system may help to establish more stability and state strength over the long-term. Kyrgyzstan's transition to democracy, however, is quite tenuous, and it remains to be seen whether the country can successfully consolidate its present system into a sustainable democracy. The country's present political parties, for example, are mostly based on patron-client networks rather than on policy platforms and distinctive visions for Kyrgyzstan's future.

There are substantial grievances among the population of the country, especially regarding corruption and social justice. Citizens generally do not trust the police to protect them, and they view the court

system as motivated by bribery rather than by a rule of law. Citizens also complain that they cannot access basic social services without bribery. More generally, Kyrgyzstanis do not believe that their state provides social justice. Recently, this discontent has helped to fuel the growth of nationalism among ethnic Kyrgyz who believe that the state has not fulfilled its promises and that non-Kyrgyz are taking resources from Kyrgyz. Already, this nationalism has been mobilized aggressively through patron-client networks, suggesting that it could become a source of political violence in the future.

Current risk. There is presently very little risk of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan unless it either is nationalist in character or perpetrated by extremists from outside the country. Although many of the drivers of VE/I on the individual, group, and societal levels are present in the country, the current situation lacks critical drivers related to the ideological bases for the development of extremist groups. With the exception of nationalism, Kyrgyzstanis have proven quite cynical of ideologies, particularly if they are being mobilized for political struggles. Similarly, there does not appear to be a substantial constituency for any one particular extremist Islamic ideology, and most devout Muslims in the country do not view their faith as the basis of their politics. Finally, the emergent democratic system in Kyrgyzstan today has reduced political repression and control of information significantly over past regimes in the country.

The largest threat of VE/I presently is likely the growing ethnic Kyrgyz nationalism in the country. Although only a minority of ethnic Kyrgyz in the country has embraced this nationalism, that minority has been quite vocal and aggressive. Nationalism was certainly a driver of the ethnic violence that hit the country in 2010, and it could be mobilized more extensively and with a more politicized agenda subsequently. It is highly unlikely, however, that nationalist extremists would find common cause with religious extremists in Kyrgyzstan, at least in the near future.

Future risk. As already noted above, most of the drivers of VE/I are present in Kyrgyzstan today with the exception of those related to a history of Islamic extremism and to ideological extremism in general as well as some of those related to the suppression of civil liberties. This suggests that if extremist ideologies were to take root in the country over the long-term while progress on civil liberties were to backslide, Kyrgyzstan would be quite vulnerable to VE/I. The risk would be particularly significant if such ideologies were to take hold while present grievances in the population were to remain. Today, most people in the country feel that the state does not provide them justice and that society has become completely corrupted. If extremists were able to mobilize people around such grievances, they could become a critical factor in the country in the future. Furthermore, given that the patron-client system of power in the country already gives local elites the ability to mobilize significant numbers of people, extremists merely need to convince a handful of local elites around the country of their ideology in order to become a substantial force in society.

Kyrgyzstan is a transit country for the heroin trade from Afghanistan, and this represents another potential driver of VE/I in the country. Little is known about the heroin trade, but people involved in it have in the past used violence to accomplish their goals. In the aftermath of the 2005 regime change we witnessed this in the form of assassinations of rival drug traders, and many suggest that drug traders played a role in the 2010 ethnic violence in and around Osh. Furthermore, the fact that this trade emanates from Afghanistan, which is a major source of violent extremism regionally, does suggest that it could become a factor in the eventual spread of VE/I to Kyrgyzstan. Other external factors that could contribute to VE/I in Kyrgyzstan include extremist groups focused on Uzbekistan, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which might want to use Kyrgyzstan as a base for carrying out acts across the border, extremists from the North Caucasus, perhaps returning from Afghanistan and Pakistan, seeking to attack Russian interests in the country, and the potential for Uyghur extremist groups to form as political repression and ethnic violence continues in Xinjiang.

The extent of the future risk of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan largely depends upon the ability of the government to consolidate the emergent democratic system and to make it effective in delivering services and in protecting its citizens. If the present political system in the country does consolidate

and is able to reduce corruption, deliver justice, and effectively ensure access to social services, the risk of VE/I, even in the future, would be quite low. Such developments, however, do not rely merely on the survival of the country's present political system; they also require that this system become more effective and more transparent and that the political competition within this system be increasingly based on a competition of ideas related to the best policies for the country.

Implications for the USG. This paper's analysis suggests that the most critical drivers of VE/I that could increase Kyrgyzstan's risk both currently and in the future relate to individuals' grievances with the state concerning corruption and social justice, the existence of patron-client networks capable of mobilizing mass social disruption and potentially violence, and the lack of civic ideals of tolerance in society. Kyrgyzstan's on-going democratic reforms, if consolidated, could address each of these drivers by establishing more effective and transparent governance and by providing competitive means of choosing state leadership based on a competition of ideas. However, undertaking democratic reforms without building a strong rule of law and political parties based on strong visions for the country's future can fall prey to populist ideologies such as nationalism, thus exacerbating the risk of VE/I. In this context, the USG should seek to help consolidate Kyrgyzstan's on-going democratic reforms while focusing particularly on increasing state efficiency in delivering services, establishing a functional rule of law, combating corruption, and promoting political competition based on policy debates rather than on personalities and patron-client relations.

Although these are all high-risk development goals that cannot be guaranteed to be successful, they potentially could also have substantial impact on the future of Kyrgyzstan if they are successful. In order to address these issues, USAID should provide assistance to the present government in the country for efforts to streamline service delivery, reform law enforcement and the judiciary, and establish increased transparency and more severe penalties for state officials engaged in corrupt activities. At the same time, USAID should assist civil society to form a stronger watch-dog presence in monitoring and reporting on corruption, abuses of the law, and politicians' ability to deliver on campaign promises.

Additionally, the USG should encourage and support public political discussion about substantive policy issues, including by providing assistance to emergent think-tanks as well as for media products fostering open policy debates. Finally, the USG should seriously consider how it can promote a culture of tolerance in Kyrgyzstan as a counter-balance to growing nationalism in the country. This may require support for civic education efforts, social marketing of multiculturalism, and organizations defending minorities' rights as well as assistance to the state in its attempts to articulate a multi-national ideal of Kyrgyzstani citizenship.

Summary Assessment of VE/I Risks in Kyrgyzstan

Key issues	Overall assessment	Explanatory note
1. Current level of VE/I activity	Very Low	The country has experienced two “revolutions” in the last decade that involved violence, but could not be interpreted as insurgency. Additionally, the 2010 regime change was followed by mass ethnic violence and a few isolated alleged terrorist acts. To date, there is little evidence of active formal violent extremist groups in country.
2. Overall capacity of state and society to respond to VE/I	The state, which is very weak, is mostly unable to respond to VE/I, whether regarding immediate acts of violence or long-term potential for violence. Society may be better equipped, especially on the local level where social networks provide resiliency to extremist ideas and groups.	The state proved poorly equipped to deal with the ethnic violence of 2010 as well as with its aftermath. Local patron-client networks and power sources undermine its projection of power, and its effectiveness is hindered by widespread corruption. Although local patron-client networks offer easy means for mass mobilization that could lead to VE/I, they also provide resiliency on the local level by offering social cohesion.
3. Likely trajectory of VE/I over next 3-5 years	The risk of substantial VE/I over the next 3-5 years is low, but the potential for the seeds being planted for organized VE/I during this time exists.	The lack of a history of organized violent extremism and organized insurgency in the country suggests that home-grown VE/I will not be widespread during this time, but the existence of numerous drivers of VE/I suggest that the development of more organized and directed forms of violence could begin to emerge.
4. Nature of the threat posed by VE/I	Islamist extremism currently does not pose a major risk to Kyrgyzstan’s development. However, the regime is vulnerable to VE/I emerging from nationalist groups or regionally based power sources.	Although Islamic religiosity is on the rise in the country, there is little evidence that this religiosity is attracted to violent means of changing their society. Furthermore, religiosity remains highly contested in the country. Nationalism is on the rise and has already mobilized mass violence. Likewise, regionally based patron-client networks have been employed in regime change.
5. Implications for USG policies and programs	The top priorities should be: developing more effective and less corrupt governance, facilitating the growth of competitive politics based on ideas rather than clientelism, and promoting tolerance and an ideal of inclusive citizenship.	The tenuous state of most of the societal drivers for VE/I in the country depend upon the ability of the democratizing state to consolidate its system, to deliver services and justice, and to effectively fight corruption. The promotion of tolerance is critical to mitigating the growing strength of nationalism that could be a driver of VE/I, especially if employing existent group-level drivers.

I. BACKGROUND: ISLAM, ATHEISM, AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN KYRGYZSTAN

Assessing the potential risk of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Kyrgyzstan requires an understanding of the historical legacies of Soviet rule, Islam and atheism, post-Soviet instability, and political and inter-ethnic violence. This section provides a brief sketch of these historical legacies as they are manifested in the country today.

Islam and Atheism in Kyrgyzstan

Ninety-one percent of Kyrgyzstan's population self-identifies as Muslim (mostly Sunni, with a very small Shia minority).¹ In reality, however, this tells us little about the diversity of religious observance in the country. Almost all of the country's ethnic Kyrgyz (72.4% of population), ethnic Uzbeks (14.4%), and other Central Asian ethnic groups (approximately 5.2% of population together) identify as Muslims whether or not they practice the religion on a regular basis.² This is not only due to the deep historical roots of the religion in the region, but also due to the legacy of Russian colonialism and Russo-centric Soviet rule in which the people of Central Asia defined their difference from Slavic peoples through their connection with Islam. At the same time, the seven decades of Soviet rule did much to break down Muslim institutions in the region, detaching people from orthodox practices of religion and propagating atheism as an alternative to religiosity. Although many Kyrgyzstanis retained their faith despite Soviet anti-religious campaigns, atheism teachings were also successful, leading many others to view Islam as more a part of their cultural identity than as a guiding belief system.³

If Islam has great significance for the cultural identity of all Kyrgyzstanis, historically the modes of practicing the religion have differed substantially amongst ethnic groups in the region. The ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, as nomads, historically drew from their pre-Islamic animistic beliefs in their practice of Islam, bringing them particularly close to mystical forms of Sufism that included faith healing and had less emphasis on the role of the mosque and clergy. Most Uzbeks, Uyghurs, Dungans, and many Tajiks by contrast had long lived in agricultural settlements and urban areas where the mosque was critical to their sense of community and spirituality. Thus, the practice of Islam in Kyrgyzstan is likely to be different depending upon one's ethnicity, and by extension depending upon where one lives. The south of the country, which is part of the particularly religious Fergana Valley and has long been influenced by Uzbek settled culture, has stronger traditions of local religious institutions, including mosques, and has been more conducive to the development of Muslim communities with collectively common practices. Furthermore, while generally Kyrgyzstan did not have the informal underground Muslim leaders and scholars that were active in Uzbekistan

¹ Data are from: International Republican Institution (IRI), Baltic Surveys, and the Gallup Organization, *Survey of Kyrgyzstan Public Opinion, February 4-27, 2012* (2012), <<http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2012%20April%2011%20Survey%20of%20Kyrgyzstan%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20February%204-27%2C%202012.pdf>> [accessed 16 June 2013].

² Data are from an assessment of the Kyrgyzstan Census Bureau for 2013 <<http://www.stat.kg/stat.files/din.files/census/5010003.pdf>> [accessed 16 June 2013].

³ It is noteworthy that in 2003 study conducted by the International Crisis Group, only slightly over 20% of people polled in Kyrgyzstan believed that there should even be political parties in the country representing Islamic interests. Although more recent data on this question are not available, anecdotal evidence continues to suggest that there is a very small constituency in Kyrgyzstan for an Islamic state. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement*, 22 December 2003, p. 10.

and Tajikistan during the Soviet period and created alternative local schools of Islam, such leaders did have followers in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

During the Soviet period, Kyrgyzstan, like all Soviet Republics with significant Muslim populations, also had an institution known as the *Spiritual Board of Muslims*, or *Muftiate*, which oversaw all official Islamic institutions and was recognized and regulated by the Soviet government. This structure has continued into the post-Soviet period, and the *Muftiate* now represents the officially recognized practice of Islam in the country and serves as the primary interface between the Muslim religion and the state. It has authority over officially registered mosques and any religious educational institutions connected to them.⁴ As one recent study suggests, “although *de jure* autonomous from the secular leadership, the muftiate (sic) operates both in name and in function much as did its Soviet predecessor.”⁵ As might be expected due to the relative liberalism of Kyrgyzstan, however, its post-Soviet *Muftiate* is also more independent from the state than in other Central Asian states. The country’s first independent *Mufti*, Sadykzhan Kamalov, an ethnic Uzbek from the southern city of Kara-su, for example, quickly emerged as an independent Islamic voice in the country.⁶ Kamalov has established an independent *Islamic Center* that offers a public alternative to the more state-oriented *Muftiate* and has been characterized by some scholars as the leader of a “reformist” school of Islam in the country.⁷ It is noteworthy, however, that this center was razed amid the violence in the south of the country in 2010 and 2011, and it is unclear the extent of its present operation.

Additionally, there are numerous external influences on Islam in Kyrgyzstan, many of which have been present since the early 1990s. These include Saudi and other Arab groups that brought *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* traditions to the country both through their sponsorship of local mosques and their support for the education of aspiring Kyrgyzstani Muslim clergy abroad, the Turkish *Gülen* movement that sponsors local schools throughout the country and supports a mixture of western and Islamic pedagogy, explicitly missionary-based groups such as Pakistan’s *Tablighi Jamaat*, and political groups like *Hizb-ut Tabrir*, which operates semi-clandestinely in the country. Although the state views all of these foreign Islamic influences differently, the state is generally suspicious of external groups involved in religious activity, whether they are Muslim, Christian, or represent other religious traditions. That said, these organizations generally operate more openly than in any other Central Asian country. As witness to this attitude, it is significant that Christian missionaries over the last two decades have made significant in-roads in the country, experiencing more conversion success from Islam than in most Muslim-majority countries in the world.⁸

Overall, therefore, there is a substantial plurality of religious practice in Kyrgyzstan that spans a broad continuum including atheists influenced by Soviet traditions, Christian converts engaged with foreign missionary groups, nominal Muslims who view the religion as more a cultural attribute than a belief system, pious Muslims engaged in official religious institutions, pious reformist Muslims engaged in informal systems outside the official system, and radical politically oriented Muslims influenced by foreign groups.⁹ Furthermore, as numerous recent studies suggest, these religious

⁴ According to a recent report, the *Muftiate* in Kyrgyzstan oversees “1619 mosques, 45 madrasas and Koran study classes, six institutes, one University, and 26 different Islamic centers, foundations, and associations.” *Muslim Community in Kyrgyzstan: Social Activity at the Present Stage*, Social Research Center, American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, 2010, p. 10.

⁵ Eric McGlinchey, “Islamic Revivalism and State Failure in Kyrgyzstan,” *Problems of Post-Communism* (May/June 2009) 56:3, p. 18.

⁶ Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, p. 192.

⁷ McGlinchey, May/June 2009, p. 19.

⁸ Mathijs Pelkmans, “‘Culture’ as a tool and an obstacle: missionary encounters in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2007 (13:881-899), 881.

⁹ As evidence of the broad spectrum of Islamic expressions in the country, a human rights advocate interviewed by the author in July of 2012 even reported that she had heard rumors of some Kyrgyz villages practicing female circumcision, which has never been a tradition related to Islam in Central Asia historically.

expressions are not necessarily exclusive of each other, and they often overlap as Kyrgyzstanis engage multiple forms of religion and varied religious institutions in their lives.¹⁰ As the country moves further from its Soviet past, the population is also becoming more publicly expressive of its faith. This has been apparent in recent years as one finds increasing numbers of youth in the country wearing Islamic dress and openly expressing their religious beliefs. In comparison to the Soviet period, this certainly can be interpreted as an “Islamic resurgence,” but it is noteworthy that it does not reflect any one Muslim tradition, but varied interpretations of the religion.

In response to this “Islamic resurgence” in the country, Islam and religion more generally has also become a more open part of the country’s politics. Many politicians seek to appeal to religious voters as well as to nationalists who may view Islam as a critical aspect of the national identity of Kyrgyz, particularly vis-a-vis ethnic Russians. This phenomenon includes politicians who claim particular religiosity, such Tunsunbai Bek-ulu, as well as secular politicians who back legislation they view as “Muslim,” such as allowing polygamy. Additionally, the government has sought in recent years to create a local conception of Islamic orthodoxy based in socially conservative, but apolitical, ideas through its engagement of the *Mufiate*, but the country’s weak state is less capable than most Central Asian states in realizing such state-driven theological plans.¹¹

While discussions of Islam have become more apparent in Kyrgyzstan’s political debates as it seeks a means to articulate the identity of the Kyrgyz state, there is presently no strong constituency for “political Islam” in the country. At present, the Soviet tradition of a secular state remains strongly grounded in Kyrgyzstan, and it is both protected by the constitution and is embraced by the majority of citizens in the country. Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), which advocates for the establishment of an Islamic state, is quite active in the country and has attracted a modest number of adherents, especially in the south of the country. That said, HT has a relatively small following in the context of the country’s wider populations, with reports from 2003 suggesting a membership of only 2000-3000.¹² Although more recent research suggests that at least those sympathizing with the organization have grown, it also suggests that HT sympathizers in Kyrgyzstan should not necessarily be viewed as open to militancy just because religion informs their political views.¹³ This general lack of political Islam in the country, of course, could change over time depending upon the ability of Kyrgyzstan’s current unique system of democracy to address the needs and desires of the population.

Political Violence in Kyrgyzstan

If there are yet no significant signs of “political Islam” in the country, political violence is very much a part of Kyrgyzstan’s recent history. In broad terms, this violence can be separated into two types: 1) political violence between ethnic groups in the country; and 2) political violence during times of state failure used to change the regime. Major instances of violence have twice broken out between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south of the country since 1990, and there have likewise been two major instances of political violence leading to regime change since 2005. In addition to these four major instances of violence, there have been numerous smaller violent clashes between Kyrgyz and minority ethnic groups in recent years, and the struggle for political power has frequently included mass protest mobilization that has occasionally led to violent clashes.

¹⁰ See McGlinchey, May/June 2009; Julie McBrien and Mathijs Pelksman, “Turning Marx on his Head: Missionaries, ‘Extremists,’ and Secularists in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” *Critique of Anthropology*, (2008) 28:1, pp. 87-103.

¹¹ For more on the state’s attempts to create an Islamic orthodoxy, see Auriele Biard, “The religious factor in the reification of ‘neo-ethnic’ identities in Kyrgyzstan,” *Nationalities Papers*, 2010, 38:3(pp. 323-335), pp. 326-328.

¹² See Emmanuel Karagiannis, “Political Islam and Social Movement Theory: The Case of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan,” *Religion, State, and Society*, 2005, 33:2(pp. 137-150), p. 138.

¹³ Eric McGlinchey, May/June 2009, pp. 16-28.

Ethnic Violence

The major instances of ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, in 1990 and 2010 respectively, both occurred in the south of the country where a majority of the Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbeks live. They have also both resulted in particularly vicious and brutal acts of violence that have included rape and indiscriminate murder along ethnic lines.¹⁴ Although both instances were equally brutal, following the 1990 violence, the Soviet government proved adept at establishing at least a temporarily sustained peace that lasted two decades. By contrast, the most troubling aspect of the 2010 violence has been the implication of government bodies in the actual violence and in the continued exacerbation of ethnic tension in its aftermath, as well as the inability of the Kyrgyzstan state to address any of the issues that led to the violence originally. Human Rights Watch has well documented that many security forces sided with ethnic Kyrgyz during the violence and have since harassed, arbitrarily detained, and tortured Uzbeks, especially in the city of Osh.¹⁵ While most of the abuse of Uzbeks' rights since 2010 has been at the hands of local authorities in the city of Osh and to a lesser extent in the city of Jalalabad, the national government has also done virtually nothing to address the ongoing problems in the region, over which it has largely lost control to local officials.

Furthermore, there are numerous troubling aspects of the 2010 ethnic violence that do not bode well for the future. First, the violence corresponded with a visible increase in ethnic Kyrgyz nationalism. According to human rights activists interviewed during the summer of 2012, this nationalism is particularly pronounced among poor rural Kyrgyz, who feel that they have yet to benefit from their country's independence and believe that they deserve more from their nation.¹⁶ As evidence of this growing nationalism, there were instances of ethnic Kyrgyz provoking other minority groups into violent clashes in 2010 even before the violence in Osh, including in the north among Turks in Maevka and amongst Uyghurs and Dungans in Tokmak.¹⁷ Since the violence in the south in which approximately 470 people were killed, this nationalism has only intensified, especially in the south. As one Uzbek participant in a focus group held in the city of Osh during the summer of 2012 noted, "we do not expect to be protected; we live in constant fear; (in Osh) it is very difficult to get justice if one is a minority."¹⁸ This rise in ethnic Kyrgyz nationalism in the country, while certainly not apparent in the majority of the ethnic Kyrgyz population, is conducive to the development of violent extremist behavior including the proliferation of hate crimes. Although such nationalism does not conform to the Islamist ideologies of most Muslim extremist groups, there does exist the potential for such groups to exploit its existence.

Another very troublesome development in the Uzbek-Kyrgyz violence in the summer of 2010 was the apparent use of patron-client networks in mobilizing violence. As will be discussed more below, Kyrgyz political forces have for some time already been using regionally based patron-client networks to rally supporters and cause civic disruptions. While the actual events surrounding the violence

¹⁴ For extensive description of the brutality of the violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 1989, see Valery Tishkov, "Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!": An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, 32:2(May 1995), pp. 133-149. For an account of the brutality in the 2010 violent clashes, see Human Rights Watch, "Where is the Justice?": *Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and its Aftermath*, August 2010, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/kyrgyzstan0810webwcover_1.pdf [accessed 16 June 2013].

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, August 2010.

¹⁶ From interviews conducted by the author in preparing an evaluation of USAID's Human Rights programming in Kyrgyzstan during the summer of 2012. See: *Strengthening Human Rights in Kyrgyzstan Program Evaluation*, conducted for USAID by Democracy International, October 2012

¹⁷ See David Trilling, "Inter-Ethnic Tension Rattles Bishkek," *Eurasianet.org*, 20 April 2010

<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/6089> [accessed 16 June 2013] and "Dungans, Uyghurs Attacked in Northern Kyrgyz Town," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 09 April 2010 http://www.rferl.org/content/Dungans_Uyghurs_Attacked_In_Northern_Kyrgyz_Town_/2007251.html [accessed 16 June 2013].

¹⁸ *Strengthening Human Rights*, October 2012, p. 11.

remain contested, it has been well documented that many of the Kyrgyz involved in the clashes came from outside Osh, including from remote villages, and were mobilized by the spreading of false rumors.¹⁹ Discussions with human rights activists in the south of Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2012 further suggested that these people were purposely mobilized and provided with transportation to come to Osh. While there is no concrete evidence for these claims, it does fit with the pattern of popular political mobilization in the country and is suggestive of an ability to easily provoke mass political violence around any number of issues.

Political Violence During Times of State Failure

While the June 2010 violence in and around Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan was fueled by ethnic tensions and growing nationalism in the country, it was also an outgrowth of sustained political violence leading up to and following the April 2010 removal of Kurmanbek Bakiyev as President of the country.²⁰ Much of the analysis surrounding the violence focuses on the alleged involvement of Uzbeks in the taking of the Jalalabad government building in the aftermath of Bakiyev's deposal and the arson that burned down properties of outgoing President Bakiyev in a nearby village as critical triggers in the conflict.²¹

Furthermore, the political violence that helped to depose Bakiyev from his position as head of state was the further manifestation of trends in the mass mobilization of people in the country that began with the 2005 deposal of Askar Akayev as the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Much has been written about these two "revolutions" or forcible regime changes in 2005 and 2010 respectively, and analyses often offer contradictory views of the events. That said, most sources agree that a major tool used by both sides in these political clashes was the mobilization of villagers by local elites. Although some have referred to this phenomenon as "clan politics," suggesting that there are clear primordial group solidarities around Kyrgyzstan that can be mobilized when their interests are at risk, a more cogent analysis is that it is an outgrowth of a patron-client system of power and economic interests that has taken on a regional character.

In the case of both the 2005 and 2010 "revolutions," there were extensive reports of staged demonstrations where villagers were mobilized and often provided with transportation by interested political forces. As Scott Radnitz has suggested of the 2005 removal of President Akayev, "it was a cross-regional alliance of political and business elites" that was able to mobilize regional client bases in rural communities that eventually led to the toppling of the regime.²² This mobilization, which some allege was fueled with cash payments to participants, was initially exploited as a tool for peaceful protests on the model of recent regime changes in Georgia and Ukraine, but the protests eventually became violent when participants stormed government buildings and even looted the capital city. This was also exacerbated by attempts by the Akayev regime to utilize sportsmen beholden to state-sponsored programs to intimidate protestors in the capital city.

Since 2005, this model of popular mobilization has become a mainstay of politics in Kyrgyzstan and has led to a further weakening of state power and a corresponding strengthening of regional patron-client networks. While this trend still continues, its apex was likely in 2010, when protestors deposed Bakiyev in a much bloodier proxy battle of protestors in April and extending to the June ethnic violence in the south of the country. This has created an unstable situation in the country where

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, August 2010, pp. 26-27.

²⁰ For an analysis of the ethnic dimension of the conflict, see Sean R. Roberts, "What's Ethnicity Got to Do With It?: Healing the Wounds of Uzbek-Kyrgyz Violence in the Ferghana Valley," *PONARS Policy Perspectives: Recovery and Reformation*, 2010, Policy Memo No. 106.

²¹ Scott Radnitz, "Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *PONARS Policy Perspectives: Recovery and Reformation*, 2010, Policy Memo No. 105, pp. 2-3.

²² Scott Radnitz, "What Really Happened in Kyrgyzstan?" *Journal of Democracy* (April 2006) 17:2, pp. 132-146, p. 138.

political violence has become accepted as a tool in power struggles and where the state is undermined by regional patron-client networks. It is noteworthy, for example, that recent public opinion polls in the country suggest that the number one fear of citizens is the outbreak of civil war.²³ This situation is obviously also relevant to the risk of violent extremism since it suggests that the state is extremely fragile, political violence has become widespread, and a broad array of autonomous power networks exist that can be mobilized by particular interests. There is yet no evidence that violent extremist groups, and particularly Jihadists, have been able to mobilize such power networks in the country, but it is certainly not out of the question that they could if the environment became susceptible to such mobilization.

II. INCIDENTS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KYRGYZSTAN, STATE WEAKNESS, AND TRANSNATIONAL THREATS

The weak nature of the Kyrgyzstan state and its proximity to volatile regions where extremists are present should make it a likely target for violent extremists seeking to carry out terrorist attacks. However, thus far there have been very few, if any, instances of violence in the country that could be interpreted as acts of terrorism. This does not mean that there is no potential for such attacks to take place, but the paucity of examples over the last twenty years is reason to take caution before assuming that such activity is inevitable in the future.

Incidents of Violent Extremism

The first incident that could be interpreted as violent extremism that has taken place in Kyrgyzstan occurred in 1999 and allegedly involved the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Given that the IMU has been thoroughly discussed in other VE/I assessments, this paper will not discuss the organization at length. It will, however, note that the 1999 IMU incursion into Kyrgyzstan demonstrates the vulnerability of the country to external attacks. In August of 1999, a group of IMU militants, reportedly numbering 500-1000 entered Kyrgyzstan's Batken province via Tajikistan and Afghanistan with the intent of making their way into Uzbekistan to carry out violent attacks against the state.²⁴ Upon discovery, the group took four Japanese geologists hostage, later releasing them. A year later in the summer of 2000, there were more IMU incursions into Kyrgyzstan, including a kidnapping instance where three U.S. mountain climbers were held hostage, but the numbers of militants were far less in number.²⁵ In both cases, the Kyrgyz military demonstrated that it was ill-equipped to deal with such incursions despite the allegedly disorganized nature of the IMU groups involved. Given that these events occurred prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks that raised the international profile of terrorist attacks, the international community did not view these incursions as a serious security threat. As an International Crisis Group (ICG) report at the time noted, "Though militant activities even on this scale are a serious threat to the well being of the population in affected regions and undermine the regimes' image as being capable of controlling their borders, they do not threaten to bring down governments in the near term."²⁶

Other alleged terrorist attacks or foiled terrorist plots in Kyrgyzstan are much more murky than these

²³ IRI, February 2012, pp. 31-32.

²⁴ Ghoncheh Tazmini, "The Islamic Revival in Central Asia: A potent Force or a Misconception?" *Central Asian Survey* (2001) 20:1, pp. 63-83, p. 72.

²⁵ ICG, *Central Asian Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Security*, 1 March 2001, p. 8

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 9.

early instances of violent extremism. The Kyrgyzstan state has alleged that Uyghur terrorist groups seeking independence from China have perpetrated several acts of violence or plots to undertake such acts. These include an alleged attempt to bomb the U.S. embassy in Bishkek in 2002, as well as the murder of Chinese businessmen and the murder of Uyghur activists in Kyrgyzstan, both in 2000. There is very little clear information about these events, even including the plot against the U.S. Embassy, bringing into question whether the Kyrgyzstani authorities' treatment of these events as terrorism were merely attempts to placate or ingratiate themselves to Chinese authorities, who oppose all independent Uyghur political activity. Given the available facts, one must question the reliability of the claims of a planned attack on the U.S. Embassy, and one could evaluate all of the other events as more likely being related to criminal activities than to politically motivated terrorist aspirations.²⁷

In the last several years, there have been a few other acts of alleged terrorism that have not been entirely explained. Most notably, in 2010, there were three alleged terrorist acts in Kyrgyzstan, including foiled plots to blow up the central mosque and the Bishkek central police station and an explosion outside of the Sports Palace where a trial related to the violence surrounding the April 2010 regime change was being held.²⁸ While authorities arrested several people in relation with these attacks, none were eventually convicted. Given the context of the political events in 2010, these may have indeed been acts of violent extremism related to internal political battles, but it remains concerning that little is known of who perpetrated them.

Overall, this history of violent extremism is not suggestive of a serious problem with VE/I in the present. Despite the weakness of the Kyrgyzstani state and the country's proximity to the bases of international terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the country apparently has not been the site of any serious global Islamic extremist activities. However, given the inability of the Kyrgyzstan state to adequately address the murky violent acts planned and carried out in 2010, the country remains vulnerable to such external forces in the future.

Kyrgyzstan's Weak State

As is evidenced from the above discussions, Kyrgyzstan is a very weak state. The country has already experienced two regime changes in which relatively minor mobilizations of the population were able to depose two presidents in the course of five years. The state also has proven unable to deal effectively with small incursions by extremist groups or to address an ethnic conflict in the south of the country. Perhaps most disturbing, however, the present national government has virtually lost control over its southern portions, which are run by local elites who frequently disregard policies handed down from northern Kyrgyzstan. This is particularly true in Osh, whose Mayor Melisbek Myrzakmatov has established a significant degree of control over the city and has often come into conflict with national officials in Bishkek.

As a result, presently the country is very divided politically, and the experience of citizens in the respective regions is very different. Interviews and focus groups in Bishkek and Osh in the summer of 2012 starkly highlighted this divide, especially with regards to the observation of human rights. For example, 75% of interviewees in northern Kyrgyzstan suggested that the human rights situation in the country was better or much better than prior to 2010, but in the south only 21% of

²⁷ Analysis of all of these events in the context of the definition of terrorism suggests that none of these events were likely Uyghur-led terrorist attacks or plots, and their characterization as such was likely politically motivated. See Sean R. Roberts, *Imaginary Terrorism: The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat*, PONARS Eurasia Working Paper, March 2012, pp. 20-21.

²⁸ U.S. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, 18 August 2011 <<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170258.htm>> [accessed 17 June 2013].

interviewees suggested that things were getting better in the realm of human rights.²⁹ Indeed, in the south of Kyrgyzstan and in the city of Osh in particular, the Uzbek minority continues to suffer serious discrimination, harassment, and abuse. Furthermore, as a March 2012 report by ICG suggests, many ethnic Kyrgyz in the south, and particularly in Osh, support its region's autonomy from the north and as well as their own local elites' persecution of ethnic Uzbeks.

The weakness of the state and the sharp divides between north and south taken together with Kyrgyzstan's trend towards the use of political violence based in local patron-client networks suggests that it is a very fragile country that could be exploited by violent extremists. This does not necessarily mean that a threat of such exploitation is inevitable, particularly if it involves Jihadist groups, which do not appear to be embraced by even the most radical factions of the Kyrgyzstani Muslim population. It does mean, however, that in the appropriate environment, such exploitation is a risk. At the same time, the country has also recently made strides towards democratization, which has opened it up to further vulnerabilities, but could also over the long-term lead to more stability and resilience to external incursions and extremist influences. In this context, the success of Kyrgyzstan's attempt to become a sustainable and effective democracy will be critical to its risk of VE/I in the foreseeable future.

Potential Transnational Threats

Kyrgyzstan's geographic position makes it particularly vulnerable to influence from violent Islamic extremist organizations. It is difficult to determine the risk that these extremist influences in close proximity pose to the state, but they certainly present potential threats. In general, these threats can be divided into four different categories: 1) the threat of violent extremism drifting northwards from Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly after the U.S. military withdraws from Afghanistan; 2) the threat of becoming embroiled in violent extremism focused on the state in Uzbekistan; 3) the threat of becoming embroiled in violent extremism focused on the state in the People's Republic of China; and 4) the threat of a radicalization of the drug trade.

The threat of Jihadist organizations from the south

It is quite difficult to assess the potential threat of Jihadist groups from Afghanistan and Pakistan influencing the situation in Kyrgyzstan once the United States scales back its military involvement in Afghanistan. Citizens and government authorities in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere in the former Soviet Central Asian states are very fearful of this happening, but it is not clear that this fear is founded on anything other than a strong aversion to political Islam in general. It is fairly well documented that a variety of radical Islamic groups have been active for some time in Kyrgyzstan in order to propagate their religious beliefs, but this has yet to translate into any active local militant groups.³⁰ In this context, it is not likely that such groups would have significantly more success merely because the U.S. has withdrawn its military from Afghanistan. Although there is a resurgence of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, there is no evidence that the concept of global Jihad is particularly attractive to the population of the country. If extremist influence from the south poses a threat, therefore, it is more likely to involve foreign violent extremists carrying out acts in Kyrgyzstan given its accessibility, its porous borders, and its weak state than to involve the development of homegrown violent extremists. For such foreign-based extremism to take place in Kyrgyzstan, however, foreign extremists would need to have a clear motive for wanting to carry out violence inside the country. Such motives would most likely be linked to other foreign interests in the country. Kyrgyz politicians, for example, have suggested that the presence of the US-supported Manas airbase in the

²⁹ See *Strengthening Human Rights*, October 2012

³⁰ See ICG, 22 December 2003, pp. 7-10.

country increases the risk of such attacks, but they could just as likely transpire vis-a-vis Russian or Chinese interests.

The threat of being embroiled in violent extremism targeting Uzbekistan

One motive for foreign extremists to target Kyrgyzstan could be as a means to access Uzbekistan. Although open-source information about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its splinter group, Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), remains inconclusive regarding these organizations' capacity to become a threat to the Uzbek state today, many suggest that both organizations remain active as allies of Al-Qaeda in northwest Pakistan and in Afghanistan itself. Most recently, for example, a combined Afghan and coalition security force arrested a leader of the IMU in Afghanistan's Baghlan Province, and it was alleged that he led a cell of insurgent fighters targeting Afghan and coalition forces.³¹ If there still remain significant numbers of IMU and IJU fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the conflict in the country wanes, one can expect that these fighters will focus once again on Uzbekistan. As in 1999 and 2000, such a shift in orientation could once again bring them to southern Kyrgyzstan where they may be able to operate without state detection. Furthermore, one can imagine a situation where these fighters could begin to react to tension between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country. Furthermore, they could find willing recruits among Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek minority if the present repression of Uzbeks in the south of the country continues.

The threat of being embroiled in violent extremism targeting either the Russian Federation or the People's Republic of China (PRC)

Assuming violent extremism continues to be a problem in Russia's North Caucasus region, one can imagine a situation in which extremists from the North Caucasus could target Russian interests in Kyrgyzstan. Although such events could transpire virtually anywhere in the former Soviet Union, it is important to note that Kyrgyzstan has a fairly large diaspora from the North Caucasus. Furthermore, there are allegedly significant numbers of Chechen and other North Caucasian extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan who might re-orient their actions against Russia after the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan would be one of the easiest destinations for such extremists given its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan, its relatively weak government, and its own Caucasian diaspora. Furthermore, Russia continues to have a military presence in the country as well as a substantial diplomatic operation and widespread business interests, all of which could be targeted by extremists seeking to harm Russia. While it is unlikely that such actions would involve local Kyrgyzstanis, there is a possibility that some Kyrgyz would be willing to support such efforts giving that the nationalist trends in the country include anti-Russian sentiments.

While there is little evidence that there today exists a credible and capable violent extremist organization among the Uyghurs in Central Asia, South Asia, or in China itself, this could change in coming years. In the last five years, the development of China's Xinjiang province, home to most of the Uyghurs in the PRC, has accelerated. This development has resulted in a substantial influx of Han Chinese migrants, the destruction of traditional buildings and lands with Uyghur historical and cultural significance, the displacement of Uyghur populations, and the further marginalization of the Uyghurs economically and politically.³² Thus far, this has led to a substantial increase in spontaneous ethnic unrest between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang, but as it progresses further it is not

³¹ "Combined Force Arrests Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Leader," *U.S. Department of Defense Information/Find*, 3 April 2013.

³² See Henryk Szadziewski, *Commanding the Economy: The Recurring Patterns of Chinese Central Government Development Planning Among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang*, *Inner Asia* (2011), No. 3.

unlikely that Uyghurs will eventually resist these processes through a more organized insurgency. Furthermore, the development of the Uyghurs' declared homeland in Xinjiang is heavily reliant on Chinese economic engagement with Central Asia. As the PRC builds two large special trading zones in Xinjiang's cities of Urumqi and Kashgar, it is simultaneously developing pipelines and transit routes to connect these trading zones with the Central Asian states and beyond. In Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese are presently planning to build a substantial railroad link with Kashgar that will go into Uzbekistan and beyond to Europe and the Persian Gulf.³³ This project would link Kyrgyzstan closely to the emergent western hub of China's growing economy and likely greatly expand the Chinese commercial and political presence in the country, which potentially could become targets of any Uyghur militant groups that may develop in the future.

The threat of the radicalization of the drug trade

It is well known that a substantial traffic in heroin and opiates crosses Kyrgyzstan from Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but little detail is known about how this traffic operates and to what extent it involves high-level political actors in the country. As David Lewis writes, "the dynamics and personalities of drug trafficking (in Kyrgyzstan) ... remain a taboo subject."³⁴ Some of the facts about this trade did emerge during the regime change of 2005 when several important actors in this trade entered the public view as political figures, subsequently shaking-up the trade and leading to a number of assassinations. Since that time, the trade has once again moved to the shadows, and there are few concrete facts known about the trade's operations and the figures that run it. However, it is assumed that the volume of heroin traveling through the country is significant and that at least some high-level officials must be implicated in this trade. Furthermore, given these assumed political links to the trade, it has been suggested that drug traders were involved in provoking the ethnic violence in the south of Kyrgyzstan in June of 2010.³⁵

The drug trade that flows through Kyrgyzstan is relevant to the assessment of the future risk of VE/I for two reasons. First, the trade emanates from Afghanistan where violent extremism is widespread. Second, as the assassinations in 2005 and alleged involvement of the trade in the 2010 violence demonstrate, Kyrgyzstan's drug traders are willing and able to use violence to resolve their problems. Given what little we know about this trade, it is difficult to provide particular scenarios where it could be a violent extremist threat. However, it is an obvious source of potential violence, and it is a passageway for influence from Afghanistan, and for these reasons alone it must be considered in any analysis of VE/I in the country.

At present none of these transnational threats are likely to gain substantial support from citizens within Kyrgyzstan, at least over the short-term. However, they do have the potential to foster more instability within the country and could create a larger risk for violent extremist activities in the country. Furthermore, over the longer term, they could find sympathizers within the Kyrgyzstani population if a variety of political, economic and social trends continue within the country.

³³ Kevin Smith, "Kyrgyzstan eyes transit corridor from China to the Gulf and Europe," *International Railway Journal*, 07 December 2012 < <http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/freight/kyrgyzstan-eyes-transit-corridor-from-china-to-the-gulf-and-europe.html> > [accessed 17 June 2013].

³⁴ David Lewis, "High Times on the Silk Road: The Central Asian Paradox," *World Policy Journal* (Spring 2010) 27:1, pp. 39-49, p. 45.

³⁵ Peter Leonard, "Heroin Trade a Backdrop to Kyrgyz Violence," *Boston Globe*, June 24, 2010.

III. CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE DRIVERS OF VE/I IN KYRGYZSTAN

Analysis of the Scope, Nature, and Drivers of the VE/I Risk Today

Many of the potential drivers of VE/I identified in USAID's *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* are present in Kyrgyzstani society.³⁶ The following paragraphs provide a discussion of these drivers and, more specifically, how these drivers potentially might operate at the individual, intermediate group, and society-wide levels to foster violent extremism and/or insurgency. As is the case in many other Central Asian countries, most of these drivers are not new to Kyrgyzstan. They have been a part of the country's reality for much of the last two decades, and as noted above, there have been few if any instances of VE/I in the country. However, combined with external "pull" factors, they still have the potential to foster violent extremism, perhaps even more so the longer they are a part of social reality.

Individual-Level Drivers of VE/I

USAID's *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* encourages the analyst to consider the absence or presence of the following five categories when assessing the potential individuals may engage in violent extremism or insurgency: (1) "concrete and specific political, economic, and social grievances"; (2) "broader ideological (especially religious) objectives"; (3) "the search for economic gain, or the pull exercised by prior involvement in illicit economic activities"; (4) "personal factors... (such as) the desire to avenge a loved one, or follow a friend... on the path of jihad"; and (5) "intimidation or coercion by peers or the community."³⁷

Of these five drivers, the only one that is not experienced by a wide range of Kyrgyzstan's population is likely the second. While Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic of the Central Asian states and has relatively free and competitive elections, the political parties and other political organizations do not really represent any ideological position. Instead, most political forces have developed around personalities and patron-client relationships. The only exceptions are perhaps the rising ethnic Kyrgyz nationalism in the country and the corollary Uzbek ethnic nationalism that is growing in response to the repressive tactics taken against Uzbeks in the south of the country. There is no evidence that these growing nationalisms are spawning violent extremists at present, but they could have the potential to do so over time.

Although religion, and especially Islam, is experiencing resurgence in the country, this rise in religiosity appears to be more a personal than collective experience and is not likely, without external provocation, to translate into political ideologies founded on Islam over the short-term, particularly among ethnic Kyrgyz. As already noted, the Kyrgyz do not have a tradition of strong Muslim institutions based in communities in the ways that many other Central Asian groups do, with the exception of community rites of passage such as weddings, circumcisions, etc.³⁸ This does not mean that they cannot develop stronger connections to mosques and other formal religious institutions, but they would not emerge from their own historical experience. Although the ethnic Uzbek, Tajik, Dungan, and Uyghur minorities in the country have a different historical experience that is more connected to the formal institutions of an Islamic community, they have also yet to demonstrate a

³⁶ Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, 'Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism' (produced for USAID by Management Systems International, 2009) <http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/publications/docs/guide_to_drivers_of_ve.pdf>.

³⁷ Denoeux and Carter, p. 63.

³⁸ See Biard 2010, pp.328-329.

strong inclination towards the politicization of Islam inside Kyrgyzstan. These trends are supported by recent ethnographically inspired research into the contested and generally individualized nature of Kyrgyzstan's re-engagement of Islam among both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.³⁹

If ideology is not a very pervasive driver of collective mobilization in Kyrgyzstan, other identified drivers of VE/I are in the country. Concrete political, economic, and social grievances are widespread in Kyrgyzstan and have been contributing factors in the country's two forced regime changes in the last decade. Most of these grievances are economic and related to dissatisfaction with the degree of social justice in the country. Recent public polling, for example, reveals that the top three issues facing the country cited by the overwhelming number of respondents are unemployment, corruption, and economic development.⁴⁰ On the household level, the same poll cites respondents as highlighting the most important issues to be improvement in the standard of living, jobs, and housing problems.⁴¹ Likewise, focus groups with a broad segment of the population in Bishkek and Osh held during the summer of 2012 suggested that most people in country, with the exception of Uzbeks in Osh who face more substantial rights abuses than others, interpret human rights through the prism of social justice.⁴² In particular, focus group participants focused on corruption, which they suggested both negatively impacted their lives economically and in terms of equal access to justice. As one Kyrgyz focus group participant in Osh noted, "Anywhere you turn – state services, police, the courts – only money and contacts decide everything, not rule of law."⁴³ The strong grievances regarding social justice in Kyrgyzstan are especially troublesome in the context of VE/I since many Islamic extremist organizations view social justice as a central part of their mission and as a rallying point for popular mobilization.

Drivers three, four, and five are all present in Kyrgyzstan as aspects of the country's general patron-client system of power. Most of Kyrgyzstan's political system is based on patron-client networks. Such a system is fairly widespread in hybrid regimes that are caught between democratization and authoritarianism, but they are perhaps particularly pronounced in the former Soviet Union given its history of constrained politics and resource scarcity.⁴⁴ In Kyrgyzstan, these patron-client networks have become particularly localized through local elites who have access to national resources, and much of the economic gain through these networks is assumed to involve illicit activities, including the drug trade. As a result, a broad spectrum of Kyrgyzstan's population is involved in a search for economic gain through allegiances with others, and often these allegiances involve illicit activities (driver three). At the same time, involvement in such networks frequently involves a balance of loyalty and fear that is reinforced by the expression of their patrons' exercise of power (drivers four and five).

The presence of these three drivers embedded in Kyrgyzstan's patron-client based politics suggests that group mobilization, including violent mobilization, is easily achieved through economic incentives, as witnessed in the "revolutions" of 2005 and 2010. Combined with the strong economic, political, and social grievances held by individual Kyrgyzstani citizens (driver one), individuals in the

³⁹ See Biard 2010; Julie McBrien, "Mukadas's Struggle: VE/Is and modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2009), S127-S144; McBrien, "Listening to the wedding speaker: discussing religion and culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* (2006) 25:3, pp. 341-357; Baris Isci, "'Proper' Muslim Against 'Authentic' Kyrgyz: The Formation of Islamic Field and Secular Challenges in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan," PhD Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis, May 2010.

⁴⁰ IRI 2012, p. 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴² *Strengthening Human Rights* 2012, pp. 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁴ See Henry Hale, "Formal Constitutions in Informal Politics: Institutions and Democratization in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *World Politics* (October 2011) 63:4, pp. 581-617.

country are indeed vulnerable to extremist mobilization, especially if appropriate “pull” factors are present that provide economic incentives and address their grievances with the status quo. All of this said, it is important to reinforce that the absence of the second driver based on ideological mobilization makes it especially difficult for extremist groups to mobilize people along common beliefs. That said, if such groups were able to appeal ideologically or otherwise to a group of local elites, under the present system of power in the country, those elites have shown that they are capable of mass mobilization through non-ideological incentives.

Group-Level Drivers of VE/I

The *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* highlights political anthropologist and counter-terrorism expert David Kilcullen’s observation, “people don’t get pushed into rebellion by their ideology. They get pulled in by their social networks.”⁴⁵ This perspective explains quite well the political developments in Kyrgyzstan during the 2005 and 2010 “revolutions.” Social networks are very strong in the country and are reinforced by a system of politics that is based much more in patron-client relationships than in competing ideologies. Furthermore, as recent research points out, these patron-client relationships play out differently in Kyrgyzstan’s politics along ethnic lines.⁴⁶ This suggests that if social networks do facilitate VE/I in Kyrgyzstan, they may also be ethnic in character. In the context of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict in the south of the country, this provides a cautionary tale of how nationalism, perhaps the one ideology that can mobilize populations in the country, could be a driver of VE/I in the country.

The other important dimension of Kyrgyzstan’s patron-client networks is their local nature, which has often been interpreted as a reflection of “clan politics.”⁴⁷ In some ways, the local patron-client networks that have developed have presented a serious challenge to the consolidation of authoritarianism in the country, and it is still unknown whether they can play a constructive or destructive role in the country’s attempt to consolidate a democratic political system. Similarly, as a driver of VE/I, it is difficult to assess whether these local patron-client networks are more likely to facilitate or deter violent extremism. On the one hand, they allow for the mobilization of localities and the development of informally autonomous areas politically, as we have seen in the last three years in the city of Osh. On the other hand, they also provide a certain degree of resiliency within communities against the spread of what are considered “dangerous ideologies.” As this report suggests several times, the ability of extremist ideologies to penetrate such available structures for mass mobilization will likely ultimately depend upon those ideologies ability to benefit the people involved by providing improvements in livelihood and in resolving their most strongly held grievances as a group.

Political- and Societal-Level Drivers of VE/I

In addition to individual- and group-level drivers of violent Islamist extremism, USAID’s *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* also highlights seven “political drivers” that have the potential to shape and reshape society broadly. These drivers include: (1) denial of political rights and civil liberties; (2) violations of human rights; (3) widespread government corruption; (4) the presence of ungoverned territories; (5) a history of prior militant conflict; (6) external state support for domestic violent extremist groups; and (7) illegitimate yet unchallenged national governments.⁴⁸ In Kyrgyzstan, many

⁴⁵ Denoex and Carter, p. 74.

⁴⁶ Brent Hierman, “What use was the election to us?: Clientelism and political trust amongst ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” *Nationalities Papers* (2010) 38:2, pp. 245-263, p. 246.

⁴⁷ See Kathleen Collins, “The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia,” *Comparative Politics* (January 2003) 35:2, pp. 170-190.

⁴⁸ Denoex and Carter, p. 27.

of these drivers are present today, but they are also in flux as the country seeks to establish its own unique form of democracy. If these drivers are predictive of the risk for VE/I in the country, one can assume that this risk will depend substantially on the relative success and failure of Kyrgyzstan's attempts to consolidate a democratic system of governance.

At present, the two political societal-level drivers of VE/I that are mostly absent are numbers five and six. Kyrgyzstan does not really have a history of militant conflict (driver five), at least regarding conflict between formal militant groups and the state. The state did have minor skirmishes with the IMU in 1999 and 2000, but these were not sustained and not really focused on Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, while one could interpret the mass ethnic violence in the south of the country in 1990 and 2010 as "militant," it did not involve formal militant groups. Similarly, although there is some external support for groups espousing extremist ideologies in the country, such as for HT, there is little evidence that there is a significant presence of any extremist groups in the country with substantial support from outside governments (driver six). Furthermore, at present, it is not clear why any outside government would support such actions in the country unless they intended to target the interests of the United States, Russia, or China in Kyrgyzstan. The absence of these two drivers is important to the analysis of VE/I risk in the country since they also suggest a paucity of formal militant groups in the country that are based on extremist ideals. This situation would likely only change over the short term with the involvement of external forces.

Drivers one, two, and seven, all of which relate to the democratic nature of the state, have all been present in the country over the last decade, and some of them continue to be present in the country today. That said, they are also in flux and differ in their articulation regionally. At present, the government in the country has been formed through a system based on popular elections, thus rendering it legitimate (driver seven) for the majority of the population. Furthermore, it faces substantial challenges from within the political system that is based mostly on parliamentary power. In fact, due to changing alliances in the parliament, the Prime Minister of the country has changed six times in the last three years. Since this system of governance has been established in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, there appear to be substantial improvements in the areas of political rights and civil liberties (driver one) as well as in the overall observance of human rights (driver two).

This improvement is apparent from interviews conducted with human rights activists during the summer of 2012, but the responses of activists during these interviews were also divided regionally. In the north, for example, 75% of respondents noted that the protection of human rights had improved since 2010, and 81.5% noted that their working relationship with the government had improved.⁴⁹ Among interviews in the south, however, only 21.1% suggested that the protection of human rights had improved since 2010, and only 50% noted improvement in their working relationship with the government.⁵⁰ Given the poor situation of human rights of interaction between civil society and government under the previous regime of President Bakiyev, these responses in the south suggest that the protection of human rights and civil liberties remain dismal in the southern region of the country. The substantial variance in answers to these questions in the north and south of Kyrgyzstan suggests a country that is sharply divided politically along geographic lines. The future of these drivers of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan, thus, depends largely upon the stability of its present democratically oriented form of governance and which direction political trends move nationally—in the direction taken by the north, that taken by the south, or acutely divided between the two regions.

The identified societal-level drivers three and four are likely those most present in Kyrgyzstani society today. National public opinion polls from 2012 reveal that 75% of those asked about the extent of corruption (driver three) as a problem in the country said it was a "very big problem," and

⁴⁹ *Strengthening Human Rights* 2012, pp. E6, E12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp. E7, E12.

an additional 21% noted that it was “a big problem.”⁵¹ The fact that an alarming 96% of those polled viewed corruption as a serious problem also speaks to the public animosity held for corrupt behavior, especially among government officials. In a broad sense, these findings also suggest that an overwhelming majority of the population feels that social justice is not served in the country. Furthermore, this corruption is perceived as a substantial hindrance to the observation of human rights and civil liberties. In semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2012, for example, human rights activists noted that they viewed law-enforcement, the courts, and corruption as the three biggest obstacles to the observation of human rights in the country.⁵² Furthermore, they generally identified the problems with law-enforcement and the courts to be related to the corruption in these institutions rather than their political allegiance to the state.

At the same time, the problem of “under-governed spaces” (driver four) in Kyrgyzstan is growing as a result of state weakness, at least at the national level. As the example of the city of Osh demonstrates, the national government is incapable of maintaining its authority over the second largest city in the country when local power sources decide to resist national directives. In addition to the lack of national authority over Osh and other southern regions, there is anecdotal evidence that much of Kyrgyzstan lacks national oversight. The localized patron-client networks that are significant political actors tend to control life on the local level. As a result, there is substantial variance in the situation across regions in the country. To date, this has not resulted in the development of the type of ungoverned spaces that have allowed the establishment of extremist groups in countries like Afghanistan and Somalia, but arguably that potential exists given the weakness of the state and the strength of informal local power sources.

Overall, viewing the risk of VE/I through the potential drivers identified in USAID’s *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* offers a picture of a country that is certainly under risk of VE/I, but is not immediately vulnerable. Furthermore, analysis suggests that violent extremism is more likely to emerge as a vehicle for nationalists than as a tool of extremist religious ideology over the short term. However, this situation also remains vulnerable to exploitation by Islamic extremists over the longer term, particularly given that the most acute grievances held by the Kyrgyzstani population with its government relate to the country’s lack of social justice. Although generally cynical about the power of ideology to resolve problems after seventy years of communist rule and twenty years of stilted democratization, if extremist groups promising social justice in the country are able to prove that they can deliver, they might find many supporters over the long-term.

IV. POTENTIAL USG RESPONSES

The preceding analysis offers a number of insights that could usefully inform USG policies and programs in Kyrgyzstan. It offers a picture of a country in flux where many drivers of VE/I are present, but also where important ones are not. From a broader perspective, the analysis suggests that the risks of VE/I are more long-term than short-term, thus making a development response more appropriate to mitigating those risks than are efforts to bolster the state’s capacity to countering terrorism. The analysis of the individual drivers of VE/I suggests that the most acute risks exist in the “push” factors of people’s grievances with the state, particularly regarding social justice. Conversely, the “pull” factors of local patron-client networks, while not presently radicalized, potentially could become so over the long-term. In examining group-level drivers, again the “pull” factor of localized power networks emerges as a risk, depending upon how these networks are employed and for what purposes, but especially as a tool for nationalist ideologies in the present.

⁵¹ IRI 2012, p. 27.

⁵² *Strengthening Human Rights* 2012, p. E7.

Finally, among societal-level drivers, the largest risks lie with the country's pervasive corruption and the fragility of its present democratically oriented political system. It is particularly noteworthy that Islam presently does not play a significant role in these drivers at any level. Although Islamic extremism could potentially pose a threat over the longer term considering the country's proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as its Muslim-majority population, the present risks of VE/I in the country are much more related to Kyrgyzstan's status as a fragile state with widespread corruption and a lack of social justice.

In this context, this report recommends that U.S. Government (USG) actively involved in development assistance to Kyrgyzstan consider a development response to potential VE/I in the country that prioritizes the following: 1) developing more effective governance and reducing corruption, both in social services and in the justice system, including law-enforcement and the judiciary; 2) developing political competition based on ideals rather than on patron-client networks; and 3) the promotion of tolerance and a larger conception of an inclusive Kyrgyzstani citizenship that embraces all nationalities in the country. Although the goals of these responses are neither easily achievable nor can be accomplished entirely through development assistance, the risks of failure are likely worth the potential gains that successful programming could make.

Developing More Effective Governance and Reducing Corruption

Although the USG has worked in the development of democracy and good governance in Kyrgyzstan for over two decades, these efforts have generally not found substantial political will for democratic reform emanating from the host government until 2010. Since 2010, Kyrgyzstan has sought to implement a unique form of governance that is based on parliamentary democracy, representing the first time when the USG's aspirations of democratization have corresponded roughly to the aspirations of the regime in power in the country. Providing assistance to a state that is resisting democracy and one that is seeking to implement democracy require radically different approaches. While a state that is resistant to political reform requires that development interventions build a popular constituency for reform, a state that is seeking to implement democracy requires that development actors assist it in increasing effectiveness. To date, the USG has played a critical role in helping Kyrgyzstan's new system of governance through assistance to its central organ, the parliament. However, additionally, USAID and other USG actors involved in development need to assist the state to become more effective in its service provision to the population, including in the areas of health, welfare, and education. Another important area where USAID and other USG agencies have been involved, but must continue involvement is in the reform of law enforcement and the promotion of an independent, yet uncorrupted judiciary.

In all of these areas, the reduction of corruption is critical. This is especially true in the justice system of the country, which is generally distrusted by the population, who view both law enforcement and the courts as institutions that do not protect the citizenry, but exist primarily as instruments of rent seeking. In addition to the information already provided in this report about this distrust, it is noteworthy that in recent national public opinion polls, only 37% and 28% of respondents respectively viewed the police and the courts favorably.⁵³ As the experience of Georgia demonstrates, the successful reform of law-enforcement and the judiciary that reduces corruption resonates not only with citizens inside the country, but regionally. Outside the justice system, however, citizen focus groups conducted in 2012 also suggested significant grievances with the extent of corruption in the healthcare system, the social welfare system, and in education. Development responses to this situation might involve a combination of accountability measures through support for watchdog organizations and reforms to streamline service provision and appropriately punish corrupt practices.

⁵³ IRI 2012, p. 49.

These interventions are critical to both consolidating the developing democratic system in Kyrgyzstan, hence ensuring continued improvements in the protection of human rights and civil liberties, and in restoring public trust in government through more favorable public opinions about the ability of the state to provide social justice. Additionally, more effective governance may assist the national government to project its power more successfully throughout the country, preventing the further deterioration of the divide between the north and south in the country.

Developing Political Competition Based on Ideas Rather than on Patron-Client Networks

As noted throughout the report, Kyrgyzstan's political system is largely dependent upon patron-client networks. This weakens the state, creates vehicles for the mass mobilization of segments of the population, and perpetuates an ideological void in the country that could potentially over the long-term be filled by extremists. Development responses to this situation in Kyrgyzstan have yet to be successful. Conventional approaches to political party building, for example, have been implemented by USAID in the country for close to two decades, but now when political parties have substantial power, none of them are truly built on ideals and visions for the future of the country. Instead, they are largely built on personalities and patron-client networks.

In this context, USAID and other USG agencies should be encouraged to “think outside the box” about political party development and the promotion of a competition of ideas in the policy arena. To date, much of political party assistance to the country has focused on party organization and winning elections. Few resources or strategic thinking have been dedicated to supporting the development of political parties along ideological lines. Given that existing party leaders generally are more concerned about maintaining power and winning votes than policy stances, such assistance perhaps should not be dedicated to these people. Instead, it may need to be cultivated from outside the arena of present political parties through the promotion of substantive policy debates with clear alternatives in the public sphere via think tanks and other means. Although this may be the most difficult issue of the priorities recommended to address, it may be among the most important given the present vacuum of ideology in the country and the fact that the absence of strong extremist ideology in the country has been critical to the development of VE/I.

Promoting Tolerance and the Ideal of Inclusive Kyrgyzstani Citizenship

Given that ethnic nationalism is the one ideology that has proven capable of mobilizing citizens both politically and violently in Kyrgyzstan to date, serious thought needs to go into how a development response can counteract its rapid growth in the country today. Although extreme ethnic nationalists in Kyrgyzstan remain a minority, much like the ideology of Islamic extremism, nationalism has the potential to quickly spread and to voice its minority opinions aggressively and violently. Furthermore, a country undergoing democratic reforms is particularly vulnerable to the spread of nationalism as a populist ideology that can easily mobilize people. It is noteworthy, for example, that the rise in ethnic Kyrgyz nationalism in the country has transpired along with the state's democratization. In this context, the involvement of nationalist groups in the country's fragile democratic system could result in an illiberal democracy characterized by the mob rule rather than by the rule of law...

Given that this is a cross-cutting development problem, it is difficult to address it directly, but it should be an aspect of USG development interventions on multiple levels, including in the promotion of human rights, in educational programming, in work with the parliament, political parties, and think tanks, and in the USG's engagement with civil society. In this sense, it may make most sense for implementers of USG assistance to view the promotion of tolerance and a civic identity as a theme that should permeate their work, their trainings, and their assistance decisions.

Obviously, all of these recommendations for the development response to VE/I require further engagement with the present USG development assistance program, on-ground assessments dedicated to project design, and careful consideration of resources.

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