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## Fragmentation, Frustrated Revolt, and Off-Shore Opportunity: A Comparative Examination of Jihadi Mobilization in Central Asia and the South Caucasus

William B. Farrell

University of Maine, [william.b.farrell@maine.edu](mailto:william.b.farrell@maine.edu)

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**FRAGMENTATION, FRUSTRATED REVOLT, AND OFF-SHORE OPPORTUNITY:  
A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF JIHADI MOBILIZATION IN  
CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

By

William B. Farrell

B.A. Tufts University, 1992

M.A.L.D The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1994

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Interdisciplinary)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

December 2019

Advisory Committee:

Dr. James W. Warhola, Professor of Political Science (Co-Chair)

Capt. James Settele, USN (Ret.), Exec. Director, School of Policy and International Affairs (Co-Chair)

Dr. Seth Singleton, Professor, School of Policy and International Affairs

Dr. Mario Teisl, Professor of Economics, Director of School of Economics

Dr. Sharon Morris, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State (2015-18), United States Department of State

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By William B. Farrell

Dissertation Advisors: Dr. James W. Warhola and Capt. James Settele, USN (Ret.)

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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December 2019

This research presents analysis for identifying common risk and resilience factors that contributed to or hindered Salafi jihadi mobilization of citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus and examines the extent to which these factors had differing internal and external outcomes on Salafi jihadi mobilization. Three levels of analysis provide examination of regime characteristics, behavior of jihadi organizations that mobilized individuals from the region, and case studies through interviews in communities affected by jihadi mobilization in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia.

This research reveals that early distinctions in Islamist subnational struggles had oriented violence towards governments within Central Asia, while neighboring struggles in the North Caucasus oriented jihadi participants from Azerbaijan and Georgia largely towards external authorities in the north. Further, this research suggests that the dual phenomena of domestic jihadi manifestation of violence and foreign fighter mobilization to external theatres are inversely related and affected by the patterns of jihadi organizational displacement, co-location with larger entities engaged in conflict abroad, and expansion of organizations seeking new members within these

external jihadi theatres. Additionally, state behavior, including state coercive capacity, solidification of elite cooperation, and regime legitimation through the construction of well-curated national identities, has served as a strengthening bulwark against jihadi organizational effectiveness internally in the region. Yet, interview data from this study indicates that state behavior has also engendered notable grievances among ethnic and religious minority populations in areas of jihadi foreign fighter origin. Despite these society-fragmenting perceptions of injustice, prejudice, and lack of trust in governance, grievances have not galvanized into viable sustained internal jihadi action throughout the region. Rather, this research suggests that punitive state pressures on outgroups and patterns of economic migration across the entire population have contributed to a venting process that limits the potential manpower available for internal violent agendas. Yet this same venting process presents some individuals avenues for jihadi mobilization, strengthening the recruitment possibilities for offshore jihadi organizations.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible wife, Jennifer Farrell and our five beautiful children, Liam, Aila, Siobhan, Seamus, and Killian. Not only have they endured my frequent and long travels abroad, but also the many missed weekends and vacations as I put pen to paper to write this piece. I am so blessed to have such a supportive family that has helped me to understand that life is all about the warmth and love of the people around you. They forever have my love and gratitude.

This journey would not have even begun, had it not been for my parents, James and Margaret Farrell, who encouraged me and my brothers, Dr. Walter Farrell and Geoffrey Farrell, to continue our academic training and to never stop thinking, questioning, and growing. My hope is that my children will emerge into adulthood with the same curiosity, sense of adventure, and desire to learn that my mother and father instilled in us. My parents and my brothers have been a deep source of inspiration and motivation on this journey. I truly wish my father could have seen me complete this effort. But his memory and spirit have been with me throughout.

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I am also appreciative of FHI360 and the United States Agency for International Development for the support and permission to use and adapt materials that I produced for the 2018 study *Georgia Violent Extremism Risk Assessment* and for Mercy Corps for the support and permission to use and adapt materials that I produced for the 2016 study *Vulnerable to Manipulation: Interviews with Migrant Youth and Youth Remittance-Recipients in Kyrgyzstan*.

And finally, I am grateful for the crucial financial support through the Penelope Wolfe Fellowship and the School of Policy and International Affairs that helped launch my doctoral studies.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMAG	The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia
BAAD	Big Allied and Dangerous Database
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DAESH	<i>Dawlat al-Islamiyah f'al-Iraq w Belaad al-Sham</i>
DC	District of Columbia
ETIM	East Turkistan Islamic Movement
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FIS	Islamic Salvation Front
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HT	Hizb ut-Tahrir
ICG	International Crisis Group
IJU	Islamic Jihad Union
IK	<i>Imarat Kavkaz</i> or Caucasus Emirate
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRPT	Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IS	Islamic State
IT	Information Technology

JAK	Jund al Khalifa or Soldiers of the Caliphate
KLA	Kazakhstan Liberation Army
KII	Key Informant Interview
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PAPI	Pencil and Paper Interview
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
SADUM	Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
START	National Consortium for Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
TRAC	Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium
USG	United States Government
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
US	United States
UTO	United Tajik Opposition
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization
ZMRI	Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Transcaucasus

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

While earning my master's degree at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in the early 1990s, my academic advisor suggested that I forgo my summer plans of continuing my Arabic studies in Fez, Morocco. Instead he presented an opportunity for me to explore newly independent Uzbekistan as a way of broadening my view of Southwest Asian and Islamic history. While I was intrigued, I had little understanding of Central Asia, the former Soviet Union, and how this would be more than a detour from my main areas of academic and professional interest. But as an impetuous young man, the adventure called to me. Little did I know that that three-month stint would light a fire of curiosity about the region and its dynamics that has caused me to return again and again to Central Asia and later repeatedly to the Caucasus. And through design or happenstance, I have found myself travelling a multi-decade path that has deepened my exploration of issues of stability and fragility. Whether based in Dushanbe as a member of the Contact Group of Guarantor States for the Tajik peace process, or based in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali as a member of the Joint Control Commission for the Georgian-South Ossetian peace negotiations through my positions at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), or based in Tashkent with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) overseeing post-September 11<sup>th</sup> stabilization programs across the five Central Asia countries, or through United States Government-sponsored field-research projects on stability and violent extremism conducted over the years across the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Georgia, my curiosity about these countries has continued to grow, uncovering ever more questions to be examined and theories to be formulated and refined.

To the casual observer, Central Asia is oft perceived as a monolithic mass of post-Soviet autocracy, punctuated by periodic tensions and turmoil. The “-stans” moniker, or sardonically the “icky stans,” leaves an opaque caricature of this cross-roads of civilizations. And while the South Caucasus may escape some of the pejorative simplification suffered by Central Asia, its persistent struggles in Ngorno-Karabakh, its “frozen conflicts” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and its proximity to the violence in the North Caucasus paints an image of statically developing countries in perpetual instability. Needless to say, the devil is in the detail when it comes to understanding how and why these countries have evolved in their own particular ways, as well as suffered or escaped certain phenomena.

One of these compelling phenomena is the presence of Salafi jihadism. Of late, policy analysts and the circles in which they operate have leaned on the term “violent extremism” as an umbrella for all ideologically motivated forms of violence and support for violence, from hate groups and white supremacists to FARC to Islamic State, and the wide territory in between. And while the term does allow flexibility when examining groups with violent agendas, its bagginess risks conflating forms of violence that mobilize different constituencies for a myriad of divergent reasons.<sup>1</sup> My own research interests, perhaps rooted in my ongoing exploration of Islamism and expressions of violence, focus on a sub-set of the violent extremism umbrella: The groups and individuals that adhere to a Salafi philosophical frame for their practice of Islam and who believe that the use of violence, through the lens of jihad, is justified and necessary to protect Islam and promote this philosophical frame.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation references violent extremism in various points where either the literature reflects the usage of that term or engagement with key respondents or stakeholders in field research was facilitated by use of that term, rather than less widely familiar Salafi jihadism.

<sup>2</sup> Further discussion on Salafism and jihad is presented in subsequent chapters of this text.



In the context of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the specter of Salafi jihadism has loomed large, both in foreign analysis of vulnerabilities and of national leadership proclaiming concerns for the phenomenon. But while specific geographic areas of these two regions, such as the Ferghana Valley in contiguous parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic or the Pankisi Valley of the Republic of Georgia along the border with Chechnya are often labeled as jihadi hotbeds, the story is more nuanced. To understand this nuance, one must examine patterns of mobilization to Salafi jihadism, here defined as individuals participating with Salafi jihadi organizations as foreign fighters outside of their countries of origin or participating with Salafi jihadi organizations on attacks within their home countries.<sup>3</sup> In these regions, the presence of Salafi jihadism takes both the form of organizations that have developed in Central Asia and the Caucasus and organizations that have their origins abroad, but draw participation from people originating from these regions. Since 1991, when credible data on violent attacks began being publicly and more credibly tracked, examples of Salafi jihadi attacks have been almost non-existent in the South Caucasus and highly limited in Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> Yet, estimates of participation of citizens of countries across Central Asia and the South Caucasus in jihadi conflict zones in Afghanistan and recently in Syria and Iraq show mobilized individuals numbering in the thousands, among the largest cohorts of foreign fighter groups in this conflict zones. Beyond sheer volume, fighters from the South Caucasus, specifically from Georgia, have played an outsized role in leadership positions in Salafi jihadi organizations, while Central Asians, particularly ethnic Tajiks and ethnic Uzbeks, have played a prominent role as suicide bombers in the Syria and Iraqi conflict areas.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, participation includes individuals who attribute their own action to support of a violent extremist organization or agenda.

<sup>4</sup> Further discussion of Salafi jihadi presence and actions are discussed in chapter 4.

This paper, therefore, seeks to understand common factors in Central Asia and the South Caucasus that contribute to vulnerabilities of foreign fighter mobilization, yet have largely provided for resilience to domestic Salafi-jihadi attacks.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, this paper sheds light on the extent to which the nature of political regimes, indications of societal cohesion or fragmentation, and affiliation of local violent non-state actors with global Salafi organizations contributes to the risk profiles in these regions.<sup>6</sup> It is thus through a comparative examination of the shared and divergent factors in the region that one can begin to theorize which common factors have influenced notable mobilization to Salafi jihadi violence outside of the borders of these countries, yet has produced limited domestic Salafi jihadi violent expression internally.

Complementing an understanding of these internal country-level dynamics and their relationship to jihadi mobilization is an examination of the behavior and effectiveness of local Salafi jihadi organizations in each country. As these organizations serve as direct vehicles for Salafi jihadi mobilization of citizens, understanding markers of their effectiveness, durability, and mission is essential. Additionally, clarity on the role that affiliation by local actors with global Salafi jihadi organizations plays on these markers contributes to understanding the extent to which the risk profile of each country has changed following affiliation. Both formal pledges of allegiance (*bay'a*) and non-formalized alliances are examined as indicators of affiliation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, seven countries are included: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia; and Azerbaijan and Georgia in the south Caucasus. Armenia has not been included in absence of sufficient evidence of Salafi jihadism mobilization domestically or internationally in the modern era.

<sup>6</sup> As violent non-state actors operate within and across borders of sovereign states, they have the potential of affecting and being affected by the stability of those states and by the actions of government. Thus, a comparative understanding of the conditions of governance, state legitimacy, and state integrity in the region provides further insights into ease of presence and mobility in the region.

<sup>7</sup> Though the modern global Salafi jihadi movement had been largely dominated by al Qaeda, the separation from al Qaeda of Islamic State in 2014 and its rapid increase in prominence created a

This paper utilizes two case studies to examine citizen perception of vulnerabilities and resiliencies to Salafi jihadi mobilization in the two regions. The Republic of Georgia and the Kyrgyz Republic were chosen as case studies, due to their prominence as countries of Salafi jihadi mobilization in each of the regions. The paper builds on field research conducted by the author between 2016 and 2018 in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. These countries share important common experiences, beyond a portion of their citizenry participating in jihadi organizations. Each has emerged from the starting block of the Soviet experience and have passed through some form of political instability since independence, including violent ethnic conflict and political transition in Kyrgyzstan, to internal strife and *de facto* breakaway regions in Georgia. And both have been regularly identified as democratic outliers in an otherwise autocratic regional landscape. Yet like their neighbors in each of the regions, these countries have important differences, not least of which is the difference in religious faith of the majority population, with the overwhelming majority of Georgians identified as Orthodox Christians and the majority of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic identified as Muslims. These countries further differ in their approach to governance and power, the path of political transition, cultural and religious identity, and the relationship with ethnic and religious minorities within their borders.

Certainly, much has been written about violent non-state actors, both jihadi and non-jihadi, in fragile states, with competing bodies of literature suggesting, in turns, that their presence is caused by or resulting from state fragility. Beyond the absence of consensus on their relationship to fragility, much of this literature is geographically focused in areas outside of the former Soviet space or reliant on global cross-country analyses of macro indicators.

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competitive effect for recruitment and choice of affiliation. This paper takes into consideration this dynamic.

Additionally, there is a limited and dated body of scholarly literature and a somewhat larger body of grey literature that has examined the presence of violent extremism in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Yet, there is limited contemporary field research in Central Asia and the South Caucasus on topics pertaining to vulnerabilities and resiliencies toward Salafi jihadism and citizen mobilization. Further none of the existing literature has used comparative methods to examine the mobilization phenomenon across these two regions. Arguably, research on sensitive topics in these studied countries can be challenging: Bureaucratic roadblocks, inaccessibility, and risks of legal penalties discourage some researchers. Perhaps most importantly, while the extant studies on violent agendas in Central Asia and the South Caucasus provide valuable insights, many pre-date the rise of Islamic State (IS), an highwater mark for Salafi jihadi mobilization in the region.<sup>8</sup> It is in the light of IS's rapid ascension and expansion of recruits that one gains a more complete understanding of the mobilization phenomenon in these two regions. This paper, thus, seeks to fill a lacuna in the extant literature on risks and resiliencies to jihadi mobilization by providing a comparative examination of the factors present in two non-contiguous areas of the former Soviet Union and theorizing on which of these factors are influential in the particular Salafi jihadi mobilization patterns present in the regions.

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<sup>8</sup> Depending on the timeframe and the user, Islamic State has been known by a number of names, including Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Levant (ISIL), and Daesh, the Arabic acronym representing Dawlat al-Islamiyah f'al-Iraq w Belaad al-Sham (i.e., Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria/Levant), and most recently Islamic State (IS). Names carry significance, sometime differing, for both the user and the listener. For consistency this paper endeavors to use the name that the organizations themselves used at the time of writing this dissertation. By using these self-designated titles, the author does not intend to give legitimacy to either territorial or religious claims by these organizations.

## 1.1 METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a mixed method design to answer two primary research questions related to Salafi jihadi mobilization:

(1) Which common risk and resilience factors in Central Asia and the South Caucasus have contributed to or hindered Salafi jihadi mobilization of the citizenry?

(2) To what extent have these factors had differing internal and external outcomes on Salafi jihadi mobilization?

These questions are addressed in this research through an examination of three levels of analysis: regime-level characteristics; jihadi-organizational dynamics; and case-specific community-level perceptions.

*1. Regime-level characteristics:* The study is underpinned by an understanding of the nature of states in Eurasia. An examination of scholarly literature on the nature of political regimes in the Caucasus and Central Asia provides the foundation for considering risk and preventative factors to jihadi mobilization. Additionally, state stability and fragility data from the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index as well as Transparency International is examined to provide longitudinal context on changes affecting state integrity.

*2. Jihadi Organizational Dynamics:* At the organizational-level, this paper analyzes attack data between 1991 and 2017 from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and the Big, Allied and Dangerous Database (BAAD) from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland (START). Additionally, Stanford University's Mapping Militants Project and with the Site Intelligence and TRAC databases to identify attack patterns and formal *bay'a* and non-formal affiliation dates for each relevant Central Asia and South Caucasus jihadi organization.

3. *Community-level perceptions*: Finally, this paper relies on data collected by the author through field research conducted in 2016 and 2018 in the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Georgia, respectively. This qualitative interview data, which was gathered using ethnographic methods, presents perceptions of members of communities in both countries which have been affected by Salafi jihadi actors.

## **1.2 CHAPTER OUTLINE**

This dissertation contains seven chapters, including this introduction. The discussion in Chapter 2 provides a basis for understanding the path towards violent expressions of Islamism globally and the relationship of these historical and ideological underpinnings to the manifestation of Islamism and expression of violence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Additionally, the chapter examines the literature on recruitment and assumed motivations for joining Salafi jihadi organizations globally. Chapter 3 discusses the nature of political regimes in Central Asia and the South Caucasus and the extent to which these characteristics provide a bulwark against jihadi mobilization or conversely create a permissive environment. Chapter 4 examines the presence of jihadi organizations in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including their emergence, mission and key characteristics. Analysis of violent attack behavior and lethality of Salafi jihadi organizations in Central Asia and the Caucasus pre- and post-*bay'a* is examined to shed light on organizational effectiveness. Chapters 5 and 6 provide insights at the community level to attitudes and perceptions related to jihadi mobilization vulnerability. Chapter 5 relies on primary data from field research conducted in spring 2018 to examine jihadi mobilization, vulnerabilities, and resiliencies in the Republic of Georgia. Similarly, Chapter 6 builds on primary data collected in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2016, examining vulnerability and resiliencies

to jihadi mobilization. Finally, Chapter 7 draws conclusions on the comparative vulnerabilities and experiences of jihadi mobilization across the two regions.

### **1.3 LIMITATIONS**

The two case studies in this paper present perception-based qualitative interview data from communities and key informants. While both case studies include substantial numbers of qualitative interviews in selected geographies, the political conditions in both countries precluded the possibility of conducting surveys with a representative sample of the population. Though these purposive samples prevent generalizability of findings, they provide insights that serve as the basis for theory-formulation and provide groundwork for future comparative studies. As the political environments in these countries become more permissive for large-scale survey work on sensitive questions and the availability of research funding for such endeavors expands, further quantitative research should be conducted. Further, while many respondents in both the Kyrgyz Republic and Georgia had direct familiarity with people who had been recruited to Salafi jihadi organizations, the respondents themselves were not self-identified as Salafi jihadis. Thus, perceptions from these respondents can only infer motivations or attitudes of those who have actually been mobilized to jihadism. Outside of prison settings, for which granted governmental permission ranges from challenging to impossible, identifying respondents who are Salafi jihadis or former foreign fighters is both difficult and potentially dangerous for potential respondents and interviewers.

Data tables available from the University of Maryland and Stanford University provide timely attack data globally. While many of the attacks are attributed to specific actors, some of the data remains without attribution. Where actors have not claimed responsibility or the evidence is insufficient to link actors with attacks, designations such as “unknown assailant” are

utilized. It is, therefore, impossible to know whether some of the unattributed attacks were actually committed by the violent non-state actors identified in this research or whether there are some remaining unknown actors. This research takes into account these unattributed attacks.

Public announcements of *bay'a* are often identifiable among Salafi jihadi leaders. Yet, where relationships appear to exist between local violent non-state actors and al Qaeda or IS, but there is an absence of public record on *bay'a*, determination of a formalized relationship is inconclusive. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, affiliation is defined as both the formal process of *bay'a* and attributed relationships, as determined through examination of the existing scholarly literature and U.S. Department of State designations of affiliation.

The prominence of IS is relatively new, with the organization emerging as a separate entity from al Qaeda first in 2014. Affiliation of local Salafi jihadi actors with IS occurred in the 2014 to 2017 period. Databases tracking attack information are therefore constrained to this short period; a notable contrast with the pre-2014 periods. Additionally, the emergence of IS has created competitive pressure for affiliation, resulting in some examples of organizational splintering at the local level. This is acknowledged in the text, where it emerges.



## CHAPTER 2: THE GLOBAL PATH TO SALAFI JIHADISM

The path of Islamism and the radicalization of a small subset of Islamists that embrace violence has arrived center stage in discussions, media reports, and academic literature in recent years. The emergence of groups like al Qaeda, IS, and their affiliated organizations, however, can leave an incorrect impression that the linkage of Islam, ideology, and political aspiration are a condition of the very recent present. These groups and their supporters did not simply emerge globally or in regions like Central Asia and the South Caucasus like mushrooms after the rain. Nor is their particularly violent interpretation or political agenda representative of all who espouse Islamist views or indeed the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. However, the process of Islamist radicalization should also not be seen as completely divorced from dynamics happening within the Muslim world in the past decades. On the contrary, modern Islamism, which has manifested in both quiescence and revolt, has clearly identifiable shared origins. It is, therefore, important to view the growth of militant movements in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s and the precipitous expansion of Salafi jihadi organizations and the global jihadi movement in the 2000s within the context of broader Islamic revival yet pivoting in a virulent direction.

The origin of modern Islamism emerged in efforts to come to terms with the vacuum left by the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, viewed by many as the physical embodiment of Islamic strength, as well as the pressures of great powers, through colonialism or the competitive bulwarks of capitalist and Marxist ideologies. Defining a path that is understandable and acceptable at a time of great change, particularly one that was not designed by distant self-serving internal or external rulers, emerged as a collective imperative. It is the intellectual groundwork laid by Sayyid Qutb and Hassan al Banna of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Seyed Abul A'la Maududi of Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan that placed the foundational

cornerstones of modern Islamism. Further, the influence of Islamist thinking on Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia at a moment when Saudi interest and financial largess through oil wealth allowed propagation of their religious doctrine abroad, created a vehicle for introducing vast numbers of people to a particularly conservative Sunni direction with a political and social view of Islam as a comprehensive aspect of life in service of God. Additionally, building upon the intellectual and organizational platforms of al-Banna, Qutb and Maududi and conservative religious expansion propagated globally from the Kingdom, the model of revolution that emerged in Iran and the proven viability of a call to action and repelling of foreign invaders in Afghanistan demonstrated that revolution and violence can serve as a path to protection and expansion of Islam.

## **2.1 ISLAMISM AS TERM AND CONCEPT**

Certainly, reexamination and renewal within religion and particularly in Islam is not a concept that first emerged in the modern era (Sfeir, 2007). Yet it is in the modern era that we find a blossoming of terminology which encompasses a lexicon that is at times opaque and other times pejorative, but not uniformly clarifying. Such terms include: Islamic revival, Islamic awakening, Islamic activism, Islamic fundamentalism, political Islam and Islamism. While “Islamism” had been in usage from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a synonym for Islam and a counter to the oft used “Mohammedanism,” the modern usage of “Islamism” did not come into vogue until “the rise of an ideological and political interpretation of Islam challenged scholars and commentators to come up with an alternative, to distinguish Islam as modern ideology from Islam as a faith” (Kramer, 2003). Prior to this point, and continuing for a period to overlap in usage, there was wide application of the term “Islamic Fundamentalism” as a descriptor for an ideological pursuit of both a return to the early practice of Islam and to the role of Islam beyond religion, as an integral part of the social, political,

economic, and religious aspects of society. Just as the Prophet Muhammad had introduced “a new moral order in which the origin and end of all actions was not self or tribal interest but God’s will,” (Esposito, 1988), this modern renewal of Islam sought oneness with God as a contrast with the man-made partitions present in modernity and particularly in the artificiality of modern states, whether as a function of colonialism, post-colonial nationalism, or imperialism.

As media usage of “Islamic Fundamentalism” took on a pejorative hue in the public mind which equated it exclusively with intolerance and violence, scholarly usage began to shift towards “Political Islam” or “Islamism” to describe Muslims’ desire to bring religion into the political space, while reflecting that those who espoused this view may be from mainstream Islam and not necessarily extremists (Kramer, 2003; Milton-Edwards, 2004). Already by the mid-1980s, French scholars were using the term *islamisme* as a “modern ideology and a political program.” English usage of the term emerged shortly thereafter. Olivier Roy, one of the leading French scholars on the subject describes Islamism as a “recasting of Islam into a political ideology with the aim of transforming the society through the state” (Roy, 2012). In other words, the formation of an exclusively Islamic state, rather than a hybrid which incorporates Islamic elements is fundamental to the definition of Islamism. Similarly, Antoine Sfeir identifies Islamists as all who seek to bring Islam into “their environment, whether in relation to their lives in society, their family circumstances, or the workplace,” yet recognizing that a subset of this group may choose to move to violent action (Sfeir, 2007).

Roy recognizes, however, that just as with “Islamic Fundamentalism” there has emerged a “definite gap of meaning between the use of a term in social science and the migration of this term into the public debate.” (Roy, 2012). Daniel Pipes, a vocal scholar and political commentator at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in the United States,

exemplifies this migration as he places Islamism in the same basket as other -isms as a “sustained and systematic program”, stating that it is “...yet another twentieth-century radical utopian scheme. Like Marxism-Leninism or fascism, it offers a way to control the state, run society, and remake the human being” (Pipes, 1998). Others, like Robin Wright view the phenomenon of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and modern militancy as “a successful idiom of modern political opposition” (Wright, 2001).

We thus find a contemporary divergence in the application not only of the term “Islamism” but also in the essence of its concept. At present, it is viewed on one hand in relation to political parties and activities seeking a role in existing governance structures as a path to realizing transformation through political processes, such as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria in the 1991 elections or the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) following the inter-Tajik peace agreement in 1997. On the other hand, those who categorically reject the notion that Islam can coexist in a manmade state-construct that places secular or national agendas as preeminent, apply tools to realize extra-judicial transitions of power, including violent overthrow. While there are numerous examples, such as the FIS or the IRPT in which parties sought political accommodation and engagement with existing governance structures and militarily combatting the government when that political route is ineffective, the process of using democracy as a vehicle for realizing an Islamist vision is anathema to the most extreme adherents of defense and expansion of Islamist ideology.

Distrust towards Islamist and Salafi Da’wa organizations, regardless of stated non-violent intentions or in absence of evidence of violent tactics, is pervasive.<sup>9</sup> There is a perception by leaders in the South Caucasus and Central Asia for example, that groups like *Hizb ut Tahrir al*

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<sup>9</sup> Da’wa is defined as propagation of the faith or proselytizing.

*Islami*, known typically as *Hizb ut Tahrir*, provides an early quietist face in anticipation of a future activist agenda.<sup>10</sup> All Central Asian and South Caucasus countries have outlawed Hizb ut Tahrir, viewing the organization as closely affiliated with jihadi violence. As Ahmed Rashid notes, “And because the regimes equate all (pious) Muslims with militants, the [*Hizb ut Tahrir*] recruits are now filling the jails and penal colonies of Central Asia” (Rashid, 2002).<sup>11</sup>

Assumptions of foreign funding and secretive cell structures as found with *Hizb ut Tahrir* add to the image of potential disruptors and vehicles of radical recruitment and indoctrination. The promotion of what is perceived as non-indigenous patterns of worship and more conservative dress further serves to create separation and group identification.<sup>12</sup>

Islamism, whether through political process or through violence, is not restricted to either Shi’as or Sunnis. However, the rise of global violent Islamist movements led by al Qaeda and IS is squarely a Sunni phenomenon. Scholarly literature is beginning to identify this form of violent Sunni Islamism as Salafi jihadism, through a hybrid usage of the term Salafi, referring to those who espouse the behaviors and practice as performed by the first three generations of Muslim leadership, following the death of the Prophet, frequently known as the “pious predecessors” (*al-salaf al salih*) and Jihadis, referring to those who use violence as a means to protect and expand Islam.

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<sup>10</sup> This same perception exists in West Africa with Jama’at Izalat al Bid’a Wa Iqamat as Sunna, also known simply as Izala.

<sup>11</sup> 2010 estimates from West Point’s Counter Terrorism Center placed numbers of imprisoned Hizb ut-Tahrir members at approximately 6,000, with two-thirds of that number in Uzbekistan alone. See: Karagiannis, 2010

<sup>12</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation provide further discussion of how populations within Kyrgyzstan and Georgia perceive the emergence of foreign religious influence from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey. Travels by the author in 2019 to Tajikistan indicate a keen awareness by the population of growing Qatari influence.

The foundation of virulent Salafi jihadi belief is a core set of Salafi views, with no a priori assumption of mal intent. Preeminent of these is that Islam is all-encompassing in daily life, with Sharia as the essential legal and governance framework. The period of the “pious predecessors” is seen as the golden era of Islam that must be emulated (Roshandel & Chadha, 2006; Kepel, 2002; Nasser -Eddine, et al 2011). Adaptations of Islam beyond the Quran and Sunnah are viewed as innovations in the religion that divert true Muslims from the path of God. Thus, legal interpretation, as seen in the *madhabs* or schools of jurisprudence, outside of the Hanbali school’s strict reliance on the traditions of the Prophet (*hadiths*), are counter to the literal meaning presented in the Quran and Sunnah.

For Salafis, the Shi’a’s doctrinal differences and diversion from the ancestors means that they have strayed from the true path. And in so straying, they have intentionally rejected the will of God and have placed themselves in direct violation of His intent. For some, taking this sentiment to its logical conclusion, means that Shi’a thus cannot be considered Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Among a number of points of debate between two prominent Salafi jihadis, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, leader of IS and Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al Qaeda, is the placement or removal of Shi’a from the Umma<sup>14</sup>. Al-Zawahiri views attacks on Shi’a as a strategic mistake, limiting the potential supporters of a global jihadi movement (Byman & Williams (2015). The idea of pan-Islamic unity as espoused in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani is present in

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<sup>13</sup> David Rapoport has evolved the way he frames the current wave of his four waves of modern terrorism theory. Originally, he cast this “religious wave,” which began after 1979, as a struggle primarily between Islamist terrorists and external states, more recently described as the “far enemy” in jihadi literature (Rapoport, 2004). Most recently, Rapoport describes the struggle between Sunnis and Shi’a as a key element in this fourth wave. (See: EPI8: Terrorism Waves: A Conversation with David Rapoport, November 6, 2018, Terrorism 360 Podcast with Gary LaFree)

<sup>14</sup> Umma is defined as the Muslim community of believers

statements by al Qaeda and other jihadist.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, al Baghdadi sees Shi'a as a principal enemy that must be combatted.

While Salafi jihadi organizations have routinely exacerbated tensions between Sunni and Shi'a to further their purposes, with notable contemporary examples in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, this theme is not widely evident in behaviors by Salafi jihadi organizations in the context of Central Asia or the South Caucasus. The most likely reason for this is the continued limited awareness of the doctrinal differences between Shi'ia and Sunni Islam. Certainly, for the generations that emerged from the Soviet Union, the recrafting of Islam as culturally-oriented practice, rather than pursuit of strict religious dogma, muted the differences. For the younger generations that have grown up outside of the Soviet experience, continued state efforts to model religion on indigenous syncretic practice has not provided an opportunity to illuminate a Shi'a and Sunni divide among the general population. Further, in Central Asia, one possible explanation may be that the overwhelming majority of Muslims throughout the region identify as Sunni, even if many do not practice or fully understand the doctrine. The Ismaili's, based primarily in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, represent the largest cohort of Shi'a in the region, with other modest presence of Shi'a in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Lisnyanky, 2009).<sup>16</sup> In Azerbaijan, Shi'ism is the predominant religion with minority Sunnis and adherents of Salafism concentrated in the north. And in majority Christian Georgia, the Muslim minority

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, as Sfeir notes, some scholars see al-Afghani as a reformist thinker who sought to modernize Islam, rather than an advocate of a return to the golden era of Islam (Sfeir, 2007). Modernization and a foundational moral compass through emulation of the pious predecessors is not necessarily a contradiction.

<sup>16</sup> During field interviews by the author in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2016, interlocutors made critical reference to the Aga Khan Foundation and Ismailis, a branch of Shi'a Islam. In this particular context, the Aga Khan Foundation was operating development programming in southern Kyrgyzstan and thus placed in direct contact with this conservative Sunni community.

which represents approximately 10 percent of the population is largely Sunni, with a minority Shi'a population among the ethnic Azeris near the border with Azerbaijan. While Salafism has grown in the past decade among Kists of the Pankisi Valley, their extremely small population numbers as well as the physical distance limits opportunities for interaction with the Shi'as located in Kvemo Kartli and Marneuli.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, *tasawwuf* or Sufism, as it is also known, is considered by Salafis and Salafi jihadis as incongruous with Islam. At the heart of Salafi belief is that there is only one God. Practices such as the veneration of holy people and their burial sites, sometimes referred to in the scholarly literature as "Saint worship," have been criticized as un-Islamic, since the time of Ibn Taymmyia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century for placing these humans on parity with God.<sup>18</sup> Yet in Central Asia, where religion is syncretic, popular Islam followed a Sufi path. And indeed, in places like the tomb of Baha u-Din Naqshband Bukhari, the founder of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, located near the city of Bukhara, followers continue to venerate holy men and tie pieces of cloth to the branches of trees and shrubs as prayer petitions. Tension between these syncretic beliefs, based in Sufi tradition and oft cited as indigeneous forms of Islam in Central Asia<sup>19</sup> and along the

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<sup>17</sup> Further discussion in chapter 3 of this paper touches on the competitive influence of Iran and Turkey within Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Most notably, while the Tajik population is Sunni, their historical and linguistic ties are more aligned with Iran. Similarly in Azerbaijan, their linguistic origins include them in the broader Turkic world, while recognizing the predominance of Shi'ism among the population.

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, Ibn Taymmyia, often attributed with developing key aspects associated with Salafi jihadism is described as having been vehemently anti-Sufi. Similarly, Uthman dan Fodio, whose efforts led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in the area in and around present-day northern Nigeria in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is associated with anti-Sufi attitudes. However, both men were members of Sufi orders, so would have been unlikely to be wholly against Sufism. Rather, at least in the case of Ibn Taymmyia, he voiced concern about certain aspects such as veneration of shrines as a practice that placed the venerated en par with the respect that one should afford God alone. For a further discussion on Ibn Taymmyia, see: Esposito, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Among the religious traditions blended into the regions Islamic character are traces of Zoroastrianism.



northern flank of the South Caucasus, have been met in recent years by critical Salafi voices. This tension appears to manifest along a generational divide, with older populations relying on the traditions that they inherited from their Soviet upbringing and younger Muslims increasingly seen to be adopting behaviors and rituals more closely associated with foreign-influenced Islam.<sup>20</sup>

For Salafi jihadis, struggle against the foreign invader and non-Muslims is an essential part of defending Islam and realizing the establishment of a caliphate according to Salafi jihadis. The definition of non-Muslim, however, is contentious as is the controversial act of declaring Muslims as takfir<sup>21</sup>, if they fail to conform to a rigid view of the religion or if they are deemed as corrupt and unjust government leaders, a behavior that is counter to the view of being Muslim. It is this latter point of condemning unjust leaders as apostates that has served as a galvanizing point for violent conflict not only in modern times, but in historical territorial conquests and disputes. Ibn Taymniya is credited with having provided guidance and justification for declaring a Muslim apostate, if behavior, such as unjust or corrupt rule, runs counter to Sharia and thus counter to Islam.<sup>22</sup> In such a case, the apostate would be viewed as living in a state of ignorance or jahiliyah. Correctly or incorrectly, this justification has been called upon in subsequent centuries and locations.<sup>23</sup> One prominent example from the region was in 1991 in the

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<sup>20</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 in this dissertation present perceptions by respondents in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia on the clash of cultures that has emerged as younger Muslims gravitate towards Salafi orientation. Similar observations have been made by both Valiyev (Valiyev, 2008) and

<sup>21</sup> Takfir is defined as apostate.

<sup>22</sup> Ibrahimi notes that al Qaeda referenced Ibn Taymiyyah and other early scholars frequently in its fatwas, including multiple references in Osama bin Laden's "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places."

<sup>23</sup> As Islamist thinking spread and embedded more deeply in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, the apparent hypocrisy of the keepers of the two major holy places of Islam of living extravagantly and corruptly on the windfall of oil wealth, disconnected from the people, and in closer connection with the non-Islamic world served as a point of discontent. For some this suggested

Ferghana Valley, when Adolat, the forerunner to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, demanded the application of Sharia throughout Uzbekistan and the overthrow of Islam Karimov, whose rule was described as counter to Islam. Similarly, the 2015 video appearance of Tajikistan's OMON Colonel Gulmurad Khalimov, who had joined IS in Syria as its Minister of War, threatened the regime of President Emomali Rakhmon as unjust and illegitimate.<sup>24</sup>

While the modern jihadi movement is predominantly comprised of Sunnis predisposed to a Salafi pursuit of Islam, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the Shi'a leadership of the Islamic Republic following the deposing of the Shah, provided a useful model of revolution through jihad. The revolutionaries in Iran were a mixture of both religiously oriented and left leaning groupings who shared a perception of unjust rule, corrupt and inequitable treatment under the monarchy of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. Certainly, Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini used the justification of obligation for waging jihad against religious, political and social oppression when he called on Muslims throughout the world to "rise up against un-Islamic rulers (Esposito, 2012; Armstrong, 2000). It was in this form and in the embodiment of Khomeini himself that revolution took on the mantle of historical parallels and significance, including equating the Shah with the unjust and despotic Umayyad caliph Yazid, the one responsible for the death of Hussain at Kerbala (Armstrong, 2000). And Komeini's writings on

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that the House of Saud was straying from the moral path (Esposito, 2012). Inspired by the obligation to affect change under the banner of Islam and return Saudi Arabia to the roots of the "pious predecessors," followers of Juhayman al-Otobi and Mohammad Abdullah al-Qahtani, seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in late 1979. Among these followers were many who had been educated at the University of Medina and exposed to an Islamist worldview (Boubekeur & Roy, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> While a 2015 video threat against the Orthodox church and leadership in Georgia made by four citizens of Georgia who had joined IS in Syria uses similar language of injustice and illegitimacy, since the government leadership is not Muslim, the concept of Takfir is not applicable.

revolution contribute to and further the basis of thinking promoted by al-Banna and Maududi on the responsibility of Muslims and the role of the state (Roy, 2015). The compelling aspect of this revolution for Muslims, whether Shi'a or Sunni, was that in the modern era it was different than the mold of Marxist revolution and allowed Muslims to come to modernity through their own path (Armstrong, 2000).<sup>25</sup>

It unclear to what extent the Iranian Revolution broadly influenced the populations of Central Asia and the South Caucasus at the time. It is known that Mujaddidya scholars, young Central Asia Islamists who were calling for renewal of Islam in Soviet Central Asia in the 1970s and 80s, had access to the works of Qutb and Wahhabi-oriented theologians and were buoyed by the Iranian revolution (Frank & Mamatov, 2006). Additionally, as the Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East expanded, Moscow had allowed muftiates throughout the Soviet Union to have greater ability to obtain Qurans and other written materials on Islam in this period (Yemlianov, 2010; Atkin 1992), yet the authorities had so coopted the muftiates, that they became an invaluable ally in conveying a heavily curated version of Islam and defending against the spread of potentially destabilizing information such as the Iranian revolution.<sup>26</sup> And while the Iranian Revolution may have had resonance with some, expression of that resonance or dissemination of

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<sup>25</sup> The western support of the Shah served as further evidence to many within the revolution of the corrupting power of foreign influences. Thus, not only was the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy a testament to change affected by combatting a ruler who served the interests of himself, rather than God, it also served as evidence that Western support of unjust leaders did not guarantee their longevity. It, therefore, became possible for people outside of Iran to see that in addition to the obligation to fight against illegitimate leaders and foreign invaders, they could actually succeed in overthrowing them and swiftly bringing about an Islamic Republic.

<sup>26</sup> Muslims in the Soviet Union were certainly not oblivious to world events, however. Goyushov and Rovshanglu note that the heavy influx of Muslim university students from the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s and 1980s was a conduit for Salafi influences. (Goyuhov & Rovshanglu, n.d.)

information on a religious-based revolution would have been profoundly dangerous in the Soviet Union, at the time.<sup>27</sup> The events in Iran confirmed for the Soviets that religion had the potential to provide people a pathway to a radically different public order.

By end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Iran did demonstrate its support for Muslim activists in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. In 1989, agitation by Abulfaz Achibey's Azerbaijan Popular Front, which led to citizens dismantling frontier fortifications along the Iranian border at the end of 1989 as a means to access markets in Iran, was being celebrated by Iranian press as a demonstration of "Islamic Zeal" (Sattarov, 2010; Altstadt 1992). When independence finally arrived two years later, itinerate Iranian Mullahs and religious materials crossed the border into Azerbaijan, undeterred by the weak authorities (Altstadt, 2017). That ease of access, however, closed by the mid-1990s, as Heydar Aliyev's distrust of Iranian meddling in Azerbaijan's domestic affairs grew. The 1995 banning of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, suspected of financing from and complicity with the Iranian government, signaled not only a crackdown on Iranian engagement in Azerbaijan, but also the end of Islamic political parties.

Additionally, during the Tajik civil war that began in May 1992, the leadership of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) operated in exile out of headquarters in Taloqan, Afghanistan and Tehran, Iran.<sup>28</sup> For Said Abdullo Nuri, the leader of the IRPT and UTO and his deputy Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, the former Kazi Kalon

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<sup>27</sup> Documentation from CPSU Central Committee, for example, reveals that there were twenty-one underground Islamic schools discovered in 1982 and more in the following year in the Tajik SSR. Within some of these, the works of Qutb, Maududi, and al-Banna were identified (Roi, 2000). This number of underground Islamic schools belies a deeper tradition in the Ferghana Valley of hidden hujra religious schools that existed since the early days of the Soviet Union (Peyrouse, 2007; Frank & Mamatov, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> In 1997 the author met with representatives of the IRPT in their office in Taloqan, Afghanistan, while he was serving as Deputy Head of Mission with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), during the inter-Tajik peace negotiations.

of Tajikistan, their extended stay and support from the Islamic Republic of Iran suggests not only a sanctuary of convenience due to historical and linguistic connections, but also one of potential replicable revolutionary model.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the penultimate negotiation session and ceasefire, prior to the signing of the Tajik Peace Agreement in Moscow, took place in Tehran, under the auspices of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And while the inclusion of Iran in the Contact Group of Guarantor States of the Tajik Peace Agreement contributed to the goal of ensuring regional stability, the active presence of the Iranian delegation served the dual purpose of opening a path for political power-sharing and the guarantee of the IRPT's legal status as a political party.<sup>30</sup> As recently as 2015, following the designation of the IRPT as a terrorist organization and the accusation of its leader, Muhaddin Kabiri, of criminality, the Iranian government hosted the exiled Kabiri in its country. By the early 1990s, Iran began to extend its influence through the presence of charitable organizations. The most notable charitable giving has been through the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, with presence in Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The IRPT and its leaders were, at the time, nominally Sunni Muslims. But arguably the years of constrained religious education and external exposure in the former Soviet Union weakened the firm divisions between Sunni and Shi'a. While better educated than their compatriots, Nuri and Turajonzoda emerged from this Soviet experience initially without a firm Salafi lens that casts a pall over Shi'as.

<sup>30</sup> The author represented the OSCE on the Contact Group of Guarantor States, along with Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ambassadors of Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. During and following the negotiation process, this body regularly met with each other and with the Government of Tajikistan, the United Tajik Opposition, and its constituent members, including the IRPT.

<sup>31</sup> In 2016, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee had its operations suspended by the Government of Tajikistan, for unclear reasons. Among Azeri communities in Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia, key informants discussed the availability of Iranian scholarships among ethnic Azeris in Georgia and in Azerbaijan to study Islam in Iran.

## 2.2 SPREAD AND DISRUPTION

The story of modern Islamism begins far from Central Asia and the South Caucasus in Egypt, embedded within the philosophy and practice of the Muslim Brotherhood who saw the obligation of integrating Islam in all aspects of life, including political and social. Founded by Hassan al Banna in the late 1920s and later spreading globally, the organization from its early days incorporated social justice issues and the importance of Islam as mainstay in life and society. Al Banna's efforts to raise awareness of the Palestinian plight further helped connect Muslims with issues that transcended the challenges to the Muslim community beyond their own national boundaries.

The worldview and teachings of Sayyid Qutb, one of the subsequent leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, emphasized that God and the practice of Islam is the source of universal truth and that "Muslims have an obligation to build a community based on the divinely mandated principles of compassion and respect for others" even through revolution, were not only inspiring religious and social messages, but served as a counter to socialism, capitalism, and colonialism (Calvert, 2010; Boubekeur & Roy, 2012). A prolific writer, Qutb's interpretation of the Quran and Sharia and views on human freedom through total submission to God and jihad against ruling unjust regimes were widely read, not only in Egypt, but among a generation of Muslims coming to age in an evolving world.<sup>32</sup> It is this straightforward, unembellished literal view of the Quran and Islam that provided many with a comforting touchstone in a turbulent world.

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<sup>32</sup>Arguably, populations evolving from colonialism in the 1960s, such as those in Africa, were profoundly experiencing a crisis of identity that provided fertile ground for the imposition of new societal frameworks. This same dynamic of quasi post-colonialism and the struggle for identity emerged in the 1990s in Central Asia and the south Caucasus, with emergent political Islam, such as Hizb ut Tahrir drawing on the messages of Qutb, Maududi and others.

While seeking the possibilities of political integration, the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to mobilize both devout Muslims and disaffected youth was seen as a threat by Gamal Abdel Nasser whose Arab nationalist ideology was incompatible with the brotherhoods Islamist ideology (Kepel, 2002). It was the accusation against the Brotherhood for plotting assassination of Nasser in the mid-1950s, that saw Sayyid Qutb's imprisonment and eventual execution. As a result, many Brothers migrated to Saudi Arabia where they experienced a welcoming environment, particularly for those who were able to find employment in much needed teaching positions at places of higher learning.<sup>33</sup>

Seyyed Abul A'la Maududi who founded Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan in the early 1940s, was similarly promoting the importance of connecting Islam and politics into a synergistic whole, so that people were not simply Muslim by "cultural and sociological affiliation" but by the use of Sharia as the sole legal and governance framework (Roy, 2012). Maududi was prolific and widely distributed, focusing his writings on the obedience of Muslims to God. Like al Banna, Maududi saw western capitalism and Marxism as the primary ills in society (Esposito, 2012).

While Maududi, Qutb and al Banna similarly took steps to renew the religion through their writings, organizational formation, and population mobilization, it is in Qutb's writings that we find the clearest expression, not only of the possibility of incorporating violence in the pursuit

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<sup>33</sup> Scholars such as Gilles Kepel point to this embedding of the Muslim Brotherhood's worldview in key academic institutions, including the University of Medina, as a seeding of Islamist ideology in the teachings of a generation of Saudis and those who travelled from abroad to study in the Kingdom (Kepel, 2002; Boubekour & Roy, 2012). So not only did this Islamist worldview begin to inspire and influence some in Saudi Arabia, those who came to Saudi Arabia temporarily from abroad for education, returned to their home countries carrying messages of political activism and the integration of Islam in all aspects of life.

of Islamist ideology, but the need to remove the interference of human rulers from the realm of God's lands (Meijer, 2012). This is not to say that al-Banna and Maududi did not support jihad. On the contrary, both the major jihad, characterized as an internal personal struggle, and minor jihad, characterized as external action, were viewed by them as the means to bring successful realization of an Islamist vision (Esposito, 2012). But Qutb expanded the foundation of Maududi and al Banna and further radicalized it. Each found early cooperation with nationalist governments as a vehicle to move their countries beyond colonial powers (Sageman, 2004). Ultimately, the misaligned agendas between nationalism and Islamism produced adversarial relationships. It is here that a binary perspective emerges that serves as the underpinnings of modern Salafi jihadists. A rigid view of Islam as practiced by the Salaf and an unwillingness to compromise with secular governments to achieve a hybrid version are met with a religiously mandated obligation to protect and promote Islam through jihad, both the internal struggle and the external battle.

As discussed later in this paper, the post-Soviet search for unifying political and social frameworks in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, saw the simultaneous emergence of both nationalism, shaped in the image of the sitting leaders, and Islamism, not dissimilar to the dynamics found in Egypt and Pakistan, decades earlier. Particularly in the wake of the Tajik civil war, in which the popular narrative across the countries in the region portrayed the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) as Islamists seeking to seize power from nationalist leaders, Islamism was perceived as a threat that needed to be contained. And despite the short-lived coexistence of the IRPT as the only legal political party in the region, following the Tajik peace agreement, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and



Tajikistan all eventually outlawed Islamist political parties and opposition groups as the authorities consolidated political and security power.

### **2.3 EMERGENCE OF TRANSNATIONAL SALAFI JIHADISM**

While the Muslim Brotherhood seeded their worldview in Saudi Arabia, this seeding of ideology did not displace the Salafi-oriented framework of Wahhabism.<sup>34</sup> The introduction of Islamist ideology with Wahhabism, however, resulted in the broadening of those who followed a literalist adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, a conservative expression of Islam that rejected innovations and accommodation with modernization, and promoted an obligation to harmonize all aspects of life with Islam (Boubekeur & Roy, 2012). And where governance structures are in conflict with Sharia or Islam or where leaders have strayed from the “true path,” then there is an obligation to affect change by whatever means (Esposito, 2002).

In absence of a hierarchical structure across the Muslim community, such as a uniformly agreed upon Caliphate for harmonizing religious doctrine, Saudi Arabia pursued a path to take on the mantle of doctrinal leadership. The 1962 establishment of the Muslim World League provided a vehicle for internationalizing the promotion of Wahhabi-oriented Islam. Convenient to the establishment of this non-government organization and the intention of Saudi leadership was the precipitous rise in the market price of a barrel of oil, of which Saudi Arabia was well-endowed. By the 1970s, Saudi Arabia was not only committed to spreading its conservative brand of Islam globally through books, scholarships, mosque and madrassah construction and organizations such as Izala in West Africa, it now had the depth of financial resources to do so on a grand scale. The combination of foreigners being educated in Saudi Arabia and influenced

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<sup>34</sup> For Saudi’s the western notion that there is a Wahhabi school of Islam is counter to their own belief that the Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia is the true Islam and is neither a school of thought nor a trend.

by blended Wahhabi and Islamist views ultimately returning home to preach and share this perspective, as well as the robust funding and intentional national strategy of exporting conservative Saudi religious doctrine globally had a powerful effect. This is not to imply, however, that this effect was short-lived or relegated to this initial period in the 1970s. Though delayed in receiving religious influence from Saudi Arabia while under the Soviet yoke, citizens in Central Asia and the South Caucasus were increasingly exposed to educational opportunities, distribution of written materials, and the presence of foreign imams in the years immediately following independence.<sup>35</sup>

The December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which immediately followed the Grand Mosque incident in Mecca, provided the opportunity for Saudi Arabia to usher out large numbers of potential malcontents. The invasion spurred Palestinian-born theologian Abdullah Yusuf Azzam to issue a Fatwa on “Defense of the Muslim Lands.” This Fatwa highlighted the individual obligation of each Muslim to defend Islam in Afghanistan by repelling foreign invaders, a call that was more difficult to ignore than less specific pleas for Muslim support.<sup>36</sup> As a result, young men, initially from the Arabian Peninsula, but later Muslims from around the world were attracted to this perceived noble cause. While there are vastly different views on the level of foreign fighter involvement in Afghanistan, the presumed range of 10,000 to 35,000 shows the level of robust foreign response to this first modern jihadi theatre of war.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Focus group discussants and key informants from the Pankisi Valley of Georgia discussed the widely acknowledged presence of humanitarian and proselytizing funding from Saudi Arabia in the years following the first Chechen war, when vast numbers of refugees sought sanctuary in Pankisi Valley. See Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>36</sup> Already a well-respected, religious intellectual in Saudi Arabia, having taught at the King Abdul Aziz University and known for his views on defending Islam against foreign invaders, Azzam was able to garner support for his Fatwa from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>37</sup> For further discussion on the range of estimates for foreign fighters in Afghanistan see Donnelly, n.d.

Conveniently for the Saudi government and others, many of those attracted to the fight in Afghanistan were Islamists who potentially posed a threat to the stability of their countries. By not hindering their departure and indeed facilitating it in some cases, Saudi Arabia and others were able to decrease the internal pressure from the segment of young, Islamist-minded citizens. For Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, however, the import and militarization of Islamists in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, seeded a future jihadi threat directly along their borders.<sup>38</sup>

While Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda did not originate the concept of defensive jihad, the experience in Afghanistan created the bonafides needed to issue a Fatwa that called on Muslims worldwide to wage war against America (World Islamic Front, 1998).<sup>39</sup> To create maximum resonance, the Fatwa played on historical animosity toward foreign crusaders and the local Muslim leaders who were allied with the United States and other western countries (Roshandel & Chadha, 2006; Esposito, 2002). By wrapping in local Muslim leaders, the outlines of the concept of the near enemy again emerge and echo historical Salafi calls justifying action against those unjust and corrupt leaders in Muslim-majority countries who by their very behavior are cast as apostates. Even the custodian of the two principal holy sites and the very heartland of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, was vilified for its cooperation with the West and welcoming of non-

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<sup>38</sup> With the juggernaut of zealous volunteers arriving in South Asia from multiple countries, Azzam relocated to Peshawar, Pakistan near the Afghan border where he established the Maktab al-Khidamet (Afghan Service Bureau). It is from this location that Azzam was able to in-process volunteers and assign them to fighting units in different parts of Afghanistan (Hegghamer, 2008). And through this process, the melting pot of young energetic, mission-oriented Muslims created opportunities to shape thinking and receive military training. It is here that Azzam and Osama bin Laden, a former student from King Abdul Aziz University, found common cause, with the Maktab al-Khidamet serving as the organizational foundation for what would later become al Qaeda.

<sup>39</sup> Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders

Muslim troops on its territory during the first Gulf War, a rallying cry for *takfir* and action against this transgressor. The designation of the far enemy, of which America is specifically named, also emerges as those non-Muslim-majority countries that through imperialist or neo-colonialist behavior have subjugated or otherwise harmed Muslims.<sup>40</sup>

And while the messages used in the Fatwa were not new, the combination of elements broadcast through the increasingly globalized vehicles of print and broadcast media and the early days of internet helped to amplify the message and reach a broad audience. Short of perhaps realizing a fully unified vision, for those who were already buoyed by the success in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union and engagement in other subsequent jihadi arenas, the Fatwa provided a framework for inspiration and a focal point for action. Within three years of the Fatwa, the attack on US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen's Aden harbor, and the culmination in the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States created broad awareness of Osama bin Laden and his organization, al Qaeda. No better advertisement for the organization and its vision could have existed than a steady drumbeat of media attention. For violent groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) opposed to the Government in Uzbekistan and fighting in the mountains of Tajikistan<sup>41</sup> and later Afghanistan and Pakistan, al Qaeda's ascendancy served as a symbol of growing

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<sup>40</sup> Chief among these grievances is the foreign military presence in the Arabian-peninsula, the war in Iraq, and the support of Israel.

<sup>41</sup> In 1997 while on assignment with the OSCE to the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan, the author met with one of IRPT's prominent field commanders, Mullo Abdullo, in his armed encampment in Tavildara. This visit coincided with a birthday celebration for Mullo Abdullo, to which our delegation was invited. Rumored to be in attendance at this birthday event were fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan who were co-located in Tavildara. A few months later, the Tajik peace agreement was signed. Resentful of the negotiated outcome, Mullo Abdullo and the IMU left for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Islamist influence and helped these groups convey messages that transcended merely their local strife. Within a decade, groups like the IMU had pledged allegiance to al Qaeda.

Though Afghanistan served as the first grand jihad theatre in the modern era, it did not serve as the final one. Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Yemen and most importantly, Syria and Iraq have attracted citizens of other countries who would be trained and gain battle experience against both the near and far enemy.<sup>42</sup> In each of these theatres, but most significantly in Syria and Iraq, the steam valve effect first seen in Afghanistan parallels the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon in Syria, where approximately 30,000 foreigners from more than 80 countries are estimated to have become involved since 2011 (Soufan, 2015)<sup>43</sup> Among these foreign fighters, those from the former Soviet countries constitute the third largest cohort. And within that cohort, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia represent notable numbers of mobilized individuals.

Arguably the 2014 emergence of IS out of the fountainhead of al Qaeda, has eclipsed al Qaeda in both global policy attention and its territorial holdings. And unlike al Qaeda, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi has been able to ignite the passions of a new generation through his rallying call for establishing a self-described Caliphate. Early and swift military success in 2014 and 2015 saw this vision of Caliphate beginning to take shape within Iraq and Syria. It is during this period

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<sup>42</sup> For further discussion on jihadi arenas, see Gunaratna & Oreg, 2015 and Donnelly, n.d.

<sup>43</sup> Within the process of recruitment, grouping, and deployment, the opportunity for Precht's model of radicalization manifests, in which volunteers passed through a process of pre-radicalization, association and identification with Salafism, indoctrination and increased group bonding, and solidification through acts of violence (Borum, 2011). And as the Afghan conflict generated orphans and displaced young people, many of them found their way to the madrassahs of Peshawar. In the Syria and Iraq conflict, the significant number of male jihadi deaths and resultant widows and children raises a question of their vulnerability to future jihadi indoctrination. Here isolation and group identification combined with a consistent reinforcement of religious and extremist messaging to shape a generation of Salafis who saw the use of violence as a legitimate tool for protecting and promoting Islam.

that many national Salafi jihadi groups previously affiliated with al Qaeda, began shifting pledges of allegiance, and in some cases branding, to IS. At the height of its territorial holdings, IS claimed 16 provinces outside of Syria and Iraq, including the Caucasus Province, centered around the North Caucasus and Khorasan Province, centered around Afghanistan and Pakistan, yet evidencing interest in former Soviet Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

## **2.4 THE CONFLUENCE OF DOMESTIC AND TRANSNATIONAL AGENDAS**

The pathway to radical Islamism and networked global jihad is, however, neither linear nor static, with violence conducted by Salafi jihadis organizations present in a cauldron of national and international issues. One of the obstacles to analysis of violent extremism is the extent to which it overlaps with other violent phenomena such as civil war and insurgency (USAID, 2011; Bruck, 2011). Definitions can be easily conflated when sub-state actors revolt against a government and use tactics such as kidnapping and armed assault, with unifying underpinnings relating simultaneously to geographic divisions, ethnic divides, religious differences, or other in-group and out-group factors.<sup>44</sup> In networked or affiliated organizations where command and control from an international central authority is unlikely, leaving regional or country-based organizations with both field leadership and operational control, the potential for varying motivations and behaviors exists. Some of these may mirror other forms of political violence or violent expression.

The study of conflict, civil war, insurgency, and crime provide deeper and chronologically lengthier bodies of research and accepted conclusions than that of violent extremism and the more specific Salafi jihadism. Yet, to look at violent extremism, even

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<sup>44</sup> For a discussion on how political violence is sometimes given a religious hue by leaders to inspire and catalyze recruits, see: Juergensmeyer, 2017.

transnationally, as a separate area of study from these would neglect the recognition of a probable relationship: It is quite possible, and in many cases likely, for someone to simultaneously be a violent extremist, an insurgent, and a criminal.<sup>45</sup> When violent non-state actors have an operational footprint in multiple proximate countries and members of those violent non-state actors are drawn from those countries, operating both domestically and internationally, it is reasonable to assume that there may be a blurring of motivations between a domestic agenda and an international agenda (Piazza, 2011) or a difference between organizational and individual motivations. The border between the North Caucasus and South Caucasus countries, the West African Sahel, Iraq and Syria, and the Pamir mountain range straddling Central Asia and Afghanistan are physical representations of places of confluence of transnational terrorism and domestic insurgency.<sup>46</sup>

Research by James Piazza has suggested that violent Islamist groups are not monolithic, but rather can be categorized in two types which are structured and operate either as “strategic groups” similar to national-liberation and regime-change movements and “universal groups” that are transnational in nature and networked with global jihadi organizations like al-Qaeda with no specific individual national agenda (Piazza, 2009). Yet even with this articulated distinction, the international composition of membership within the transnational organizations raises the question of the ability to draw such a neat line, particularly as networked organizations contain greater national content and leadership than foreign fighters, as is particularly notable in the

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<sup>45</sup> As will be discussed later in this paper, some scholars, such as Martha Crenshaw, have even raised a question about how to label foreign fighters, who may be fighting in a foreign land in support of a cause that mirrors behavior of revolutionaries.

<sup>46</sup> It is in the similarities to political conflict that many in the international community see the seeds for mitigating mobilization to local Salafi jihadi groups. By diminishing the pool of potential recruits and areas of safe haven, the assumption is that the organizations themselves can be diminished (Denoeux & Carter, 2008; Carter & Dininio, 2012; USAID 2011; Graff, 2010).

Eurasian context. Further, classical organizational theory when applied to violent extremist organizations suggests that while some members participate in an organization to achieve its stated goal, and are incentivized to do so, those organizational goals can shift, leading to a recognition that an organization's primary goal is sometimes simply its own continuation (Oots, 1986; Rapaport, 2004).<sup>47</sup> This type of behavior is demonstrated by the splintering of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the formation of the Islamic Jihad Union. While both organizations overtly sought the dissolution of the Karimov regime and broader territorial control in Central Asia, neither organization has mounted an attack within the countries of Central Asia or on their direct interest since 2009. Their exile in Afghanistan and Pakistan has resulted in the organization seeking alliances and targets within South Asia. Further, the dilution of membership from exclusive Uzbek citizens at inception to the reported inclusion of members from broader Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Chechnya suggests an evolution in recruitment and in organizational behavior.

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<sup>47</sup> In the case of Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad, known more widely as Boko Haram, an example drawn from outside of Central Asia and the Caucasus, it is challenging to know where the bounds of their national revolt ends and their connection to global jihad through their 2015 affiliation with Islamic State as the Wilayat al-Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah begins. As some scholars have argued, the Islamist movement in northern Nigeria has passed through phases until reaching this highly lethal transnational threat. In each of its phases, the parallels or intentional modelling on Uthman dan Fodio and the rise of the Sokoto Caliphate emerge (Cook, 2011). Muhammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, preached an Islamist message, railed against the injustices of the government, and sought refuge with his followers in rural areas before returning to the cities. The pressure of government on the group and the violent response against the military and police culminated in the arrest and execution of Yusuf. It is at this point in 2009 that the group manifests a sharp turn towards violence beyond security services of the government.



## **2.5 ATTRACTION AND RECRUITMENT TO SALAFI JIHADI ORGANIZATIONS**

There is indeed a growing body of literature that examines the attraction and recruitment of participants and supporters to jihadi organizations. But while scholars are gaining incremental understanding of the conditions under which Salafi jihadism likely thrives, there remain vigorous debate and profound gaps in the empirical evidence base on factors of vulnerability to jihadi mobilization. At the core of the debate is a continued challenge in understanding not only the path to radicalization, described by McCauley and Moskalenko as “a change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup” (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), but also the causes of transition from simply the support and justification of violence in the abstract to actual participation in violence. Though the path to participation in violence is likely not universally linear, models drawn from psychology on how individuals progress towards violence suggest a combination of homophilic association, such as clan, ethnicity, or religious belief; alienation by a sense of injustice or relative deprivation; presence in a closed community or society; moral engagement that justifies the struggle, and ultimately membership in a jihadi organization whereby extremist thinking is solidified and strengthened, conditioning members to relinquish inhibitions to violence (Sageman, 2004; Moghaddam, 2005).

Proving the key determinants of attraction to violent extremism broadly and Salafi jihadi groups, specifically, remains confounded by the limited field-based empirical evidence, particularly in former Soviet countries. Chief among these reasons, not only in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, but in other developing countries that are confronted with violent extremism, are the challenges of broad community-level data collection both due to sensitivities around the subject matter and permission by national or sub-national authorities to query the

population. Validity concerns abound when subjects are uncomfortable or afraid to answer questions honestly (Dillman,1998).<sup>48</sup> Similarly, opportunities for direct engagement with participants and former participants of violent extremist organizations are rare<sup>49</sup>, given the recognition that violent extremists are largely a hidden or difficult to reach population and even when reached, pose a potential danger to both researchers and respondents, whether from other violent extremists or from state security services.<sup>50</sup>

Existing global research fails to provide firm evidence of a singular pathway to jihadi attraction and mobilization, revealing a probable range of motivations (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Not only are the motivations for jihadi mobilization potentially as varied as the individuals who are mobilized, there is inevitably variance between continued choices based on whether an individual is within the leadership of a jihadi organization, serving as a foot soldier or provider of support services, or resides in a community proximity to the jihadi organization. Extant theories on the motivations for involvement in terrorist organizations emphasize three underlying influencing categories: Strategic perspective, the natural systems perspective, and the socio-economic perspective. Each of these veins of theory suggests

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<sup>48</sup> The author designed and analyzed research for the United States Agency for International Development in Kidal region of northern Mali, in the period immediately following jihadi retreat. Enumerators, originally from Kidal, were able to gather interviews from community members, but faced response bias on particularly sensitive questions.

<sup>49</sup> A research project that the author is currently supporting involves collection of interviews with convicted extremists in the Kyrgyzstan prison system. Organizations such as Prison Reform International and Search for Common Ground have interviewed Central Asian prisoners involved in violent extremism. The results of those projects, however, are not publicly available, presumably due to their sensitive nature.

<sup>50</sup> Over the years this author's own efforts to access jihadists and friends and family of jihadists through more formal channels with the host governments has been rebuffed - once in the Kyrgyz Republic and twice in Tajikistan. An additional attempt to interview immediate family members of citizens of Georgia engaged with jihadi groups in Syria was prevented by an Institutional Review Board.

principal influencing factors for individual motivations. But the complexity of the human condition is not so neatly delineated along mutually exclusive lines. Rather, the ambiguity present in the extant literature provides for a blended view of motivational influences.<sup>51</sup>

Each of these is part of an emerging body of literature that presumes that people involved in violent extremism are primarily rational actors and actively make decisions accordingly (Sandler & Enders, 2004). Similar to classical economic theory, rational actors possess stable and consistent preferences, compare expected costs and benefits of all available options and select optimal expected options to maximize utility. In contrast, a smaller body of literature, largely grounded in psychology, attributes terrorism to so-called irrational actors who involuntarily manifest abnormal behavior, that which is different than the standard societal norms. Among these actors are the mentally ill<sup>52</sup>, violence-seeking or fanatics who may or may not be capable of being analytical and can appear rational at times yet have a mindset that is obsessed with a “particular perspective about the world that is so powerful it can encourage violent action” (Ozdamar, 2008; Post, 1998). However, to characterize the religiously fanatical as irrational, as some violent extremists have been described, minimizes the self-perception of reasoned choice in promoting their ideological viewpoint. One must be cautious in ascribing

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<sup>51</sup> To this end, frameworks such as that put forward by Denoeux and Carter (2011) provide for multiple factors of influence, without assigning disproportionate weight to any individual factor. Similarly, McCauley and Moskaleiko’s work on mechanisms of political radicalization, builds a framework for radicalization by individual, group, and mass population (see: McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> A scholarly consensus has emerged, through empirical study, that group-based terrorists are psychologically consistent with the general population. Recent studies of mental illness and its relationship to terrorism suggests that lone-actor terrorists, sometimes called lone wolves - individuals operating outside of jihadi organizations, but aligned and committed to their beliefs - may be a more likely have higher numbers of individuals with mental illness. Organizations, in contrast, are more likely to prohibit entry or eject people who appear erratic, irrational, and potentially untrustworthy. See: Logan et al, 2017; Corner & Gill, 2015.

irrationality to another person's behavior, when that person may fully believe their actions and precipitating motivations to be not only rational, but also superior to the mainstream viewpoint.<sup>53</sup>

The strategic or instrumental perspective (Abrahms, 2008; Berrebi, 2007; Crenshaw, 1981) is part of the body of literature that presumes that people involved in violent extremism are motivated by a desire to see a certain political outcome. And in attempt to realize these political outcomes they analyze and evaluate pros and cons of various actions, adopting violence as a course of action when the expected political return is higher from this action than from alternate options (Bergen & Hoffman, 2010). Success equates with attaining political goals, such as occupying territory, gaining political representation or replacing autocracies with theocracies (Crenshaw, 1991; Pape, 2003). Where governance is perceived as weak, ineffective or takes on predatory behavior, political goals can emerge as improvements in governance or simply change of leadership. In the case of Salafi jihadis, particularly where predatory governance structures are led by Muslims, labeling these regimes as apostate provides further moral justification for achieving political goals. At the organizational level, Salafi jihadi groups seek to promote a specific politicized ideology, including the incorporation of Sharia as a legal framework (Piazza, 2008; Kepel, 2002; Sageman, 2004).

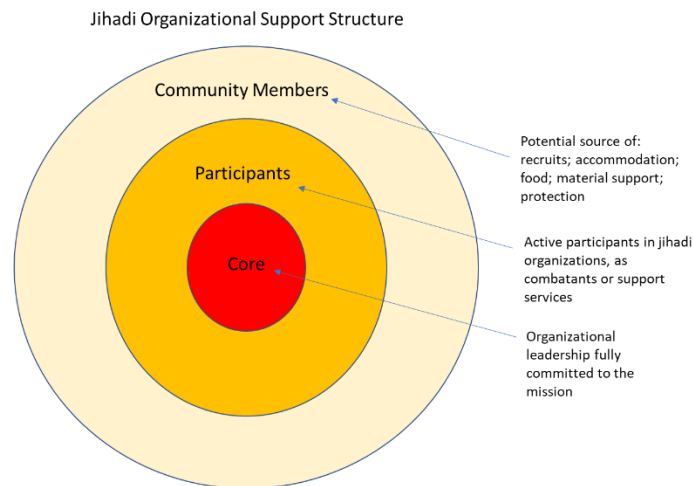
Proponents of this model see jihadi organizations and their participants as resembling traditional patterns of political or revolutionary movements, including a committed core, potential recruits, and communities that may or may not provide needed services, resources,

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<sup>53</sup> Scott Atran's interviews with failed suicide bombers, for example, highlights the self-perception of not only being rational in their choices, but also in seeing themselves as "ultra-moralistic" in their behavior, perceiving that their actions serve the only good that matters – God. See: Atran 2010. Mark Juergensmeyer also describes the FBI's dismissal of the apocalyptic beliefs, not recognizing that members of the Branch Davidians may truly have believed what they were doing was in pursuit of end times. See: Juergensmeyer, 2017.

shelter, and protection. Individual choices for participating in violence or agreeing to provide support as a member of a jihadi organization reasonably differ from the choices made by the firmly committed founders and leadership of jihadi organizations, as well as the decisions that community members in areas of jihadi operation or in areas of potential rear-base consider. Conflating the varying levels of commitment and motivations within and around jihadi organizations risks creating a false impression of a monolithic and static set of motivations.

**Figure 1: Jihadi Organizational Support Structure**



Critics of this model are quick to point out that ideologically motivated actors, such as Salafi jihadis are often averse to compromise and negotiation, negating the argument that political motivation is the actual driver of their behavior.<sup>54</sup> Where groups like the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have sought political accommodation within the construct of secular governance structures, transnational Salafi jihadi organizations have labeled their actions as betraying the ideological vision.<sup>55</sup> In this view,

<sup>54</sup> This counter argument is most prominent in consideration of organizations that have no realistic likelihood of fully realizing their goals in the absence of compromise, such as al Qaeda. For further discussion see Cronin, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> In the case of the IRPT, the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan, provided for power-sharing between the Government of Tajikistan and

governmental structures and laws that differ from a Sharia legal framework is anathema to Salafi jihadi beliefs, thus rendering political compromise itself as sinful.

In liberal democratic societies, there is a presumption that a state has the responsibility to rule in the interest of the people, to protect the citizens and the borders of the country through a monopoly of power, to ensure fair and equitable laws and the application of those laws, and to be transparent and accountable in their actions. As seen with so many developing countries and particularly in the most fragile places, governments are often passively ineffective or willfully predatory. In the pursuit of self-interest, they spend a disproportionate level of resources on military assets and infrastructure; not necessarily to protect their people, but to protect the longevity of their authority. And along the fringes of these fragile places, some people live remote and isolated from their respective capitals, disadvantaged by poverty and vast inequality, and aware that they are excluded from having a say in how they are governed (Farrell, 2016).

The presence of corruption, inequity and injustice present prominent elements of weak governance that may serve as motivating factors for separatist movements, insurgencies, and other violent non-state actors. Researchers have noted that groups with distrust and a perception of vulnerability from another group are at enhanced risk of conflict (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). Whether it is Syria, Yemen, Mali, mountainous Tajikistan, northern Nigeria, or the smuggling routes between the Sahel and Libya, the story of weak governance and mounting grievances emerges as a presumed factor in pushing people towards conflict and state fragmentation (Collier, 2006). It is here that we find a clear overlap between violent Islamist messaging of realizing a better future through a redefined Islamic model of state and traditional violent

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United Tajik Opposition, which included the IRPT.

opposition voices who message that a change of governance from the status quo will yield improvements for aggrieved populations.

Yet even when the social contract between government and the governed is shredded, revolt and overthrow do not typically yield a direct path to stable societies. Data from the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index (Fund for Peace, 2015) for countries in the Middle East that experienced change in the Arab Spring reveals that Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia all have seen an increase in fragility since 2011. Part of the reason for this increased fragility is that the fog of civil conflict is neither orderly nor homogenous. Sometimes rapidly installed successor governments are no more capable or willing to equitably govern in pluralistic societies. Sometimes parallel groups with competing agendas emerge like Islamic State or al Qaeda wrapping grievances in a violent Islamist frame, radicalizing some and co-opting others (Farrell, 2016). Interview data of unsuccessful suicide bombers in the West Bank and former members of Boko Haram indicated that weak governance and injustice served as prime motivators for violent action by youth (Mercy Corps, 2016; Hassan, 2012; Krueger & Maleckova, 2003).

The natural systems perspective from organizational theory promotes the view that people participate in violent extremism in order to realize some social gain rather than political return. (Roy, 2015; Sageman, 2004). It is the informal relationships that emerge by the shared experience of participation that develops social solidarity. Some empirical evidence supports the belief that terrorism is used "primarily to develop strong affective ties with fellow terrorists" (Abrahms, 2006). It is the sense of belonging and being part of a tight-knit group that drives people to join (Atran, 2010). And it is theorized that the pull of belonging, inclusion, and being part of something bigger than oneself can attract those to a cause for which they are even willing

to die or kill. Further, while some people may be drawn to join to establish these ties, there is emerging evidence, including in the field research presented in this dissertation, that existing social and kinship networks, sense of duty to and expectations from family, friends, and community may be important factors for mobilization (Klausen, 2010; Farrell, 2016; Farrell, 2018). While the free rider principal of economic theory would suggest that participation in a violent extremist group is disincentivized by the recognition that benefits of the success of the group accrue to members and non-members alike, this principal ignores the strong pulling effect of social ties and their community and cultural expectations. Identify fusion, a related theory occurs when people are so strongly attached to a group and its members, that the individual and group identify blend. The person experiences oneness with the group (Swan, et al, 2012). Thus, in the natural systems perspective, attraction and participation is perceived to be related to these personal connections. In one study of 29 deceased Georgian foreign fighters, for example, 44.8% of the studied foreign fighters had a family member that also fought in Syria or Iraq for a Salafi jihadi group (Clifford, 2018).

The Socio-Economic Perspective examines the extent to which poverty, unemployment, and lack of education relate to support for or direct involvement in violent extremist organizations.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, these conditions can be deplorable for individuals and their families. And efforts to address these challenges are important for social and human development. Yet, the literature on violent extremism reveals a broad divergence in the understanding of the relationship between these socio-economic factors and involvement in violent extremism. Where empirical evidence is available, it is “limited and fragmented” (Drakos, 2011, ODI 2013),

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<sup>56</sup> For additional detail on the literature pertaining to employment and violent extremism, see this piece written by the author: <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1860/livelihood-diversification-analysis-literature-review>



leaving conflicting views on the extent to which lack of educational and livelihood opportunities impacts choices related to violent agendas. Policy makers are confronted with the challenge of differing views on the role of socio-economic conditions on attraction to these organizations and limited empirical evidence helping to identify sound areas for development investments. Yet anecdotal information suggests redressing social equity challenges, including economic issues could serve as vehicle for raising the opportunity cost of joining jihadi organizations.

A substantial portion of the peer-reviewed literature on drivers of violent extremism has focused on macro-level analysis of countries of origin and places of terrorist attack as a means of understanding the conditions under which violent extremism emerges and is sustained (Abadie, 2006; Krueger & Laitin, 2003; Krueger & Maleckova, 2003; Piazza, 2006; Li & Schaub, 2004). From these cross-country analyses which examine data on unemployment rates, economic growth, gross domestic product per capita and similar macro-level indicators, no consensus has emerged on whether negative economic factors are directly related to participation in violent extremist organizations or that positive economic factors correlate with resilience to violent extremism. While some studies indicate that there is a relationship between low per capita income and terrorist attacks (Li & Schaub, 2004; Bravo & Dias, 2006; Freytag et al, 2011), others find no discernable relationship (Krueger & Laitin, 2008; Abadie, 2006; Piazza, 2006).

However, consistent with findings on civil war, there is some emerging agreement that *precipitous changes* in some of these conditions may have a relationship to participation in attacks, particularly among better educated populations (Graff, 2010; Collier, 2003). This finding is consistent with research that states that change, whether economic, political, or social can create conditions for instability. In this view, therefore, absolute poverty would not show a direct connection to terrorism (Bjorgo, 2004), but rather the relative change in conditions or

relative deprivation (Gurr, 2005; Collier, 2003; Thorsten & Riera-Crichton, 2015). Gurr posits that one of these precipitous changes that poses a risk factor for developing countries is a “youth bulge” characterized by a substantial increase in population facing insufficient employment prospects (Gurr, 2005). In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, for example, the period of transition from the Soviet Union and the precipitous changes in quality of life saw the emergence of armed non-state actors, such as the Mkhedrioni in Georgia and Adolat in Uzbekistan. As discussed in the case study on the Kyrgyz Republic, there was ample speculation that in the 2014-2016 period the sudden drop in remittance value due to the combined effect of a plummeting ruble exchange rate and the diminished price of oil would have a rapid and profound dampening effect on demand for young migrant workers in Russia, creating a sudden unemployed youth bulge and potential for instability in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. While some migrants did return to the region, many more stayed or returned abroad. And a small portion of these young people mobilized to the Syrian conflict zone.

The literature highlighting weak governance in developing countries as the critical element of allowing violent non-state actors to develop and grow through attraction of recruits and supporters largely suggests that perceived inequalities, including wealth distribution and availability of employment, are points of galvanization (Chenoweth, 2005; Gurr, 2005, Gurr, 1993, Khalil & Zeuthen, 2014, Abadie, 2006)). As income inequality increases, whether regionally or between ethnicities or other discernable group identity, there is evidence that insurgent violence increases (Fearon, 2008). This raises the question of whether livelihoods and income levels are the causal factor or whether relative deprivation and inequity are more prominent.

The near exclusive focus on macro-economic outcomes in the literature neglects the micro-level examination of economic factors and individuals (Bruck, 2011) and presents a weakness in understanding vulnerabilities at the local level. There are, however, a handful of studies that provide insight into characteristics of people who are mobilized to violent extremism. In these examples, employment, wealth and poverty varied, with some indication that income and education levels were generally average or above average for their population of origin. This is consistent with questions that have been raised about the role of unemployment in attraction to armed movements (Khalil & Zeuthen, 2014; Beber & Blattman, 2010; Berman, et al., 2009).<sup>57</sup> Venhaus's examination of 2,032 foreign fighters affiliated with al Qaeda indicates that 'economic motivations were the least cited reason for joining a terrorist organization' with some individuals characterized as poor and having been unemployed for extended periods while others were from more privileged backgrounds (Venhaus, 2010). Sageman's study of 172 al Qaeda members reveals that al Qaeda members in the sample do not present as poor, compared with the broader population (Sageman, 2004). Rand Corporation's examination of 335 Palestinian terrorists suggests that both higher education and standard of living are correlated with participation in terror organizations and with becoming a suicide bomber (Berrabi, 2010). This study reinforces findings from interviews with 250 Palestinian militants, including suicide bombers who had not completed their missions, in which none was uneducated or exceedingly poor (Hassan, 2001). The captured Islamic State personnel records from 2013-14 provide insight into 4,600 people who joined Islamic State, revealing that only 7% of those who responded indicated that they were unemployed (Dodwell, Milton, Ressler, 2016). While the records

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<sup>57</sup> Gogvadze found that IS recruitment methods in the Pankisi Valley of Georgia emphasized the positive lifestyle of foreign fighters, potentially attracting even those Georgians with good economic means (Gogvadze, 2107).

above, as well as those found in the Sinjar data reveal a variety of types of employment prior to joining Islamic State, unskilled labor is particularly high, including among people with above average education, raising the question of whether frustrations with unrealized career expectations may have influenced mobilization decisions (Dodwell, Milton, Ressler, 2016).

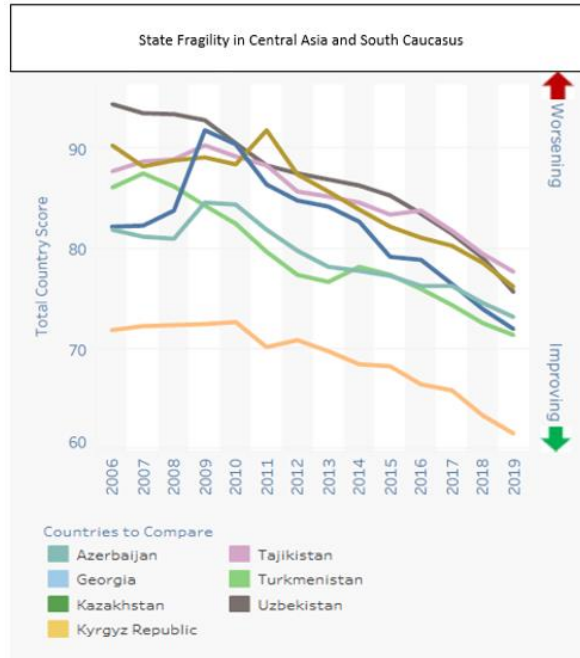
## **CHAPTER 3: REGIME DYNAMICS: STATE-BUILDING AND OFF-LOADING THREATS**

Over the past nearly three decades of independence, a favorite perennial meme of Central Asian, and to a lesser extent, South Caucasus watchers has been that these regions are plagued by existential threats, frequently cited as the potential for a popular response to the predatory and weak regimes that are in place. Since the rise of IS in Syria and Iraq, much attention has focused on the potential for jihadi mobilizers to harness domestic discontent to fuel regime change and establishment of Salafi jihadi states in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Most countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus certainly have experienced instability, including civil war, insurgency, inter-ethnic violence, terrorism, and the export of Salafi jihadi fighters: The Tajikistan civil war of the 1990s resulted in tens of thousands killed and displaced. Far from ancient history, fighting has periodically arisen in the years that followed, most notably in 2010 and even as recently as 2015 in a street battle in Dushanbe between government forces and fighters led by Deputy Defense Minister Abdukhalim Nazarzoda. Clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 saw ethnic minority Uzbeks and majority ethnic Kyrgyz pitted against each other with thousands displaced and many killed. Political instability in Kyrgyzstan has seen the ouster of two Presidents in the past decade, including in the 2005 Tulip Revolution. Depending on who is crafting the narrative, Uzbekistan's firm crackdown on protestors in the Ferghana Valley in 2005 ended with dozens or hundreds dead, with many more fleeing across the border (Farrell, 2016).

In the South Caucasus, the Rose Revolution, which preceded Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution by two years, may not have further ignited an Arab Spring-type domino effect across the Caucasus-Central Asia, but it did see political transition. The so-called frozen conflicts

between Georgia-Ossetia; Georgia-Abkhazia; and Nagorno-Karabakh, periodically reignite, reminding observers that it is the political process and not the tensions that have been put on ice. And while the 2008 Russo-Georgian war was short-lived, there is a lingering recognition that if

**Figure 2:** State Fragility in Central Asia and South Caucasus 2006-2019



Source: Data compiled from Fund for Peace Fragile States Index

Russia desires to extend its territorial influence, as has been seen in eastern Ukraine, it would not be constrained by the Georgian military or NATO.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> The Color Revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine are often attributed with having been inspired or influenced by western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on issues of democracy and governance. The Soros Foundation, along with the National Democratic Institute, the International Republic Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems have all been active in this space across Eurasia. And indeed, it is broadly known that some advisors and staff surrounding Mikheil Sakaashvili in Georgia had formerly been employed by some of these western NGOs. Regardless of the legitimacy of this attribution, concerns of external influence on stability of regimes appears to have prompted preemptive consideration of Foreign Agent’s Law in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, modelled on the Russia legislation. The broad definition of “political activity” under the law leaves ample latitude for application against perceived challengers or threats. Aside from xenophobic appearance, the express focus on those receiving funding from abroad, suggests a deliberate targeting of a key vehicle for linkage and leverage.

Despite these episodes of violence and political transitions, the region has become increasingly resilient to existential threats to the survival of the states, if not to the maintenance of their full integrity. Specifically, despite the emergence of conditions, at the time of independence, that may have led to larger domestic Salafi jihadi mobilization, Salafi jihadism has not gained either an adequate foothold or window of opportunity for action resulting in jihadi-oriented revolution or a sustained level of terrorist attacks in any of the countries of the region.<sup>59</sup> As Figure 2 indicates, across all seven countries, there has been a clear trend of improvement across the aggregated fragility scores identified in the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index. This chapter, therefore, discusses the regime-level dynamics that created a pathway from exposure to potentially threatening elements to protective factors that have raised the level of resilience of most of the countries in the region.

### **3.1 EARLY DAYS: WEAK AUTHORITY AND SUB NATIONAL TENSIONS**

During his lifetime, psychologist Jean Piaget asserted the value of using analogies and metaphors to simplify complicated topics, while simultaneously noting their limitations as inevitably only partially consistent with the phenomenon being described. The emergence of Salafism and its violent relative, Salafi jihadism, in this region is often described as having a root cause. The metaphor of a root, however, evokes an undesirable weed in one's pristine lawn, implying a single source that can be dug up and eradicated. As Juergensmeyer suggests, a more appropriate metaphor is that of a wildfire that emerges due to a confluence of appropriate conditions (Juergensmeyer, 2017). In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, those conditions emerge on the backdrop of relatively recent history, with most notable effect occurring in the

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<sup>59</sup> Given its civil war, Tajikistan serves as a special case that is discussed in chapter 3 and chapter 4.

slide toward dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent states. While the path to Salafi jihadism in Central Asia and the South Caucasus differed somewhat, the absence of sufficient subnational control, the presence of porous borders and foreign influencers, and the emergence of tensions in peripheral areas, facilitated the drive towards violent Salafi agendas. Certainly, one must be cautious not to equate the presence of Salafism as a sufficient condition for the inevitability of jihadi mobilization. But the presence and growth of Salafism in each of the areas where jihadi mobilization occurred, strongly suggests that Salafism, if not a proximate cause, was perceived as a viable cognitive framework for a step toward justification of violent agendas.

In the last two years of Soviet rule, the seeds of visible nationalism were untethered, as attitudes towards independence galvanized in rapid fashion following state brutality in multiple locations along the southern flank of the Soviet Union: the killing of ethnic Armenians by ethnic Azeris in Sumgait, Azerbaijan and declaration of martial law by Soviet authorities in 1988; the violent suppression of peaceful Georgian anti-Soviet demonstrators in Tbilisi in 1989; Soviet state of emergency and massacre in Baku during the Black January events in 1990; and the military crackdown on rioters in Dushanbe in 1990, protesting the granting of housing in the midst of a Dushanbe housing shortage to relocated Sumgait Armenians. And while the subsequent end of the Soviet Union and independence, not long after these demonstrations and crackdowns, may have provided an initial sense of euphoria, this euphoria soured as subnational tensions within the newly independent countries emerged.

For non-Slavs in the region, the abrupt transition from Soviet citizenship left a pervasive sense of uncertainty and a question of identity. It is in the initial period after 1991 that it became painfully evident that a return to the Soviet Union was not possible, yet a new understanding of



what it meant to be a citizen of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, or any of the other countries, had not yet emerged. For ethnic Russians and others who vacated the region en masse in these early years, connections to Russia provided more likelihood of opportunities and a stable life, as the early 1990s saw a pronounced deterioration of social services and viable employment in the new countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The void left by communism had been met with a presumption that a hope-filled democratic model would automatically arrive. Yet, the reality of economic hardship and growing internal economic inequality left many bitter. The population did not readily see the benefit of what was assumed to be the manifestation of democratic and free market principles. These societies in transition were thus not yet clear what they were transitioning to and how long it would take.

The average citizen was not alone in feeling the pinch of change. Administrative authorities in places outside of the capital cities were constrained, like the rest of the population, with unpaid salaries, food shortages, lack of gasoline for vehicles, lengthy periods of power outages, and no heating supply.<sup>60</sup> Motivation to enforce laws or to conduct administrative responsibilities were often driven by the extent of graft that could be obtained, fraying the administrative density of subnational regions of these countries. As connections to a central control began to weaken, the importance of family and local networks remained intact and ever more influential, for local authorities who typically originated from the communities, raions, and oblasts where they were working.

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<sup>60</sup> In 1993 the author briefly lived in Tashkent. At that point, Soviet Rubles were no longer legitimate currency and the Uzbek Som had not yet been introduced. Commodities were attainable with “talons” distributed by the government for salaries, in lieu of payment. For the more fortunate, items could be purchased on the black market with other currencies.

It is at this early stage of independence that new leaders had not yet fully consolidated the security assets or administrative authority much beyond the environs of the capital cities, opening the door to challenges to national integrity. In nearly all countries in the region, the first secretaries of the respective Soviet Socialist Republics automatically became president upon independence. In some cases, this initial placement was sealed by an uncontested election process. And in a few of those cases, leadership evolved forcibly. The first two presidents of Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutallibov and Abulfaz Elchibey were overthrown, each after serving only one year in office. Zviad Gamsakhurdia fled in a coup d'état, leaving a brief gap in leadership in Georgia before being filled by the former Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. In Tajikistan, leadership of the country changed hands multiple times in the first year of independence from Kadriiddin Aslonov to Rahmon Nabiyev and finally to Emomali Rahmonov (Emomali Rahmon), as the country devolved into civil war. And while Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan all saw consistency of leadership through the Soviet transition and the early years of independence, consolidation of state power was slow.

Aspirations of subnational autonomy began to occur, particularly in places with large ethnic minorities or other differentiating factors. The question of desired self-rule was evident in the former Soviet autonomous regions in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Revolutionary movements fueled by ethnic sentiments and elite competition manifested in outright war and solidification of de facto borders in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. And while some in these regions aspired for independence, their independence projects did not articulate a radically different organizing principal for internal governance, nor did they broadly invoke other ideological language, beyond ethno-nationalism.<sup>61</sup> This is not to say, however, that religious

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<sup>61</sup> According to Yunosov, for example, only 3 per cent of respondents to a 1990 survey cited

differentiation between ethnic Azeris and ethnic Armenians was not employed to strengthen in-group and out-group identity in Nagorno-Karabakh. Nor is it to minimize the presence of mercenaries from Chechnya and their Salafi worldviews in these three breakaway regions in the South Caucasus.<sup>62</sup> Competition for territorial control contributed to a blending of national and religious identity for Azeris, particularly among those displaced by fighting. While the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh may not have directly fueled Islamist sentiments in Azerbaijan, it did play an important role in sensitizing the population to the ineffectiveness of the government of Azerbaijan in resolving the conflict and retaining the territory.

The displacement of ethnic Azeris from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict did, however, have a more direct impact on the emergence of Salafism in the country. Charitable organizations from Arab countries, particularly the Gulf countries, came to provide humanitarian assistance not only to the displaced, but to other poor Azerbaijanis.<sup>63</sup> Among these organizations were Al Haramain Foundation, International Islamic Relief Organization, and World Assembly of Muslim Youth from Saudi Arabia, Qatar Charity from Qatar, and Dar al Ber Society from the United Arab Emirates (Goyushov & Rovshanoglu, n.d.). In addition to providing humanitarian aid, some of these foreign organizations provided resources for mosque construction and scholarships to students to study Islam abroad (Altstadt, 2017; Goyushov & Rovshanoglu, n.d.;

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religious elements as part of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Yunosov, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, an examination of secondary sources, attack data, captured foreign fighter lists, and field interview conducted by the author were unable to identify information on foreign fighter involvement in Syria and Iraq of residents of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, or Nagorno-Karabakh. While beyond the scope of this study, it is possible that if foreign fighters had come from these areas, they may self-describe as originating from Russia or Armenia.

<sup>63</sup> Ethnic groups in this paper are preceded by the adjective “ethnic.” These include Azeris, Georgians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz. Citizens of these countries, regardless of ethnicity are referred to as citizens of said country. In some cases, such as Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani is used.

Sattarov, 2010). By the mid-2000s, each of these organizations had been expelled from Azerbaijan by the government, under accusations of Salafi proselytizing and promoting terrorism. But the seeds of Salafism and its power as a salve to the downtrodden and antidote to weak governance, if not expressly to violence, were already planted.

Foreign influences that carried Salafism also emerged in the Pankisi Valley of Georgia and to the northern districts of Azerbaijan, including Qakh, Zaqatala, Sheki and Qusar, in the wake of Chechnya's fight for subnational autonomy during the second Chechen war. As a result of the strong ethnic and linguistic connections between Pankisi Valley Kists and neighboring Chechens, Pankisi became a natural location for refugees fleeing the conflict in Chechnya. From the start of the second Chechen war in 1999, Pankisi received an influx of nearly 10,000 refugees (Gobronidze, 2017; Tsulaia, 2011; Sanikidze, 2015; Sadzaglishvili & Partskhaladze, 2014; Grazyvdas, 2014).<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Chechen displacement to Azerbaijan reached a peak of 8,500, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>65</sup> The displacement of Chechens, who were already largely predisposed to a Salafi worldview, provided an entry point for Salafism in both Georgia and Azerbaijan through association with the much smaller Kist population in Pankisi and fellow Sunni Muslims in northern Azerbaijan.

Responding to the refugee crisis, Gulf charities arrived in the Pankisi Valley, providing assistance to the refugee population and its hosts. And similar to the dynamic in Azerbaijan, these foreign humanitarians continued the process of proselytizing and supporting the foreign education of youth and future imams. Gulf charities that were already present in Azerbaijan

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<sup>64</sup> There was speculation that among the refugees, fleeing fighters were using Pankisi as a rear base for support of insurgencies in the north Caucasus (Yemelianova, 2010; Cecire, 2017).

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/41373cca4/unhcr-statistical-yearbook-2002-country-data-sheets.html?query=data>

working with displaced Azeris, expanded operations to serve Chechen refugees. In both Azerbaijan and Georgia, traditional Muslim leaders were ill-equipped in theological training to debate or counter views from Salafis who had received much of their training abroad. Here the outlines of a theological and generational tension emerged between leaders of indigenous practice of Islam and Salafi Islam who increasingly were convincing younger people that their parents' lack of knowledge of true Islam from the Soviet period had introduced inappropriate innovations (Grazyvdas, 2014; Sanikidze 2007).

Equally as important to the exposure of a different worldview, was the direct connection to Salafis who were participating in armed struggle against Russia. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan used Chechen mercenaries to assist in their internal breakaway regions. In Pankisi, Chechen insurgents, along with refugees found sanctuary from the fighting, and were reportedly using Pankisi as a safe haven for launching attacks against Russia. Though denied by Shevardnadze at the time, reports abound of Chechen fighters who were based in Pankisi assisting Georgian partisans with the 2001 assault on the Kodori Gorge of Abkhazia.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov's 2004 statement regarding South Ossetia demonstrated his willingness to support Georgia against Russia in "any conflict."<sup>67</sup> Since the waning days of the Shevardnadze administration, through the Saakashvili administration, the Russian government repeatedly accused Georgia of breeding terrorism in this area, alleging that Chechen militants were using Pankisi as a way to train new recruits, as well as plan and conduct attacks inside Chechnya (Kurtsikidze & Chikovani, 2002; Cecire, 2015).<sup>68</sup> Mikheil Saakashvili continued to turn a blind

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<sup>66</sup> Both media reports and field interviews conducted by this author indicate veracity. See reports from IWPR: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgian-terrorist-dilemma>

<sup>67</sup> See Stratfor article: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/georgia-south-ossetia-time-ripe-war>

<sup>68</sup> While Cecire asserts that rumors circulated that Abu Hafs al-Urdani, an al Qaeda representative, was operating training camps in Pankisi under the orders of Osama Bin Laden,

eye to the presence of Chechen insurgents in Pankisi, raising tensions between Georgia and Russia.<sup>69</sup> But while Georgia and Azerbaijan had similar patterns of early engagement with Chechens, Ilhom Aliyev's policy of expelling Gulf charities that were providing humanitarian assistance coupled with insufficient humanitarian support from his government to the refugees, created an inhospitable environment for the refugees, forcing many to leave. Whether intentional or not, these policies minimized Azerbaijan's risk of being perceived as a haven for insurgents and terrorists.

On the other side of the Caspian Sea, some in the peripheral regions of the Central Asian countries also began to question the lack of effective governance framework as evidenced through the loss of communism and the failure of emergent democracy to provide security, livelihoods, and equity. Open expressions of aspirations to structure identity and governance around Islam began to be vocalized. The Ferghana Valley and its environs became central to this consideration, notably in the Uzbekistan areas of Andijan, Namangan, and Kokand, the Kyrgyzstan areas of Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad, the Tajikistan areas of Isfara, the mountainous areas of Tajikistan proximate to the Ferghana Valley of Rasht, Tavildara, and Garm, as well as the southern Kazakhstan area of Shymkent. Not coincidentally, this territory overlapped largely with that of the Khanate of Kokand that existed from 1709 to 1876, at which time Tsarist Russia absorbed it into the Ferghana region of Russian Turkestan. And though the Khanate was not

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field research for this dissertation could not confirm veracity of these rumors (Cecire, 2015). In an effort to cool tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi, the U.S. military financed a "Train and Equip Program" in 2002 for Georgian counter-terrorism forces operating in the Pankisi Gorge. However, even as recently as 2016, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov alleged in a televised press conference that "the [Islamic State] militants go through training and get rest and additional resources in the Pankisi Gorge." See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-pankisi-gorge-islamic-state-lavrov/27512697.html>

<sup>69</sup> Interviews with Pankisi residents. See Chapter 5 for further discussion.

within the living memory of people in the early 1990s, the artifacts of history, including the Khan's palace, which still stands, and the tales of earlier self-rule, remained within the collective conscious across the newly formed borders.

At the dawn of the Soviet Union, just as at its twilight, demands for autonomy emerged and turned violent when unrealized. At the time of the Bolshevik revolution, a subnational liberation movement centered around Kokand formed under the banner of the Kokand Autonomous Government. Despite aspirations to reintroduce an Islamic form of governance, independent from Russia, Russia's superior military strength overwhelmed Kokand in a three day siege in February 1918, resulting in thousands of deaths (Ritter, 1990; Olcott, 1981; Sabol, 1995). It was in this routing that fighters, collectively known as the Basmachis<sup>70</sup>, launched a full-fledged insurgency against Russian authorities.<sup>71</sup> And while the initial insurgency under the leadership of Irgash Bey helped the Basmachis to bloody the nose of the Russians, it was the arrival of Enver Pasha and his call to jihad that unified the disparate interests in Turkestan (Olcott, 1981). By 1926, however, continued Soviet military pressure and the offer of concessions on the practice of Islam to Muslims across the Ferghana Valley, softened the desire for a continued fight. And while attacks continued intermittently from the mountains, the Basmachi movement was effectively ended.

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<sup>70</sup> Some scholars have noted that Basmachi is a pejorative term, referring to plunderers. The Turkestan Liberation Movement (Ritter, 1990) or the Freeman's Revolt (Olcott, 1981) was how these fighters referred to themselves.. Despite the presence of criminals who had been released from Kokand prisons by the Kokand Autonomous Government, the ranks of the Basmachi were filled by those suffering from socio-economic shortcoming felt under Russian rule, reflecting broad-based public support during their six-year struggle.

<sup>71</sup> 1916 is frequently cited as the start of the Basmachi movement, with forced conscription of Muslims to fight in the first world war. Yet, it is not until the routing of Kokand and support of the population strengthened the Basmachis to rebel with a mission.

But the mantle of the Basmachi was picked up at the end of the Soviet Union by Tahir Yuldashev and Jumaboi Khodjiyev.<sup>72</sup> Both men were born in the Ferghana Valley in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and saw the lack of governance in the initial post-independence period as an opportunity to affect revolutionary change in the image of Mujaddidiya scholars. They were not alone in the sentiment of change.<sup>73</sup> Islamist organizations such as Tauba and Islam Lashkalary sought to accelerate the cries for catalytic change that the more politically oriented Islamic Revival Party in Uzbekistan tried ineffectively to negotiate with the Karimov government (Rashid, 2002). In 1991 Yuldashev and Khodjiyev founded the organization Adolat, with self-defense groups established to ensure law and order in an increasingly lawless time. Adolat, which means “justice” in Uzbek, aspired to fill the governance gap through the institution of Sharia, initially in the Namangan and the surrounding Ferghana Valley, but later demanding that President Karimov adopt Islamic law throughout the country. The choice of organizational title conveyed the belief that only through Islam could justice become a reality in this post-Soviet land. Following the late 1991 occupation of the Communist Party Headquarters in the Valley and a public negotiation between President Karimov and the leaders of Adolat, Karimov returned to Tashkent, embarrassed by this competitive threat to his authority. By spring of 1992, he had outlawed Adolat, amassed a formidable police response, arresting dozens of supporters of Adolat and forcing Yuldashev and Khodjiyev to flee across the border into the mountains of Tajikistan (Rashid, 2002; BAAD).

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<sup>72</sup> Khodjiyev later assumed the nom de guerre Juma Namangani. But was commonly referred to as Jumaboi.

<sup>73</sup> Though Frank and Mamatov highlight that some other vigilante groups in the Ferghana Valley were predisposed to Hannafi school of jurisprudence, rather than the Salafi orientation of Adolat (Frank & Mamatov, 2006).



Here in Tajikistan, Adolat launched cross border attacks against the Karimov regime, while simultaneously supporting the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan in its armed struggle against the Government of Tajikistan. Ultimately Adolat rebranded into the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), with a fighting force that rose to a reported 2000 men, primarily drawn from the Ferghana Valley (Rashid, 2002, START PVC, Weiner, 2001), conducting attacks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan until the mid-2000s.

In a radio interview with Tahir Yuldashev in 2000, he drew a direct comparison between the IMU and the Basmachi revolt: “If we compare the IMU to a tree, its roots, we can say its roots are the continuation of the activity of our *mujahid* ancestors who came out in opposition to the communists seventy or eight [sic] years ago. We compare ourselves to our ancestors. We do not apologize for continuing on the path of those ancestors of ours” (Frank & Mamatov, 2006).<sup>74</sup> Later in this same interview, Yuldashev scoffed at the idea that the IMU was connected to al Qaeda or Osama Bin Laden, continuing to promote the Central Asian revolutionary spirit of his organization stating: “We have never recognized ourselves as tied to either the Taleban or Bin Laden. Praise God, we are the real Muslim children of our homeland. Therefore it is simply a waste of time to tar us with this brush. We have never betrayed our homeland, and we never will” (Frank & Mamatov, 2006). It is in that same year that intelligence sources reported that Bin Laden had provided the IMU \$26 million to finance the purchase of weapons (Weiner, 2001).<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> This is the translated text of the interview. For the original Uzbek language, see Frank & Mamatov, 2006.

<sup>75</sup> It is, of course, impossible to attest to the veracity of intelligence presented in mass media. Central Asian governments certainly had incentive to present the IMU as an affiliate of al Qaeda, as the U.S. entered into conflict in Afghanistan. And the U.S. had incentive to support the Central Asian government’s interests at a time in which U.S. military bases were stood up in Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan and Bishkek’s Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan. Not long afterward, affiliation with global jihadi movements, including al Qaeda and a subsequent pledge of bay’a to IS confirmed organizational alignment.

And within one year of this interview, Khodjiyev would be killed in combat in Afghanistan, fighting alongside the Taleban. In 2009, Yuldashev would be killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan.

### **3.2 DURABILITY OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

The passage of time has not erased familiar patterns of the political regimes in much of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Rather, the progression of time has perhaps cast light on the essential nature of the regimes, which was obscured by design of the regimes themselves or by the hopes of external western observers expecting a rapid path to liberal democracies. The regions, whether as a function of history, external influences, clans and geographic power centers, and above all elite competition, has demonstrated more authoritarian characteristics than democratic leanings, despite the notable exceptions of the Republic of Georgia and the Kyrgyz Republic, both of which are examined in case studies in subsequent chapters.

The quasi post-colonial transition of the 1990s followed a pattern of independence and decolonialization that came belatedly on the heels of the 1960s transitions to independent countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The budding language of freedom and democratic institutions gave rise to the hope that a third wave of democracy as espoused by Samuel Huntington would replace Marxist-Leninist ideology across Eurasia (Hale, 2016; Collins, 1999). Perhaps, as a result of rapid transitions to independence, countries of the region were ill-prepared to or disinterested in simultaneously building the democratic ship and sailing it, so have been considered broadly failing in their democratization efforts. However, as some have asserted, western-styled democracy was never intended in the region, so pronouncement of failure is misplaced. Even in countries that started out or had periods moving towards democracy, such as Askar Akaev's Kyrgyzstan or Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze or under Mikheil

Sakaashvili, autocratic behavior still emerged (Hale, 2016; Fumagalli, 2015). Further, Levitsky and Way argue that there is a misleading assumption that states that appeared to have begun independence on the path to democratization were heading in a linear direction. In fact, lack of empirical evidence suggests that the hybrid nature of these regimes was, the norm, giving the appearance of trends towards democratization, yet behaviors that were rooted in autocracy. (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Political actors are constrained by the formal structure and institutions of the state and operate within the bounds of those constraints. The Presidential and Semi-Presidential governance structures that are ubiquitous across Eurasia, provided an opportunity for consolidation of power for many leaders. In the case of countries like Turkmenistan under Saparmurat Niyazov or Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, economic and military power were quickly concentrated in the hands of the ruling leadership. Yet *designation* of Presidential authority is not, in and of itself, a guarantor of stability. In Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov, there were early threats that emerged in the form of an Islamist separatist movement in the Ferghana Valley led by Tohir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani (Olcott, 2007). Tajikistan, initially under Qahhor Mahkamov and Rakhmon Nabiev, was plagued by political turmoil in the early days of 1991 and 1992, before devolving into a bloody civil war. While the Presidential form of government emerged as a product of authoritarianism in the early days of independence (Levitsky & Way, 2010), it was not necessarily a sufficient condition for guaranteeing regime longevity or power consolidation.

The longevity of leaders like Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan and the recently deceased Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan only emerged after the refinement of control and strengthening of presidential authority. In the initial period following the end of the Soviet Union, the coercive

capacity was low in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, resulting in early instability (Markowitz, 2011). Beyond Central Asia, the fragmentation of power structures under Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the emergence of geographically based militia rivalries in Georgia mirrors a similar vulnerability in the absence of coercive capacity. In the case of Tajikistan, elite defection and the emergence of geographically based militias, supported by local police and military personnel fragmented the state's monopoly on power and soon resulted in devolution to civil war in 1992. It was only in the wake of the 1997 Inter-Tajik peace agreement that Rahmon found an opportunity to coopt opposition through a power-sharing arrangement. But even in the structure of power-sharing, Rahmon's government retained leadership over the key security elements. With integrated forces, demobilization and disarmament of irregulars, and connection of elites to the central power structures, defection of elites and mobilization of regionalized militia became more difficult.<sup>76</sup> Further, in the years subsequent to the power-sharing and integration arrangements, Rahmon's regime studiously decapitated former United Tajik Opposition leadership through a series of arrests or attributable killings.

In contrast, for Karimov, one might argue that the capacity of the State to exercise control through military and police was indeed present. Arguably the war in Afghanistan and the use of Uzbekistan as a staging ground for Soviet kinetic activity had strengthened the tools of intelligence and force in Uzbekistan at the end of the Soviet period (Collins, 1999). But the physical distance between Tashkent and the Ferghana Valley and the limited density of authority in this outlying region at the start of independence allowed separatist elements to take root undisturbed (Collier, 2006). Once the threat was fully understood, Karimov responded with the

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<sup>76</sup> Even the deputy leader of the IRPT Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, who served as Deputy Prime Minister in the reconciliation government after the conclusion of the Tajik civil war, was eventually forced out of the IRPT due to his closeness with the Government of Tajikistan.

full force of his Presidential powers, by outlawing and arresting the opposition, and forcing the core resistance to flee across the border. In addition, research suggests that, unlike in Tajikistan, the key power structures in Uzbekistan remained connected to Karimov, because the elites that controlled these structures perceived greater advantage in rent seeking in a unified state rather than geographically fragmented and competitive divisions (Markowitz, 2011; Markowitz, 2016).

Both Karimov's and Rahmon's use of tools of government and extrajudicial action to restrict or quiet political opposition, disposed of meaningful threats and allowed them to brutally maintain control. And while the constitutions should have provided some legal framework that protected non-violent opposition, as in so many other places in the region, the constitutions and rule of law were often sidestepped, as were other accoutrements of democracy. Where Eurasian countries display formal democratic trappings, but by any measurable standard are not democratic, they have been described by some as hybrid regimes or displaying competitive authoritarianism (Omelicheva, 2016; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Hale, 2016). Hollow democratic institutions, such as electoral processes or media, are instrumentalized to strengthen the position of the incumbent for the purpose of maintaining power. Presidents use the power of the state to quash competitors, arrest or threaten opposition, minimize access of political parties, and create irregularities in electoral processes. Political pluralism is limited. Tajikistan, frequently cited as the world's most dangerous place for journalists, not as a result of conflict, but as a result of state pressure, demonstrates an example of tight control on messaging and media. Similarly, Rahmon's 2016 outlawing of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) as a political party abrogated a cornerstone of the 1997 Inter-Tajik peace agreement and a protection guaranteed in the rewritten constitution. His unilateral designation of the group as a terrorist entity further

demonstrates the regime's ability to erect impenetrable barriers to opposition and reveals its authoritarian character.

There is a perception among some regional watchers that continued internal stability, even if marred by weak governance and inequality, is probable in the region, in large part due to the administrative density and control, negotiated social balance, and an inability of aggrieved populations to mobilize effectively. (Matteo, 2007). Further, where instability has emerged, similar to the Andijan uprisings in Uzbekistan or the Osh events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, an absence of key elite mobilizers caused a self-limiting effect with negligible state-threatening risk. Yet we understand from Hale that elite competition does indeed emerge at moments when there is a decreased perception of punishment. Leadership transitions, either through death or through elections, have that potential to present a window where expectations shift and elite networks have not sufficiently coordinated outcomes (Hale, 2016). While death cannot be avoided, it seems that term limits and elections can be. In Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, all eliminated term limits, a move that likely served to decrease perceptions of vulnerability and pre-election competition.

The death of Azerbaijan's Heydar Aliyev in 2003, Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, and Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov in 2016 reminds us that leaders are mortal. And that in places with insufficient institutional structure, the death of leaders raises the question of whether peaceful transition is possible. Nowhere is that more acute than in countries that have had the same President since independence and have never experienced peaceful transition through the ballot box or other mechanism. While leaders may attempt to set post-death plans for leadership, enforcement of those plans from the grave is difficult. The death of an iron-fisted leader has the potential to create a vacuum of leadership. And where leadership is absent,

delayed, or weak, the opportunity for struggle for power emerges. But as we saw with the death of Turkmenbashi in 2006 and this most recent death of Karimov in 2016, elites who perceive their power and economic strength by connection with the State, sought rapid accommodation, rather than violent struggle. In both the Turkmenistan example and the Uzbekistan example, presidential succession did not follow the letter of the constitution. Both constitutions designated the Speaker of Parliament as the appointed successor for a president who is incapacitated, dies, or steps down. Yet in both cases, the Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister were appointed interim President and then subsequently elected by large majorities as President in a nation-wide election. In the case of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in Turkmenistan, both commanded elite support and coercive capacity through the state security apparatus. And their extra-constitutional appointments are a reflection of a negotiated outcome between elites.

Though Azerbaijan successfully navigated a dynastic transition from Heydar to Ilhom Aliyev in 2003, we have yet to see one materialize in the rest of Eurasia (Gel'man, 2010).<sup>77</sup> In Tajikistan, steps are already underway to position Emomali's Rahmon's son Rustam for dynastic transition, as Rustam took over as Mayor of the capital simultaneous to the 2016 referendum lowering the age that a person is eligible for the presidency. In Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev ensured a smooth presidential transition by resigning after 29 years in 2019 and handing the role of interim President to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The short turnaround to an election reporting from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on widespread

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<sup>77</sup> Heydar Aliyev recognized that he was dying and selected Ilhom as his parties sole Presidential candidate, three months prior to his death, thus ensuring transition from father to son.

election irregularities, all but guaranteed that the competition were at an insurmountable disadvantage.

### **3.3 AUTHORITARIAN LEGITIMATION AND ISLAMISM AS POLITICAL FOIL**

For authoritarianism to continue, some have argued that maintenance of legitimacy with the population is essential. Without popular support, elite mobilization is hindered. Certainly, the veneer of democratic institutions in hybrid regimes can be helpful in not only providing an image of legitimacy, but in also allowing flexibility with the rule of law. But as described above, this is not sufficient to guarantee broad-based legitimacy among the population and stave off attempts at forced transitions. Even in Kyrgyzstan, arguably today the most pluralistic of the Central Asian countries, the path from the 1990 ethnic clashes in Osh and Uzgen created an opening for Askar Akaev to launch a more liberal democratic platform based on legitimacy as a stabilizing force (Fumagalli, 2015). Yet after fifteen years in power and approaching end to his term limits, a perception of vote rigging and efforts to position his children to take over leadership undermined popular support of the President, ultimately resulting in the Tulip Revolution of 2005.

In these regions, authoritarian legitimation has taken two primary forms: myth-making through a national ideology that incorporates the leader in the myth, such as in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan (Hanks, 2016); and principal stabilizers, as is seen in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (Omelicheva, 2016). Both constitute a form of social contract between overtly authoritarian leaders or competitively authoritarian regimes and a substantial portion of those it governs. This social contract serves as an important element for avoiding a swelling and sustaining of popular discontent.



With Kazakhstan's and Azerbaijan's economies tied squarely to oil and petrochemicals, the buoyed global demand for and price of oil, until recently, helped enhance public infrastructure, boost economic activity, and secure a solid perception of Nursultan Nazarbayev, Heydar Aliyev and his Ilham Aliyev as an economic stabilizer. It is this economic growth that helped secure the political loyalty as well of prosperous business owners and political elites (Marat, 2016). While Uzbekistan's highly cotton-dependent economy under Karimov had not prospered to the extent of Nazarbayev's, with more than one million Uzbek's finding their livelihoods through economic migration to Russia and Kazakhstan, the outward appearance of wealth in the country with refurbished tourist sites in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Kiva and enhanced services and social welfare provide a perception of growing prosperity for Uzbeks, particularly when compared with neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The Karimov regime had been most successful in ensuring authoritarian legitimation by projecting an image of military strength and security by ensuring that violence, as seen in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan, has not emerged within the borders of the Uzbekistan. Tajikistan, which remains the poorest post-Soviet country and is heavily reliant on foreign earned remittances to buttress its economy, the comparative security that Rahmon has provided to the citizenry following the brutal civil war and lengthy post-war rehabilitation, has helped his position. His 2017 decree that Tajikistan state media must refer to him as "The Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Emomali Rahmon,"<sup>78</sup> underscores the intentionality of positioning himself as the nation's stabilizer.

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<sup>78</sup> As reported in: <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/28/525992244/president-of-tajikistan-insists-on-long-title>

In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Islam Karimov and Saparmurat Niyazov, respectively, confronted the absence of a national ideology by constructing one. Niyazov or Turkmenbashi<sup>79</sup> as he preferred to be called, was the living embodiment of the state during his rule which concluded with his death in 2006. Ashgabat at the time felt oddly like a mix of Emirate sterile modernism and a reality television show, with images of the Head of the Turkmen plastered everywhere and video monitors of him and his family playing on screens throughout the capital around the clock. From spiritual and moral guidance, through his book *Ruhnama*, to a cultural revival of the Turkmen people and revamping of the national anthem to include reference to himself, Turkmenbashi became an integral part of all aspects of Turkmen life and thus an integral part of the country's creation story and sustaining myth. While the nation's vast oil wealth subsidized some daily household expenses for the population, the source of authoritarian legitimation was firmly rooted in the internalization of Niyazov as the destined leader.

Islam Karimov's use of myth did not go to the same extent as that of Niyazov, nor did it fully weave Karimov into all aspects of life. Nonetheless, through his writings, his forceful stance with neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and his willingness to reject advances from Moscow to join the Eurasian Economic Union or criticism from the United States for human rights violations in Andijan in 2005, Karimov established himself as the founder and protector of the country. Uzbek language requirements and uniform designations in passports as "Uzbek" regardless of ethnicity, were part of the nation-building. But it was the incorporation of Islam into the national self-identification that helped solidify Karimov's hold on stability. As numerous scholars have examined, Karimov recognized the unifying power of Islam as common ground for the majority of its citizens, regardless of ethnicity as Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Kyrgyz.

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<sup>79</sup> Turkmenbashi means "Father of the Turkmen" in the Turkmen language.

(Abdullaev, 2007; Hanks, 2016; Ziegler, 2016; Roy, 2000; Olcott, 1999). As most Central Asians were poorly informed of the major tenants of Islam at independence, the opportunity to reinforce moderate syncretic forms of Islamic practice and simultaneously a fear of radical religious tendencies allowed the regime to strengthen a consistent image of what it meant to be Uzbek (Hanks, 2016; Collins 2016). And further, how the State would defend that national image by opposing external and radical interventions. The 2019 establishment of the Imam al Bukhari Centre in Samarkand, while after the death of Karimov, solidifies and promotes Uzbekistan's claim to a specific indigenous form of Islam.<sup>80</sup>

In the early days of independence, there was a conspicuous absence of both a unifying national character and ideology to replace Marxism-Leninism. All Central Asian countries eventually formed a post-Soviet national identity that has built in Islam as an important and favorable component, while simultaneously cultivating a “myth of extremism” as the enemy of the State (Abdullaev, 2007; Hanks, 2016; Heathershaw & Montgomery, 2015). In Georgia, the national identity strengthened around the concept and functions of State blending with the Georgian Orthodox Church, until they were seen as two halves to the same coin. Azerbaijan, under the leadership of father and son has studiously cultivated a secular state that is built instead around the cult of personality of its leaders. The creation of state built on the construct of traditional indigenous religious practice and counter to efforts to evolve outside of the given construct is the continuation of a pattern of earlier transition periods. Building a unifying character is predicated on first eliminating challenges as seen through competing narratives.

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<sup>80</sup> The high-profile Centre has already signed memorandums of understanding with theological institutions across the Muslim world. Establishment of this Centre has the ancillary benefit of evoking the memory of the Madrasa Mir-i-Arab of Bukhara, one of few institutions of Islamic theology in the U.S.S.R, and one of great pride to Uzbeks.

Islamism in modern pre-Soviet Central Asia and the South Caucasus is revealed in the competition between establishment traditionalists and reformist-minded challengers of the status quo. On the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the Jadidists sought to evolve Muslim society from its perceived lethargy, by transforming the practice of Islam to suit modern realities. And in the process of promoting reform, they accented the need to purge religious practice of unnecessary innovations that were not envisioned from the origin of the religion (Paksoy, H, 1991; Peyrouse, 2007); in particular, syncretic forms of Islam that embraced the mystical aspects of Sufism and threatened the view of uniqueness and omnipotence of God. Though Jadidists were present across Muslim regions under Russian control, their energies were focused in Central Asia, where the largest Muslim population resided. But their vision of reform was met by Russian dominance and the dissolution of the movement.

In the Soviet period this competition was severely muted by the government's efforts to minimize and control religious adherence through the establishment of Muslim overseeing bodies known as the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM)<sup>81</sup> and the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Transcaucasus (ZMRI)<sup>82</sup> In both cases, and in the successor organizations in post-Soviet Central Asia and the South Caucasus, authorities managed religious practice under unified religious leadership that hived closely to the muted practice of Islam, emphasizing cultural practices, rather than spiritual and ideological aspects. One key manifestation of this recalibration of Islam was the effective elimination of differentiation between Shi'a and Sunni practice.<sup>83</sup> And perhaps as a function of substantially

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<sup>81</sup> Духовное управление мусульман Средней Азии и Казахстана (САДУМ).

<sup>82</sup> Zaqafqaziya Muselmanlari Ruhani Idaresi.

<sup>83</sup> In 2018 the author met with Muslim believers in Georgia at a mosque in an ethnic Azeri community on the outskirts of Tbilisi who referenced this same phenomenon and its present iteration.

decreased number of mosques and as a limitation on attestation of Imams, it was not uncommon for one Imam to serve all believers in a community, further muting differentiation and paving a path for defining Islam in a national framework.

The actions of the governments in the region suggests the belief that controlling the myth narrative is essential to the strength and longevity of national cohesion. To this end, in each of the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, though to a notably lesser degree in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, there is Soviet-modelled control over the practice of religion and the state sanctioned elements of attestation of imams and acceptability of sermons (Hanks, 2016). As long as Islam is homegrown, moderate, and traditionally indigenous it fits in with the narrative. In Uzbekistan, for example, the Sufi Naqshbandi order saw a revival and support from Islam Karimov's government in the years following Independence (Hanks, 2016). Similarly, the Karimov government elevated the image of the Basmachi as Uzbek freedom fighters, leading the charge against the tyranny of Russia. And in the process of doing so, denied the IMU's equation of their struggle with the Karimov regime with that of Basmachi jihadis fighting the oppression of Moscow to establish a theocratic region. In Kyrgyzstan, President Almazbek Atambayev underscored in 2016 a point made by a government advertising campaign that shifts towards conservative Islamic dress are unwanted foreign influences that are dangerous to the country.<sup>84</sup> Neighboring Uzbekistan took this sentiment one step farther by outlawing in 1998 all visibly religious clothing in public, except by official religious figures. Similarly, in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, long beards have been forcibly shaved by police. Through this promotion of local moderate Islam, government sought to establish parameters by which the state could build its

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<sup>84</sup> In the center of Bishkek in 2016 a large billboard was erected in which photos of women were presented from left to right wearing a burka, hijab, and mini-skirt with an arrowing indicating that the latter is the right path for Kyrgyzstan.

Islamic tradition, free from external influences such as that of the Wahhabi missionaries from Saudi Arabia.

For Central Asian leaders, raising the alarm about the risks of experienced fighters returning to Central Asia from Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan to establish a province of the so-called Caliphate continues a narrative that has been in place since the early days of independence with the emergence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the establishment of a Central Asian presence by Hizb ut Tahrir: The region is at risk and our leadership is the only guarantor of our stability. Similarly, the revisionist examination of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan and equating it as a terrorist organization after nearly two decades of power-sharing in government doubles down on a narrative that the region is besieged by external threats and internal recruits. And in this narrative is the convenient pretext for limiting freedoms and cracking down on domestic opponents (Ziegler, 2016).<sup>85</sup>

Information about Central Asia and the South Caucasus as a source of fighters for Islamic State have dotted the media and journal landscape since 2014 and to the Taliban for the decade prior to that (Rashid, 2002). The 2015 defection by Tajikistan's Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov to Islamic State and subsequent ascension to Minister of War and reports that those involved in the Islamic State-ordered or inspired the attack at Istanbul's airport in July 2016 were, in part, from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, has further fueled the image of former Soviet jihadis (Farrell, 2015).

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<sup>85</sup> A recent statement by a senior official at the U.S. Department of State expressed concern regarding over-zealous crackdowns: "...we encourage Central Asian governments to identify and act upon credible domestic and transnational security threats, and to avoid conflating violent extremism with political opposition, the activities of civil society organizations, and peaceful religious practice. To prevent radicalization to violence, governments need to distinguish peaceful expressions of conscience from genuine threats of violence" (Helsinki Commission 2015).

Estimates of mobilized Central Asians is in the low thousands and for South Caucasus FTFs closer to one thousand. While these figures have broad ranges and are highly debated, there is evidence, largely through reports of deaths in combat, that some Central Asians and South Caucasus citizens have indeed joined the ranks of Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other organizations abroad (Tucker, 2015; Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2015; Farrell, 2018). Numbers related to this mobilization have been used by Central Asian governments as a proxy for attraction to extremist sentiment and justification for strengthened security reforms.

But even the upper range of 5,000 Central Asian South Caucasus recruits, while seemingly impressive, is relatively minor on a per capita basis, compared with the recruitment that has occurred in places like Jordan or Tunisia. Putting numbers into greater context, per capita level recruitment to jihadi organizations in Syria and Iraq across the region have been estimated as: “1 in 14,400 Turkmen, 1 in 40,000 Tajiks, 1 in 56,000 Kyrgyz, 1 in 58,000 Uzbeks and 1 in 72,000 Kazakhs” (Dyner, 2015).

### **3.4 SOCIAL EQUILIBRIUM: DISSUADING ELITES FROM ALIGNMENT WITH VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

Beyond political and constitutional structure, monopoly of power, and veneers of democratic institutions, literature on post-Soviet transitions and influencing elements on stability have focused significant attention on the role of elites. Elite mobilization and greed factors are oft-cited critical elements in initiating violent competition for political and economic power. We have seen examples of elite dissatisfaction in places like Tajikistan in the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010, and Georgia in the early 1990s lead to competitive and violent behavior that shifted political tides. Yet we have also observed elite cooperation in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and post-2010 Kyrgyzstan that have provided a level of stability.

A handful of related schools of thought assert that regime stability is predicated on creating an equilibrium among elites, by bringing to bear the formal and informal use of state and personal resources for political and sometimes personal gain. Scholars who examine Eurasia through Patron-Client Relationships or Clientelism or through the related concepts of Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism see an asymmetrical relationship between those who hold power and those who serve them. As in many political systems, the *quid pro quo* relationship that is either expressed or inherently understood between the patron and client allows for financial and political favors to be exchanged for mutual benefit. The patron can, for example, receive the benefit of political support to maintain power and authority while the client, can realize access to positions or resources. It is not necessarily the case that corruption and graft are inherent parts of Patrimonial and Neopatrimonial behavior (Hale, 2015). Though certainly the distribution of state resources, such as aluminum, oil, or cotton profits or illicit resources such as narcotics revenue for personal use, as is present in the region, can be a feature. Further, as this relationship is asymmetrical, it implies that the clients have no independent access to rents or lootable resources, with the predominant control residing with the central ruler. Yet, whether the ruler perceives the state and its assets to be his personal possession or whether these are seen as legitimate bureaucratic tools for furthering the vision of state, both are dependent upon the intent of the ruler to determine whether the state will achieve sustained economic and social development.

Though the aforementioned asymmetrical relationships may exist within the realm of formal politics and may operate legitimately within institutional frameworks, there is an informal component of non-codified behavior and relationships that also exists (Hale, 2015). Whereas political science's examination of formal politics traditionally focuses on the structured and



controlling organs of state and of established norms and principles, including documented agreements such as constitutions (Lauth, 2000), there is a growing body of literature that recognizes that “informal institutions – or rules and procedures that are created, communicated, and enforced outside the officially sanctioned channels – are often as important as their formal counterparts...” (Helmke & Levitsky, 2008). While some scholars see these informal institutions as a vehicle for achieving end results or part of doing business, others perceive a detrimental aspect of informalism that embraces negative aspects of clientalism, corruption, and undermining of rule of law (Lauth, 2000; Radnitz, 2011). But it is the aspect of informal politics that helps ensure social balance that is essential to our understanding of the dynamics in Eurasia.

A significant contribution to the understanding of social equilibrium in the Eurasian context is Henry Hale’s work on Patronalism. This mezzanine level perspective on the self-reinforcing dynamics that is the norm in Eurasian politics, helps clarify why the vast majority of regimes in the region have not successfully transitioned to democracies. The concept provides an umbrella for inclusion of other characterizations of political regimes, rather than an introduction of a completely new concept. Patronalism describes the interaction within a network of personal relationships for conveying rewards and punishments for particular behavior or actions. As the individuals in the network know each other, they are not bound together by “abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations” (Hale, 2016). So while regime sustaining factors such as national ideology, personality cults, and regime legitimation are important conditions, the motivations for elite interaction is directly related to the specific control of rewards and punishments and personal relationships.

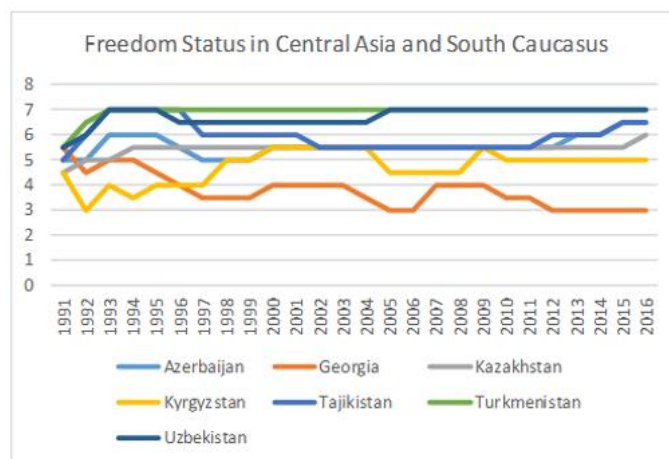
While related to the body of literature on clans, patronalism differs from clan relationships in that it describes political-economic networks, albeit direct and personal, but not

exclusively family or geographically based. Clans, particularly in these regions, are characterized by both vertical and horizontal bonds that link elite and non-elite clan members (Collins, 2004). And while they include, by definition, relatives through blood or marriage, they may also include close friends from geographic homelands as de facto family members (Collins, 2004). But these relationships, unlike those defined by patronalism are not necessarily political-economic in nature, though that may appear as a component. A further and important difference between the two is that while clans are drawn from a discreet and largely static pool of people, overlap between clans is limited. Patronal networks, on the other hand, can and do regularly overlap with each other. The most effective patronal networks are the ones that cut across geographies, industries, and ministries (Hale, 2015).

Patronalism emerges in places with weak rule of law and pervasive corruption, such as those seen in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. These societies see nepotism as a vehicle for domination of patron-client relations (Hale, 2016). In Eurasian countries, efforts to promote the Presidents' children or other specific hand-picked individuals into successor roles, such as discussed above, is a manifestation of an intent to continue personal relations and patrimonial domination through multiple generations. The focus on continuation of patronalistic relations by those who sit at the top of the vertical relationship network is one explanation for the durability of this syndrome. A second critical aspect is the self-perpetuating nature of expectation. If those in the network perceive that the network is intact and that the leader of that patron is legitimately in place, or at least, unlikely to depart, then those in the network are incentivized to behave in the way that is expected of them, in order to receive rewards and avoid punishment. Those who seek different behavior place themselves at risk of not personally benefitting, not being able to further desired interests, or penalized by others in the network or by the patron (Hale, 2016). After the

initial jockeying for control in some of the region’s countries following independence, solidification of authority became the norm across the region, with only Kyrgyzstan and Georgia moving towards transitions in power through comparatively legitimate electoral processes.

**Figure 3:** Freedom Status in Central Asia and South Caucasus



Source: Data compiled from Freedom House

Patronal politics is particularly useful in understanding the dynamics in Central Asia and the South Caucasus through the clarity it provides on regime oscillation that we have seen in the region since the 1990s between autocracy and democracy. While the overall trend in the decade between 2006 and 2016, save for Georgia, leans towards static or increased political closure across the region, represented with a score of 8 as the highest degree of political closure, the data in Figure 3<sup>86</sup> across the full timeline from 1991 shows a clear pattern of brief openings in freedom, followed by subsequent closure. Where we see greater periods of political pluralism emerge in these seven highly patronalistic countries, we have a window into the emergence of a breakdown of coordination between networks.<sup>87</sup> Where elites and their networks fail to

<sup>86</sup> Data in Figure 2 is drawn from Freedom House measures of political rights (PR) and civil liberties (CL). PR and CL scores have been averaged for each year in the chart to establish an overall freedom score.

<sup>87</sup> Hale, 2015 classifies all Central Asian and South Caucasus countries as having a high degree of Patronalism, regardless of the constitution type. For a table depicting the degree of

coordinate, they see a weakening in the perceived leadership of a single recognized patron (Hale, 2016). This condition can be particularly exacerbated when the type of regime is Presidential, and the key patron is the President. It also can emerge where the presence of multiple patrons seek to elevate themselves to regional or national positions of prominence, as has been present in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia.

One key element that ensures the reward provisions of patron networks is the ability to access lootable assets or rents. The discussion of patronal politics recognizes that the balance of social networks is markedly different in situations where there is a primary source of revenue for the economy that fall under central authority, versus regionalized commodities or revenue streams that can be controlled by elites beyond the central authority. In the former, members of the network have no accessible stream of significant resources outside of the network of the principal patron. If the principal patron retains authority, which is reinforced by control of resources, the more likely the network is to remain intact. Yet, conflict literature would suggest that where the economy of a country is highly dependent on a limited few primary commodities for export, such as oil in Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan, gas in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, aluminum in Tajikistan, or cotton in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the possibilities of conflict substantially increase (Collier, 2006). While these two points appear at odds with each other, what it suggests is that where patrons have rallied the tools of state through formal political mechanisms and regime legitimation and informal politics through reward distribution, control of a primary commodity can reinforce regime durability. Where, however, perception of transition or vulnerability or loss of legitimacy of the patron emerges, then competition for control of those resources will be fierce.

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patronalism across Eurasia, see Hale, 2015 p. 459.

The global oil boom that began in 2004 spurred substantial focus on the topic of Resource Curse in relation to political and economic development (Gel'man, 2010). The rising oil prices and demand for oil allowed for massive increases in public expenditure and modernization in places that were blessed with these natural resources. The political and economic stability of the 2000s, when contrasted with the turbulent 1990s, gave some optimism for the potential of sustained development. Even for neighboring countries that were not primary beneficiaries of oil and gas largess, the ensuing economic prosperity and construction booms in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan increased the demand for labor. Inexpensive and readily available migrant labor came by the millions from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia. These countries realized an important benefit through remittance revenue and subsequently through increased circulation of cash in their economies, spurring additional economic activity.<sup>88</sup> Thus, both the resource-possessing countries and their neighbors found their prosperity and standard of living tied to each other.

But instead of realizing the promise of sustained economic growth, the global financial crisis of 2008, the expansion of global oil production, and the rapid decrease in oil prices triggered a broadly felt economic crisis across Central Asia and the South Caucasus in the 2014-2016 period; precisely the period of foreign fighter migration to Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the falling global demand for cotton and aluminum and the resultant drop in prices of these two key commodities in this same period, caused a corresponding loss of revenue the heartland of Central Asia (Bakanova & Sobirzoda, 2015).

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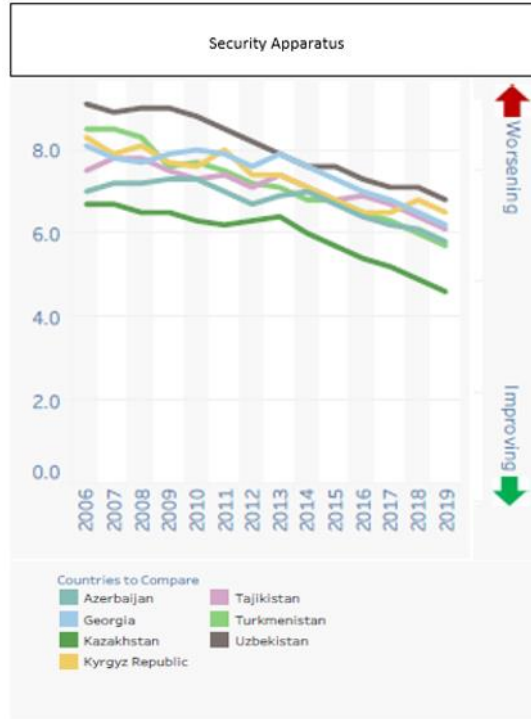
<sup>88</sup> Out of the seven studied Central Asian and south Caucasus countries, only Azerbaijan is a net importer of migrants, with a net migration rate of .1 in the five-year period beginning in 2014. So, while Kazakhstan still hosts migrant labor, outmigration from Kazakhstan to Russia also occurs. See International Organization for Migration data: <https://migrationdataportal.org/?i=netmigrate&t=2020&cm49=762>

The economic crisis in these regions, if not fully caused by the resource curse, was most certainly exacerbated by it. Specifically, the singular focus on a major exportable resource, such as oil, during a boom period incentivizes governments to disproportionately invest in that particular sector, to the detriment of others, such as building human capital through improved education and healthcare. The foundational belief is that for each incremental investment in that particular sector, a better return can be realized than would be possible in other investments in such a non-diversified economy. In economies that have not developed the safeguards against corruption or which employ rent-seeking behavior as a tool of establishing social equilibrium, maximizing return from a resource such as oil enhances the asset base of a narrow group of elite patrons, typically directly connected to the central government (Gel'man, 2010). While distribution of rewards, including expansion of government jobs or projects, may assure regime legitimation during periods of high commodity prices, contractions have the potential of yielding the opposite effect.

Research suggest that as socio-economic indicators rise, such as a result of pre-2014 increased oil and gas revenues in Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, the demand by the population for improved governance indicators stagnates (Scherbak, 2010). If citizens perceive that the government is fulfilling its social contract, there is a general sense of satisfaction with the status quo in relation to government institutions and mechanisms of governance. Simultaneously, countries in the region pursue opportunities that enhance their coercive capacity. As figure 4 depicts, investments in police, military, and intelligence have strengthened the overall security apparatus across the seven countries in the region. An improved security apparatus score marks shows the ability of the state to monopolize control and use of power, for both legitimate and regime-supporting purposes. As necessary, such coercive

capacity gives a regime greater ability to apply repression as a tool for maintaining authority and control over resources that may be attractive a source for competition. Similarly, great coercive

**Figure 4:** Security Apparatus 2006-2019



Source: Data compiled from Fund for Peace Fragile States Index

capacity allows regimes to maintain authority over elite competitors in the face of decreasing legitimacy as economic fortunes falter.<sup>89</sup> In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the only visible example of regime-threatening elite dissension in the post-2014 period has been in Kyrgyzstan, where the former President Almazbek Atambayev was arrested on charges of plotting a coup against his successor President Sooronbai Jeenbekov in 2019. And even in that example, violence was largely averted due to the strong show of force.

<sup>89</sup> Zaostrovtssev argues that correlation between the resource curse and decreases in rule of law in Eurasia is inconclusive (Zaostrovtssev, 2010). His research, however, does not take into consideration the use of resources by leadership to coopt elites or to invest in the security apparatus for perpetuation of the regime’s authority.

### 3.5 PRESSURE AND MIGRATION

The presence of highly restrictive laws on religious freedom, uneven application of rule of law based on ethnicity or geographic origin, lack of confidence in governance, the suppression of diverse political voices, and economic inequities in the face of widely perceived corruption is symptomatic of a lack of valid, inclusive and equitable concepts of state across Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Not only does this squeeze out the moderate middle, but also stands in direct contrast to the well-marketed narratives of alternate forms of governance, including that of Salafi jihadists. If legitimacy of rule is eroded, then alternate forms of ideology can emerge (Omelicheva, 2016). The offering of a state-building project that can unify populations across artificial national boundaries and promote a transparent rule of law that is equitable across all levels of society can be an attractive conceptual framework for those squeezed by their governments in the region. But in order to mount a credible alternative to the status quo, competitors need elite support, resources, and manpower to affect and maintain change.

The issue is not whether an undercurrent of jihadist sentiment is lying dormant and can be awakened by the right tone or resonance of charismatic voices. Rather, the issue at hand is whether a critical mass of group grievances can be harnessed through elite mobilization. And more precisely, whether elites perceive that improved political positioning can be realized through mobilization and violence. And importantly, do elites see advantage in approaching this political positioning through the lens of Salafi jihadism. For rational actors, including elites and aggrieved populations, analysis of opportunity cost emerges (Mesquita, 2008). A focus on grievances as a key underlying factor leading to violent extremism is insufficient: Pursuit of political or economic greed by conflict entrepreneurs must be taken into consideration as an



underlying motivation for mobilization. Predation, whether by political competitors, organized crime, separatist leadership, or jihadi organizations can play a critical role in instability (Collier, 2006). However, with elites largely managed across the region, and domestic resources heavily controlled, external alternatives for support, such as that found through Salafi jihadi organizations would seem the only viable remaining avenue for would be revolutionaries.

The governments in the region have taken measures to suppress this potential for jihadi revolt, largely through the lens of enhanced security, as discussed above. But in order to prevent those people who might be plotting destabilizing action, these governments have cast wide nets that risk alienating the broader peaceful Muslim populations in their countries. Laws, such as those in Tajikistan that prevent children under 18 years old from attending mosque and limiting Hajj to older people, and reports in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan of police forcibly shaving beards threaten freedom of religion. The Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life designates all countries in the region, except Georgia, as having at least a high degree of religious restriction by the government (Pew Research Center, 2014; 2016). While Georgia may have a moderate degree of religious restriction, the state bias towards the majority Orthodox Christian religion and the indirect pressures to mute public displays of religiosity or to convert to Christianity are deeply present.

The Spring 2015 parliamentary election in Tajikistan saw the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) lose its remaining two seats. Subsequent legislation in 2016 designated the IRPT as a terrorist organization, resulting in the arrest of IRPT leadership and the fleeing of scores of others. Long-heralded as the only legal religious party in the region, the loss of this voice in the political scene of Tajikistan not only signaled to the 44,000 registered members of the party that their views were no longer legitimate, it also eliminated the only legal outlet for

expressions of political Islam in the region (Abdullaev, 2007). Across the board, Islamist movements, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, have been banned, reflecting a push towards limiting the reach of political Islam.

Exacerbating this sense of group oppression is a recognition that the areas of most conservative Muslim observance largely overlap with areas that contain ethnic groups, clans, or networks that are different than those in the ruling administrations in Dushanbe, Tashkent, Bishkek, and Tbilisi: Ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan; Garmis, Pamiris, and Khojandis in Tajikistan; Andijanis and Namanganis in Uzbekistan; Kists in Georgia. It is precisely these groups, bar the Kists, that have experienced a history of violent conflict with the respective administrations.<sup>90</sup> The combination of geographic isolation from the capital and perception of group or minority targeted predatory or punitive efforts can be contributive motivations towards political violence (Collier, 2006; Piazza, 2011). But because of lingering deep rural poverty, failure of broad-based sustainable development, and concern of continued governmental pressure and prosecution in these locations,<sup>91</sup> these regions have been a large source of outmigration.

Two events in the Ferghana Valley demonstrate such governmental pressure on ethnic Uzbeks by governments on each side of an international border. In 2005, the mass killing of scores of people in Andijon, Uzbekistan<sup>92</sup> was attributed by the government to a response to a supposed instigation by the IMU. Though there remain many conflicting views on this event, including that the Karimov government was threatened by potential political revivals from a

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<sup>90</sup> While the Kists have not experienced violent conflict with the government of Georgia, they have experienced heavy stigmatization. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>91</sup> In Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan, fear is a pervasive factor. There is a recognition that going astray from the societal norm, speaking against the government, or otherwise breaking from the mold of normalcy, risks accusations of radicalism and potential prosecution.

<sup>92</sup> The range of numbers is widely disputed from approximately 100 to more than 1,000.

differing clan, using violent extremism as cover to eliminate this threat, thousands of Uzbeks fled the area, including illegally across the long porous border into Kyrgyzstan. Five years later in the area around Osh province in Kyrgyzstan, violence emerged between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks. Reports of forces from the Government of Kyrgyzstan being involved in supporting ethnic Kyrgyz in their eventual routing and destruction of thousands of primarily ethnic Uzbek houses and businesses are prevalent (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Over 400 people killed, 1,000 wounded, and thousands of people were displaced in the fighting (Freedom House, 2012). According to reports from the International Crisis Group, 200-400 of these Uzbeks fled to Pakistan, to join with jihadi organizations (ICG, 2015). While no statistics exist that identify how many victims of these events ultimately migrated abroad, conversations with community members in both countries strongly suggest that the perceived threat from the governments has created an unwelcoming environment and thus a desire for many to find opportunities abroad.

Until 2014, Tajikistan received the highest amount of remittances as a percentage of GDP, reaching a peak of 52 percent in 2014; with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan closely following (World Bank, 2014; Pomfret, 2014). As discussed earlier, only Azerbaijan has been a net importer of migrants in the region over the five-year period beginning in 2014. In the period 2014-16, Russian demand for Central Asian migrant labor sharply contracted as a result of declining oil revenues and the devaluation of the Ruble (World Bank, 2015).<sup>93</sup> A combination

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<sup>93</sup> Russian legislation aimed at migrants has increased the difficulty of entrance into Russia and has already resulted in many Central Asians repatriating. Some suspect that Moscow's initial use of punitive legislation was politically motivated to force Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan to join the Eurasian Economic Union. Regardless of the motivation, more than a quarter of a million workers from Tajikistan were put on the re-entry ban list, which limited work opportunities for them (Trilling, 2015).

of decreasing overall quantity of remittances and decreasing purchasing power of those remittances still being sent from Russia certainly put pressure on households and communities in the region, but did not dissuade people from continued migration abroad, either legally or illegally (Eurasian Development Bank, 2014; Ratha et al, 2014).

Migration has thus served as a safety valve for not only buffering the otherwise abysmal economies of the region with crucial remittance money, but also by ensuring that potential malcontents are productively busy outside the border of the Central Asian countries. Violent Islamist state-building projects, just as any other revolutionary movement needs not only leaders, but recruits and supporters to sustain itself and its campaign. With millions of people from the region abroad at any given time, the regimes avert substantial risk of viable competition.

## CHAPTER 4: JIHADI MOBILIZATION TO WHAT END?

### 4.1 ORGANIZATIONS AND DOMESTIC MOBILIZATION

Political violence has been a visible fixture in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, since independence. Data analyzed from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) Global Terrorism Database (GTD) shows that there have been 539 terrorist incidents<sup>94</sup> recorded through public sources in Central Asia and the South Caucasus between 1991 and 2017, including armed assault, explosions, kidnappings, and individual killings.<sup>95</sup> The overwhelming majority of these occurred in the first years of independence prior to 2000, suggesting that much of this high number can be accounted for in the fog of war or the power struggles of organized crime groups in the early post-independence period. The conflicts related to the breakaway regions in Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the civil war in Tajikistan certainly skew the data upward, with attacks around the 200 mark for each. Other individual attacks are undoubtedly post-conflict retribution for deaths of family members or brothers in arms that occurred prior to ceasefires or formal peace agreements. Settling of accounts and revenge is an unfortunate feature of the region.

Across the region, nineteen specific violent non-state actor organizations are named within the data covering a variety of ideologies including ethno-nationalist movements, separatist entities, and jihadis. Many of the remaining incidents appear with attribution to categories of

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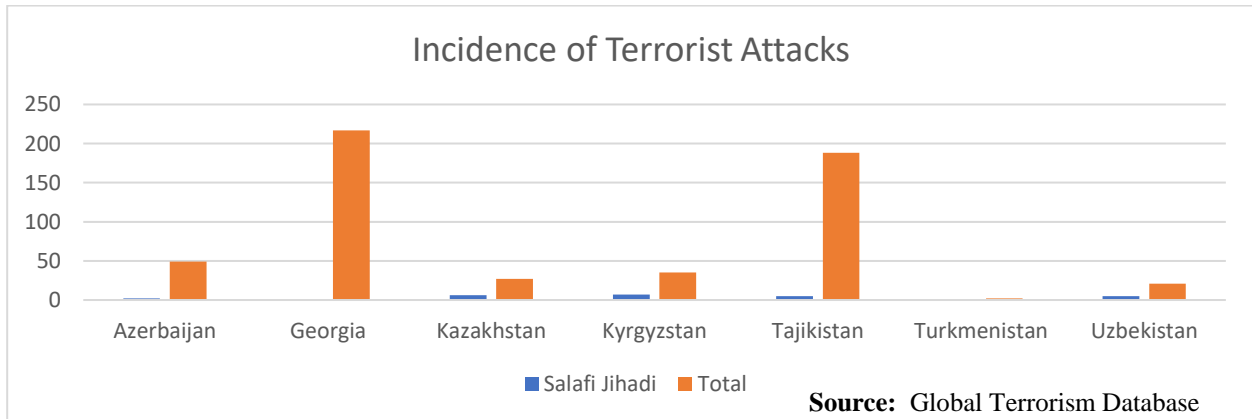
<sup>94</sup> The Global Terrorism Database defines a terrorist incident as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” See: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (2015), Global Terrorism Database Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>

<sup>95</sup> The author included data for all countries between 1991 and 2017, recognizing that the conflicts in Tajikistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan skew the overall numbers upward. Georgia alone account for 217 incidents. While Tajikistan accounts for 188 incidents in the data set.

perpetrators, rather than organized entities with titles. Such categories include listings such as “Ossetian Guerillas” or “Armenian Separatists” or “Armed Smugglers.” The pattern of organizational positioning and national instability becomes clear on the backdrop of both separatist aspirations and threats to political leadership.

But out of the total incidents, only twenty-five have been linked, either by specific organizational name or broad category, to jihadi perpetrators.<sup>96</sup> This represents less than five percent of violent actions within the region. Table 1 shows the contrast between total attacks and those attributed to jihadi perpetrators.

**Table 1:** Incidence of Terrorist Attacks in Central Asia and the South Caucasus 1991-2017



<sup>96</sup> This is not to claim that it is beyond the possibility that other attacks within Central Asia or the South Caucasus have been planned or conducted by jihadi organizations. The author has avoided supposition, basing this analysis on the existing data. As such, “Unknown” perpetrators listed in the database are treated as unattributed attacks and therefore unable to be classified by ideological orientation or specific organization type. The 2015 attack in Vahdat, Tajikistan, for example, is listed in the GTD as having an unknown perpetrator. But some sources have made a connection to a former field commander of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan. That former field commander, Deputy Defense Minister General Aduhalim Nazarzoda, had been fired from his government post shortly before the attack. It is possible that he organized retaliatory action. But in absence of evidence that he actually perpetrated the act or that it was under the auspices of the IRPT, the GTD has appropriately listed this incident as unknown. Similarly, in 2010 and 2011, the Government of Kyrgyzstan claimed that a group known as Jama'at Kyrgyzstan Jaish al-Mahdi had attacked a synogoue, a sports facility and attempted an attack on a police station before being eliminated see: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf> and <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-terrorism-sentencing/25051277.html> Absence of independent information on the perpetrator or the attack also results in “unknown” attribution.

Seven organizations have been identified as perpetrators<sup>97</sup> in these twenty-five incidents that killed or injured slightly more than 100 people and generated broad and persistent fears among the population.

**Table 2:** Incidence of Salafi Jihadi Attacks

Incidence of Salafi Jihadi Attacks			
COUNTRY	DATE	PERPETRATOR	CASUALTIES
Azerbaijan	Aug-08	Forest Brothers	5
	Jun-09	Forest Brothers	2
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>PERPETRATOR</b>	<b>CASUALTIES</b>
Georgia	N/A	N/A	0
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>PERPETRATOR</b>	<b>CASUALTIES</b>
Kazakhstan	Oct-11	JAK	1
	Oct-11	JAK	0
	Nov-11	Jihadi-Inspired	8
	Jun-16	Jihadi-Inspired	10
	Jun-16	IS/KLA	6
	Jun-16	IS/KLA	5
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>PERPETRATOR</b>	<b>CASUALTIES</b>
Kyrgyzstan	Aug-99	Jihadi-inspired	0
	Sep-99	Jihadi-inspired	5
	Aug-00	IMU	0
	Aug-00	IMU	1
	Nov-15	Jihadi-inspired	1
	Nov-15	Jihadi-inspired	1
	Aug-16	TIP	4
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>PERPETRATOR</b>	<b>CASUALTIES</b>
Tajikistan	Jun-05	HT	0
	Sep-10	IMU	29
	Aug-16	Jihadi-inspired	1
	Jan-17	Jihadi-inspired	0
	Mar-17	Jihadi-inspired	1
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>PERPETRATOR</b>	<b>CASUALTIES</b>
Turkmenistan	N/A	N/A	0
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>PERPETRATOR</b>	<b>CASUALTIES</b>
Uzbekistan	Jul-04	IJU/IMU/HT	6
	Jul-04	IJU/IMU/HT	3
	Jul-04	IJU	4
	May-09	IJU	5
	May-09	IJU	4

Source: Global Terrorism Database

<sup>97</sup> For the purposes of this discussion and to ensure the greatest breadth of potential perpetrators, all perpetrator categories in the GTD have been treated as equal. This means that listings for Perpetrator 1, 2, 3 have been aggregated and depicted in the relevant tables.

These entities include: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Kazakhstan Liberation Army (KLA), Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP)<sup>98</sup>; Hizb ut Tahrir; Jund al-Khalifa (JaK)<sup>99</sup>; Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)<sup>100</sup>; Islamic State (IS); Forest Brothers<sup>101</sup>. In addition to these named organizations, the broad category of “jihadi-inspired” perpetrators is used to denote attacks either by members of undetermined group or by unaffiliated individuals, sometimes known as lone wolves. Across all actions by perpetrators in this list, nearly all have been oriented toward Central Asia (see Table 2).

Yet, even among this list of perpetrators, there are issues of uncertainty of attribution, suggesting perhaps an even narrower list of responsible organizations. Perhaps the most controversial in the list is the attribution of the June 2016 attacks in Aktobe, Kazakhstan. Initial media accusations focused on a group called the Kazakhtan Liberation Army (KLA), which was believed to have orchestrated multiple attacks that resulted in approximately twenty casualties. But the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan quickly announced that they had determined that the KLA was a fabrication, further disseminated by unwitting journalists and scholars.<sup>102</sup> The government of Kazakhstan subsequently placed blame on operatives of IS.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Also known as the Turkestan Islamic Movement and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement

<sup>99</sup> Also known as Soldiers of the Caliphate, Brigade of the Soldiers of the Caliphate, or the sub grouping of Zahir Baibars Battalion

<sup>100</sup> Also known as Islamic Jihad Group or Jama’at al-Jihad al-Islami.

<sup>101</sup> The GTD lists an attack in Georgia committed by another, non-jihadi group known as the Forest Brothers. These two groups are unrelated.

<sup>102</sup> See: <https://eadaaily.com/en/news/2016/06/08/supporting-terrorism-rferl-invents-a-fake-kazakhstan-liberation-army> It is, of course, possible that the existence of the KLA would serve as a greater embarrassment to the Government of Kazakhstan than an external Islamic State, which was already seen as a bane to the global community.

<sup>103</sup> Postings by one of the suspects of the Aktobe events indicted sympathies for IS. It remains, however, unclear, whether the perpetrators were self-allying with IS or whether they were operating under orders. For more, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-shooting-exclusive-idUSKCN0YU1TM>



Hizb ut-Tahrir also appears in the list of perpetrators, linked along with the IMU and IJU, to the 2004 explosions at the embassies of the U.S. and Israel, and the Prosecutor General's office and the 2005 bombing of a government building in Tajikistan. While the linkage to IJU and IMU is much firmer in the 2004 attacks, Hizb ut Tahrir still is seen as potentially complicit by state officials seeking to cast a wide net.<sup>104</sup> At a minimum, Hizb ut-Tahrir's narrative and ideological stance align closely with that of Salafi jihadi organizations. Yet, Hizb ut-Tahrir, while seen by many governments globally as having an extreme ideology that serves as a conveyer belt to overtly violent jihadi organizations, has been opaque on its stance on the use of violence. It has stated that it is opposed to the killing of undefined "innocents," with scholars describing this political organization as non-violent extremists (Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006). Yet its official website clearly justifies the use of violence to defend Islam in the face of external threat or apostate leaders:

"So whenever the disbelieving enemies attack an Islamic country it becomes compulsory on its Muslim citizens to repel the enemy. The members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in that country are a part of the Muslims and it is obligatory upon them as it is upon other Muslims, in their capacity as Muslims, to fight the enemy and repel them. Whenever there is a Muslim amir who declares jihad to enhance the Word of Allah (swt) and mobilises the people to do that, the

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<sup>104</sup> This author has observed the common occurrence of government officials and the general population in Central Asian countries lump IMU and Hizb ut Tahrir together in the same breath, regardless of firm evidence. For the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, presumed Hizb ut Tahrir membership comes with a high legal penalty. Interlocutors have asserted that it is possible to simultaneously hold membership in both Hizb ut Tahrir and violent Salafi jihadi organizations.

members of Hizb ut-Tahrir will respond in their capacity as Muslims in the country where the general call to arms was proclaimed.”<sup>105</sup>

To overcome some of this debate on direct organizational involvement, figure 4 below provides a different view of the attacks.<sup>106</sup> Here, all incidents for a given country, regardless of perpetrator group, are combined and mapped against the dates of the attack.<sup>107</sup> This format reveals that the jihadi attacks cluster into four groupings between 1998 and 2017 that are roughly bound by two year increments (i.e., 1998-2000; 2004-2005; 2008-2011; 2015-2017), with more than one attack often taking place within hours or days of each other in each country. This clustered activity thus comes in bursts across the region and in each country, rather than steady continuous action. And while there is some incidence of attack and level of lethality in the South Caucasus, the overwhelming area of impact are within four Central Asian countries.<sup>108</sup>

Immediately noticeable is the comparatively larger number of attacks in the 2015-2017 cluster that occurred in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. While the eight attacks in this

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<sup>105</sup> See: <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def>

<sup>106</sup> It is important to note that some individuals have been arrested in Central Asia related to attacks represented in this chart. In at least two examples in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, subsequent prison escapes have resulted in violence. The GTD does not list these as terrorist violence, since the purpose of the violence was not politically or ideologically motivated, but rather undertaken to ensure successful escape.

<sup>107</sup> This format also eliminates the debate over attribution of attacks. For example, attacks in 1999 and 2000 in southern Kyrgyzstan, while seen as connected to narcotics trafficking, were closely connected to jihadi-inspired fighters from the mountains of Tajikistan. While it is likely that these were affiliated with the IMU, there remains some question.

<sup>108</sup> Unattributed attacks against Turkmenistan’s border guards along Afghanistan border in 2014 raises speculation of Taliban efforts to breach the territory. While only one border incident appears in the GTD, rumors have circulated that at least three border attacks have occurred since 2013. Given Turkmenistan’s adversarial relationship with journalists, ascertaining the veracity of rumors is challenging. And certainly, even if attacks can be confirmed, the attribution of these attacks to jihadists would not necessarily be a foregone conclusion, given the extent of drug trafficking occurring in this same region.

period doubles the average number of attacks seen in each of the other three clusters, the small sample represented in this figure should give caution in drawing a conclusion of a trend. It is nonetheless, worth noting that the 2015-2017 period coincides with the growth of IS in Iraq and Syria and the well-documented high period of mobilization of citizens of Central Asian and Caucasus countries as FTFs.<sup>109</sup> While one might conclude that this relative high point of activity could be an indication of emboldened or strengthened jihadi groups benefiting from training or technical support from abroad, there is currently insufficient data to discern a pattern. Further, levels of lethality, as defined by casualty numbers,<sup>110</sup> show that the 2015-2017 period, while higher than the cluster average, was in fact not the most lethal period among the four clusters.<sup>111</sup> As the GTD expands further over the coming years, the inclusion of additional data should be examined to determine if further patterns emerge.

Additionally evident from the chart is the low casualty rate, both in the aggregate and in individual attacks, excluding the outlying 2010 incident in Tajikistan with 29 casualties. Yet, an examination of frequency of attack and low casualty numbers provides a somewhat misleading view of the impact of jihadi incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan at the end of the 1990s into the early 2000s. Reports indicate that a few hundred jihadi fighters crossed into the Batken and Jalalabad areas of Kyrgyzstan and the Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan, via Tajikistan, in

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<sup>109</sup> While this research did not include analysis of jihadi online messaging, SITE Intelligence includes prominent audio and video messages from jihadi organizations. Out of these videos, purported members of IS in Syria were seen in three separate videos in 2015 containing nationals of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Georgia and one in 2018 with a national of Kazakhstan. In each, except the Georgia video, threats were voiced against the apostate regimes. In the Georgia video, animosity was aimed at the Orthodox church. See:

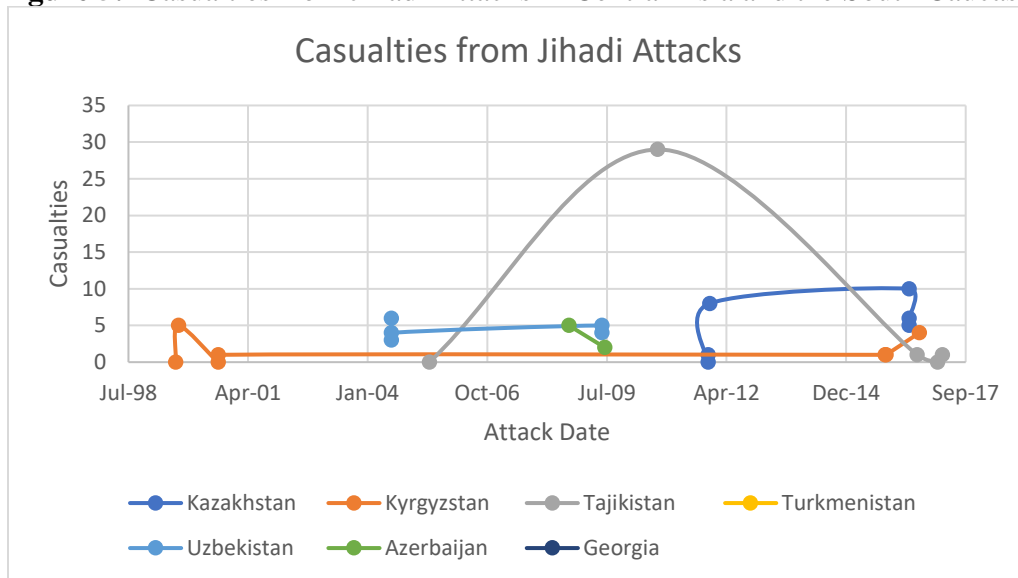
<https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Search.html?searchphrase=all&searchword=tajikistan>

<sup>110</sup> Casualty numbers are the sum of all known deaths and injuries associated with the incident.

<sup>111</sup> Highest lethality was noted in the 2008-2011 period, with the September 2010 IMU-attributed attack against a government convey in Tavildara region of Tajikistan.

incursions in 1999 and 2000, .<sup>112</sup> And while deaths were limited in both incursions, kidnapping, including of foreign mountain climbers<sup>113</sup>, and displacement of villagers caused an atmosphere of fear that pervaded communities in the region. Further, the inability or unwillingness of the government of Tajikistan to prevent jihadists from traversing its territory undermined regional relationships with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

**Figure 5: Casualties from Jihadi Attacks in Central Asia and the South Caucasus**



The long delays between jihadi attacks, and the emphasis on Central Asia over the South Caucasus raises the question of whether there is an organizational dynamic, beyond the securitized environments and coercive capacity of the states, that has helped to mute the frequency of jihadi engagement in the region. The answer to this question resides, in part, in the pattern of movement and relationships of the organizations identified in the data. The picture that emerges is a jihadi organizational landscape that began and developed differently in Central

<sup>112</sup> <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/8401-analytical-articles-cacianalyst-2003-9-24-art-8401.html>

<sup>113</sup> See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2000/2433.htm>

Asia then in the South Caucasus. Yet despite differences, there has been a visible convergence in overlapping jihadi theatres, substantially in Syria and Iraq during the studied period and increasingly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Central Asia jihadi organizations developed with the primary stated intent of supplanting the government authorities in the region or, at a minimum, forcing them to adhere to a narrowly defined Shariah-based governance model. As discussed in previous chapters, the emergence of jihadi organizations was not in isolation, but rather contemporaneous with other jockeying challengers that threatened state integrity in the early period of state-building in Central Asia. It is through the journey from Adolat to its successor organization, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and then the emergence of subsequent offshoot of the Islamic Jihad Union and affiliate of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, later known as the Turkestan Islamic Party, that the elimination of apostate regimes in areas of ethnic origin across the region are conveyed as the organizing principle, whether Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Tajik, or Uighur. Yet through the process of displacement and refuge in areas with larger violent non-state actor organizations fighting in offshore conflicts, the missions of these organizations became diluted and less focused on their initial target.

In contrast, there have been no visible manifestations of Salafi jihadi organizations mounting sustained efforts to overthrow the regimes in Baku or Tbilisi. This is not to say, however, that domestic-oriented jihadists have not been present. Certainly, the Forest Brothers demonstrated their ability to attack targets within Azerbaijan in the two known attacks attributed to them. But their efforts were short-lived and seen as part of the larger Dagestani Jamaat in identifying supporters and resources for its battle against Russian interests in the North Caucasus. And while the 1999 conviction in Baku of thirteen people accused of planning to blow

up the U.S. Embassy suggests the existence of an organization called Jayshullah, the absence of any further references to this organization following these convictions, suggests that the group either did not truly exist or that the convictions obliterated the group. The fragmentation of the jihadi landscape in Azerbaijan has hindered any visible cohesive efforts against Baku, serving instead to append to better organized jihadi efforts focused abroad.

Similarly, jihadi organizations during the second Chechen War and throughout the subsequent instability in Dagestan, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia dipped in and out of the porous mountainous borders of Azerbaijan and Georgia, seeking respite from fighting, places to restock, and areas for recruitment (Cohen, 2012) but not directly threatening either national government, nor striving to establish areas of control. Albeit, in both the Pankisi Valley and areas of northern Azerbaijan proximate to Dagestan, the presence of refugees and jihadists revealed a loss of border integrity, thus undermining sovereignty.<sup>114</sup> But in absence of meaningful threats against the state, these incursions should be understood as a desire for haven in areas with ethnically related populations and positioning for continued struggle against Russia, rather than a beachhead for internal attack.<sup>115</sup> It is this organizational orientation towards the Russian enemy that stands in sharp contrast to the domestic enemies targeted by the Central Asian jihadis.

#### **4.2 JIHADI THEATRES AND TRANSPOSED AGENDAS**

The process of displacement, affiliation, and transposed agendas is most clearly seen in the example of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. As state coercive capacity in Uzbekistan

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<sup>114</sup> For a description of incursions of North Caucasus insurgents across South Caucasus borders and the tensions between Russia and Georgia and Azerbaijan see: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2000/2433.htm>

<sup>115</sup> As with Tajikistan's challenges in controlling transit and havens for jihadists, Georgia and Azerbaijan were both accused by Russia of intentionally supporting insurgents against Russia (Vatchagaev, 2009) <https://jamestown.org/program/an-azeri-jamaat-or-a-jamaat-in-azerbaijan/>

was asserted and elite relationships settled, over the decade following independence, spaces outside of the reach of government became fewer in the Ferghana Valley, the epicenter of burgeoning Islamist dissent. For the outlawed Adolat, this led to displacement into the mountains of Tajikistan. Still proximate to the Ferghana Valley, the mountains afforded a haven to Adolat and easy access to Afghanistan and Pakistan beyond. But co-location in the Karategin Valley<sup>116</sup> meant that Tohir Yuldashev<sup>117</sup> and Juma Namangani<sup>118</sup>, Adolat's leaders, were guests in the home region of the IRPT which was then ratcheting up its struggle with the Government of Tajikistan in the early days of the civil war. With similar ideology and animosity towards the post-Soviet leadership sitting in their respective capitals, Adolat and the IRPT found a shared worldview. Both through this shared worldview and inevitable obligation to its host, Adolat joined the IRPT as a fighting force. The IRPT, which operated in a hierarchical military structure, with field commanders and their forces controlling discreet territory, required that Adolat<sup>119</sup>, under the military leadership of Namangani, operate directly under IRPT command.<sup>120</sup>

During the duration of the civil war, Namangani, and his fighters remained focused on the fight against the government of Tajikistan. But the 1997 signing of the inter-Tajik peace agreement that ended the Tajik civil war became a watershed moment for relations between former opposition co-belligerents. A fundamental condition of the peace agreement was the

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<sup>116</sup> Also known as the Rasht Valley

<sup>117</sup> Accounts of Yuldashev during this period suggest that he left Tajikistan, likely travelling to Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan, where he established relationships.

<sup>118</sup> It is unclear when exactly Jumaboi Khodjiev adopted the nom de guerre Juma Namangani. Given the ubiquitous usage of war names by Tajik field commanders, it is likely that this name was adopted early during his time in Tajikistan.

<sup>119</sup> In this early stage, the organization retained the name Adolat. The first usage of the name Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan did not appear until the conclusion of the civil war in Tajikistan.

<sup>120</sup> Namangani served under field commander Mirzo Zioev, future Minister of Emergency Situations.

integration of United Tajik Opposition Forces, including those of the IRPT, into the armed forces of Tajikistan. Additionally, leadership positions in key ministries, particularly the power ministries, were to be allocated to former UTO members. And perhaps most importantly, the IRPT was to be recognized as a legal political party. For Yuldashev and Namangani, this was a betrayal of what they believed had been a shared Salafi vision. They, along with field commanders such as Mullo Abdullo, saw the peace agreement not as a long-term pathway to an Islamist vision, argued by IRPT's Said Abdullo Nuri and Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, but rather as an abrogation of commitment to establishing Central Asian theocracy in the immediate term. Accommodation in a secular governance structure was anathema to their beliefs.

Despite this falling out, Namangani and his forces continued to use their mountain redoubt as both a principal rear base and as a safe corridor to Afghanistan, as they rebranded in the post-civil war period as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). It is in this period that the IMU not only begins to deepen its relation with the Taliban in Afghanistan, through Yuldashev's outreach, but also the first indication of incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan emerge, home of a large ethnic Uzbek population (Nichol, 2014). It is broadly believed that this move towards southern Kyrgyzstan was an effort for the IMU to have a base of operations close to its place of origin in the Ferghana Valley.<sup>121</sup>

But the IMU's relative safe haven in Tajikistan was disrupted by a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999 that Islam Karimov blamed on the IMU.<sup>122</sup> Karimov used this pretext to pressure the Government of Tajikistan, and in turn the former IRPT members of the government,

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<sup>121</sup> Osh, for example, is approximately 30 miles from Andijan, despite the presence of an international boundary between the two cities.

<sup>122</sup> There is much debate on the perpetrator of these bombings. The GTD represents them as unknown. There is widespread belief that other political challengers to Karimov's presidency may have been seeking to topple his rule through assassination.



to evict the IMU from its territory (Rashid, 2002). While the government of Tajikistan was likely incapable of forcibly ejecting the IMU from its borders in 1999,<sup>123</sup> the IMU rightly perceived potential military pressure in its home base as an undesirable outcome that would have most certainly impeded operations against its declared target in Uzbekistan. Additionally, former IRPT<sup>124</sup> members of the coalition government reportedly used their good offices to convince the IMU to relocate to Afghanistan, not wishing to see a return to destabilizing conflict in Tajikistan. Even if transit corridors between countries in this highly porous and poorly patrolled region could not be guaranteed, Tajikistan could be seen by its neighbors as making appropriate effort to prevent a permanent presence.

Tellingly, the IMU did not simply cross into Afghanistan and seek the protection of either ethnic Tajik Ahmed Shah Massoud or ethnic Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum. While these leaders were supportive of the presence of the IRPT and refugees from Tajikistan<sup>125</sup>, during the civil war, the relationship of the Northern Alliance with the government of Uzbekistan made safe haven in northern Afghanistan an impossibility for the IMU. Additionally, having already established relations with the Taliban through Yuldashev's time in the country, as well as an ideological alignment between the organizations<sup>126</sup>, Taliban controlled areas became a natural

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<sup>123</sup> The U.S. State Department's April 2001 Patterns of Global Terrorism briefer from the Office of the Coordinator of Counterterrorism asserts the Government of Tajikistan's willingness to prevent IMU transit, but its inability to do so. See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2000/2433.htm>

<sup>124</sup> Subsequent to this period, the Government of Tajikistan accused the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) of affiliation with the global jihadi movement, including in August 2017 with Islamic State. See: <http://tajikistanmission.ch/news/7-news/136-article.html>

<sup>125</sup> In 1997, the author visited the three primary areas of Tajik refugee displacement in Mazar-i-Sharif, Taloqan, and Kunduz, Afghanistan.

<sup>126</sup> While it is understood that many in the Taliban leadership have been influenced by Deobandi ideology, Salafi influences have also been prevalent in the organization.

choice for relocation. It is thus that the IMU found itself again seeking haven in the home of a larger organization also in the midst of conflict.

And while a formal pledge of bay'a to the Taliban's Mullah Omar did not occur until 2001, the quid pro quo for residing on the territory of the Taliban was support and participation in military conflicts against its adversaries, including the Northern Alliance (Project Harmony, 2001). Captured documentation from the IMU shows both the early level of support from the Taliban and the subsequent allocation of land for the building of housing for the flow of arriving Central Asians.

“In keeping with the divine orders and the master's direction, some of the Muslim people in Uzbekistan have chosen for themselves the way of migration to a land seeking safety for themselves, their religion, and their honor, after the persecution of the Kremov [sic] Regime against anyone who tries to return to his Muslim identity and abiding with proud the Islamic law. In the beginning, our victorious brothers in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan provided them with shelter (housing). As the numbers of the immigrants increased, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was forced to rent houses to shelter them. This became unfeasible as the number of immigrants has surpassed two hundred [200] families, so the leadership has been forced to find alternative solutions to the immigrants from beyond the river. The leadership has also received word that tens (10's) of families are on their way immigrating to Afghanistan. So after consultation, the leadership is considering the idea of building "Bukhari" camp as a refuge for all persecuted Muslims by the backslid governments beyond the river.” (Project Harmony, 2001)

The 2001 involvement of the United States and Coalition forces against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan was a profound game changer for the IMU. Juma Namangani and many of his IMU forces were killed in combat along with Taliban fighters in late fall 2001. As the Taliban rule in the country evaporated, the IMU was forced to retreat across the Pakistan border into Haqqani-network controlled Waziristan, along with the Taliban and other jihadists (Sanderson et al, 2010; Moore, 2010; TRAC; Site Intelligence Group, n.d.; BAAD, 2018).<sup>127</sup> IMU fighters who had not been killed by Coalition forces in 2001 continued to bolster the ranks of the Taliban and its Haqqani Network hosts in their efforts against the governments in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the 2000 to 2003 period, there were no known jihadi attacks conducted in Central Asia by the IMU or any other declared jihadist organizations, suggesting that the personnel losses and disruption caused by displacement in South Asia had a deleterious effect on their aspirations to overthrow the Karimov regime or other governments in Central Asia.

Further, the death of Namangani, the elimination of its bases in Afghanistan, and its challenged reach into Central Asia created internal disagreements and fragmenting pressure, among the remaining IMU forces. Chief among the points of dissension was the IMU's failure

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<sup>127</sup> A 2001 piece written by Ayman al Zawahiri entitled Knights Under the Prophet's Banner describes al Qaeda's strategic aspirations from the north Caucasus to Pakistan. The local jihadi organizations in Central Asia and the North Caucasus would have been a critical component to this vision. But the 2001 Coalition action in Afghanistan forced prioritization in the principal jihadi theatre of Afghanistan. "The liberation of the Caucasus would constitute a hotbed of jihad...and that region would become the shelter of thousands of Muslim mujahideen from various parts of the Islamic world ...If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahideen reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahideen movements in Kashmir..." retrieved from <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Articles-Analysis/cradle.html>

to adhere to its original mission of overthrowing the Karimov regime. By 2002, two Uzbeks, Najmiddin Jalolov and Suhayl Buranov, with nom de guerre Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih and Abu Huzaifa, respectively, launched the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) with the expressed intent of overthrowing the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. Ebu Yahya stated: "After the fall of the Afghanistan Islamic Administration [Taliban] we... decided to organize groups which will conduct jihad operations against the infidel constitution of cruel Karimov in Uzbekistan. The sole aim ... was to find war-like solutions against the infidel constitution of cruel Karimov. For this aim our union was established in 2002." (Site Intelligence Group, n.d.).

Yet even with the emergence of the IJU, it is not until the 2004 attacks at Uzbekistan's Prosecutor General's Office, the U.S. Embassy and the Israeli Embassy in Tashkent that the IJU is believed to have been involved in violent action outside of Pakistan and Afghanistan. And even these incidents suggest an evolution of mission towards the presence to two typical targets of global jihadi animosity; the U.S. and Israel. While it would be another five years before the IJU would strike again in Central Asia, the IJU claimed responsibility for an attempted 2007 attack against Uzbek and U.S. interests in Germany, with subsequent arrests of three German nationals. The planned attack at the U.S. Airforce base in Ramstein and U.S. and Uzbek diplomatic buildings appear to have been focused on removal of the U.S. Karshi-Khanabad airbase in Uzbekistan, a key U.S. support base for operations in Afghanistan (Binnie & Wright, 2009). Statements from the IJU at this stage similarly indicate a broadening of organizational mission, beyond the overthrow of Karimov.

Since 2009, there have been no further known attacks either within Central Asia or on Central Asian interests by IJU, with noted incidents in the GTD exclusively occurring in Afghanistan. Similarly, for the IMU, the last know attack in Central Asia occurred in Sughd

province of Tajikistan in 2010<sup>128</sup>, in which a police barracks was attacked by suicide bombers (GTD, 2018).<sup>129</sup> Otherwise, all known attacks attributed to the IMU prior to 2018 have occurred in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Following the 2009 joint Afghan and Pakistan military initiative known as Project Falcon, the IMU's and IJU's ability to launch further violent action was severely undermined (Moore, 2010).

But there have been two other groups that have committed attacks in Central Asia since 2010: Jund al Khalifa (JaK) and Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). Both of these organizations emerged out of the common cauldron of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. JaK, which claimed bombings in the western Kazakhstan area of Atyrau in 2016, has both an opaque origin and lack of post-Atyrau visibility. JaK appears to have been formed as early as 2009, though no operational activity was noted until 2011 (Roggio & Lundquist, 2010). In a burst of media activity in fall 2011, JaK released videos of its involvement in three battles in Khost, Afghanistan (Jihadist News, 2012), the killing of five of its members of the al-Zahir Baibars Battalion by Kazakh authorities, and overt threats against the government of President Nazarbaev (Jihadist News, 2011). Rawil Kusyanov, a senior member of JaK, described the organization's operational divisions primarily in Afghanistan, but also in Europe and Kazakhstan, where links have been made to 2012 attacks in France (Jihadist News, 2012).<sup>130</sup> But other than the 2016 attacks in Kazakhstan, JaK has not been visible in

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<sup>128</sup> Just one year prior, the IMU lost its ideological leader Yuldashev in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan, further weakening the IMU.

<sup>129</sup> Tellingly, during the height of ethnic conflicts in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, where the IMU could have capitalized on the violence to mobilize ethnic Uzbeks, the IMU merely issued a statement generally encouraging jihad, without taking any visible action. See: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/imuriots.html>

<sup>130</sup> In Kusyanov's statement about JaK responsibility for the Atyrau attack, he also illuminated a previous organizational connection to Tunisian-born Belgium resident Moez Garsalloui who had been the Emir of JaK until his death in a drone strike in Pakistan in 2012. Garsalloui has been

Central Asia or abroad since 2012, the year its leader was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. If claims by Kazakhstan authorities are accurate that the final vestiges of the group were decimated by the combination of prosecution and death within Kazakhstan, then this would suggest a thin cadre of membership.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which moved from Uighur areas of Northwestern China to Taliban controlled areas in the late 1990s, proximate to the IMU, had been originally oriented towards domestic government targets in China. In 2016, a member of ETIM's rebranded organization<sup>131</sup>, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), crashed through the gates of the Embassy of China in Bishkek, subsequently detonating a bomb. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with their small Uighur populations, have been wary of TIP activities on their territory, since then, both declaring TIP as a terrorist organization.<sup>132</sup> Despite this concern, there is neither clear articulation of orientation towards the governments of Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, and nor subsequent examples of attacks in the Central Asia region. The attack on the embassy appears to be an extension of the domestic attacks on Chinese interests. Additionally, just prior to the Bishkek attack, al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released the ninth episode of al Qaeda's "Islamic Spring" series. In this episode, he encouraged Uighurs to continue violence against China, while he simultaneously praised Uighur jihadists for their robust support in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria (Jihadist News, 2016). This praise from al-Zawahiri underscores TIP's organizational activity beyond Turkestan into the principal jihadi theatres of Afghanistan/Pakistan and Syria/Iraq.

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linked to the Paris bombing.

<sup>131</sup> ETIM rebranded after the 2003 death of its leader Hasan Mahsum in a Pakistani military operation. See: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/al-qaeda-the-turkestan-islamic-party-and-the-bishkek-chinese-embassy-bombing/>

<sup>132</sup> For a listing of banned organizations see: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1071987.html>

### 4.3 CONVEYER BELTS FOR FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Mobilization of citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus has not been confined to organizations that have been implicated in documented attacks within the region; nor primarily to Central Asian organizations that were displaced or formed in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact, with estimates of Central Asian and South Caucasian foreign fighter recruitment to Syria and Iraq ranging from approximately 2,200 to 5,000 individuals at the high point between 2014 and 2016 and recruitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan of Central Asians reaching an estimated high range of 2,500 to 7,000 prior to 2015 (BAAD, 2018)<sup>133</sup>, the emphasis for mobilization disproportionately leans towards external engagement.

**Table 3:** Foreign Fighter Estimates in Syria and Iraq

Foreign Fighter Estimates in Syria and Iraq	
Azerbaijan:	100-250
Georgian:	100-250
Kazakhstan:	250-300
Kyrgyzstan:	500-863
Tajikistan:	386-1899
Turkmenistan:	360
Uzbekistan:	500-1500

**Source:** Soufan Group (2015), Neumann, 2015, Asia Plus (2017), Matveeva (2018), Radio Ozodi (2018)

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<sup>133</sup> Overall foreign fighter estimates in Pakistan have been estimated as attaining a height of 8,000 by the Pakistan government (Khan, 2014), with as many as 4,900 of these are Uzbek or broader Central Asian nationalities (Zaidi, 2013). By 2014, heavy pressure by the Pakistani military and U.S. drone strikes in Waziristan had killed scores of jihadists, diminishing these levels. Simultaneously, flows back into the Afghanistan theatre, as well as substantial migration to Syria, FTF estimates in Pakistan had decreased to under 1,000 (BAAD, 2018; Khan, 2014). A December 2018 interview with a senior Taliban commander indicated that 2-3,000 foreign fighters were in Afghanistan, primarily from China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Chechnya, Tunisia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iraq (Bruton & Yusufzai, 2018).

While the jihadi organizational focus in the Caucasus had already been northerly oriented, two simultaneous dynamics caused a further shift in engagement that affected those mobilized from the South Caucasus. First, there was notable, and at times brutal, state consolidation of authority in the North Caucasus, particularly under the leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya. Additionally, ongoing Russian political pressure and implicit threats towards Georgia and Azerbaijan to prevent jihadis sheltering and recruiting in their countries, resulted in erosion of fruitful operating theatres within Chechnya and Dagestan placing pressure on jihadi organizations. Second, the war in Syria emerged as a more compelling jihadi theatre for fighters. Not only did Syria have deep religious significance for jihadis seeking to be part of the apocalyptic battle, it was substantially drawing the focus of both al Qaeda and IS. Further, with a Sunni-Shi'a struggle unfolding and Russia providing overt support to the Assad regime, the Syrian conflict housed two key features of defensive jihad through apostates and foreign crusaders. Particularly for the Caucasus citizens, the struggle against Russian interests was an extension of the existing North Caucasus combat. Researchers at the government-affiliated Moscow State Institute of International Relations estimate that up to 3,000 jihadis have left the North Caucasus for Syria (Weiss, 2017).

The jihadi theatres in South Asia and the Middle East spawned the creation of new organizations, particularly with the expansion of the Syria front. Table 4 presents a list of the principal jihadi organizations that have been identified as having notable levels of Central Asian and South Caucasus participants.<sup>134</sup> Out of twenty jihadi organizations identified, only the IMU

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<sup>134</sup> Membership in clandestine organizations is not typically transparent. Examination of reports, news sources, and interviews provides a reasonable understanding of the main organizations attracting citizens from Central Asia and the south Caucasus. Certainly, other less known



was truly born while present in the region. Additionally, Table 5 presents organizations that have been implicated by authorities in the region but are questionable in authenticity.<sup>135</sup> For those in the top half, neither independent confirmation of their existence nor track record of action within the region or abroad has been demonstrated. The remaining organizations claim to be non-violent, despite government accusations.

The Syria front also shifted the geographic orientation of a number of existing organizations away from both South Asia and the North Caucasus. The Caucasus Emirate<sup>136</sup>, the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (operating as TIP), Katibat Imam al Bukhari, Islamic Jihad Union (operating as Ansar Jihad) and Sabri Jammāt all originated outside of Syria but have since established a presence there, with participation from citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. And while the majority of the organizations in Table 4 are affiliated or have pledged allegiance to al Qaeda, the Taliban, Jabhat al Nusra or its successor Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, direct mobilization of FTFs into Islamic State and shifts in affiliation of organizations from al Qaeda to IS has complicated the jihadi landscape.<sup>137</sup> In January 2015, IS announced the establishment of Khorasan Province focused in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That same year, IMU leadership pledged bay'a to IS stating: "Thank the Lord, following the Almighty's will we have pledged our

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organizations and brigades may have been present during this period.

<sup>135</sup> Jayshullah is included in this list, since scant information about the conviction of thirteen presumed members is the only identifiable information available about this organization. It is certainly possible that the organization existed and was decimated by these arrests. But no credible independent verification is currently available.

<sup>136</sup> In 2014, a number of key leaders in the Caucasus Emirate pledge bay'a to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and Islamic State, illustrating serious rifts within the organization.

<sup>137</sup> The Twitter statement of one ethnic Uzbek FTF who left Katibat Imam al Bukhari to join IS illustrates the tension between organizations in a call to other citizens of Transoxiana: "O emigrants and mujahideen, some emigrants accused the Islamic State with a great falsehood. By Allah, we do not see this falsehood in the Islamic State, especially in terms of disbelief-branded. We see the opposite." See: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/uzbek-fighters-who-defected-from-imam-al-bukhari-battalion-to-is-call-muslims-of-central-asia-to-join-group.html>

allegiance...to the Caliphate that has bowed to Islam...and we are now part of it." (Sharipzhan, 2015). And while IMU has not expanded into Syria, rather choosing to rebrand and focus as part of IS Khorasan, it has emerged in direct conflict with its former allies, the Taliban and al Qaeda.<sup>138</sup>

Both al Qaeda and IS, as well as their affiliates, have thus been actively operating simultaneously in the two principal jihadi theatres since 2015. Competitive pressures have, in turn, created a choice of mobilization pathways that previously did not exist for FTFs. Certainly prior to 2013, Central Asian and South Caucasus FTFs were more constrained in their options of geography, with typical engagement in the jihadi theatre proximate to their homeland. But the sheer volume of overall FTFs to Syria, by some estimates exceeding 30,000 (Soufan, 2015), suggests a greater attractive pull since flows began in earnest there after 2013. As new groups formed in expanded geographies, ethnicities from Central Asia and the South Caucasus emerged in jihadi organizations in both theatres.

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<sup>138</sup> Through an audio statement in November 2017 released through as-Sahab Media Foundation, Aymin al-Zawahiri stated: "Here I want to conclusively stress that we have no [sic] released anyone from our pledge of allegiance. We only expelled Ibrahim al-Badri and the group with him and none else, not Jabhat al-Nusra or other... The pledge between us and all those who pledged to us is a sacred, binding contract that is impermissible to be broken and must be fulfilled." (Site Intelligence)

**Table 4: Principal Jihadi Organizations with Central Asian and South Caucasus Participants**

Organization	Ethnicities from Region	Origin	Place of Origin	2018 Operations	Affiliation (known Bay'a)
Caucasus Emirate <sup>139</sup>	Kist, Azeri, other South Caucasians	2007	Chechnya	Syria	al Qaeda
Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya (CRI) <sup>140</sup>	Kist, Azeri, other South Caucasians	1991	Chechnya	Inactive 2007	al Qaeda
Dagestani Shari'ah Jamaat <sup>141</sup>	Lezgin, other South Caucasians	2002	Dagestan	Inactive 2010	Unknown
Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement <sup>142</sup>	Uighur and Central Asians	1999	China/Pakistan	Af/Pak/Syria	al Qaeda and IMU
Forest Brothers <sup>143</sup>	Lezgin	2008	Dagestan	Inactive 2009	Unknown
Islamic Int'l Peacekeeping Brigade <sup>144</sup>	South Caucasians	1998	Chechnya	Inactive 2002	al Qaeda
Islamic Jihad Union <sup>145</sup>	Uzbek and other Central Asian	2002	Af/Pak	Af/Pak/Syria	Taliban (2002); al Qaeda
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan <sup>146</sup>	Uzbek and other Central Asian Central Asians and South	1998	Tajikistan/Af	Af/Pak	Taliban (2002); IS (2015)
Islamic State <sup>147</sup>	Caucasians	2014	Iraq	Global	N/A
Jabhat al Nusra <sup>148</sup>	Central Asians	2011	Syria	Syria	al Qaeda; Independent (2017)
Jamaat Ansarullah <sup>149</sup>	Tajik	2010	Afghanistan	Afghanistan	Taliban and al Qaeda
Jama'at Kyrgyzstan Jaish al-Mahdi <sup>150</sup>	Kyrgyz	2010	Afghanistan	Inactive 2011	Taliban (2010) and al Qaeda
Jund al-Khilafah <sup>151</sup>	Central Asians	2009	Afghanistan	Af/Pak	al Qaeda
Jund al-Sham <sup>152</sup>	Kist and other South Caucasians	2012	Syria	Syria	Jabhat al Nusra (2013)
Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad <sup>153</sup>	Uzbek	2013	Syria	Syria	Jabhat al Nusra (2015) Taliban (2014) and Jabhat al Nusra
Katibat Imam al Bukhari <sup>154</sup>	Uzbek	2013	Afghanistan	Af/Syria	Nusra
Malhama Tactical <sup>155</sup>	Uzbek	2016	Syria	Syria	Jabhat al Nusra (2016)
Sabri Jammāt	Uzbek	2013	North Caucasus	Syria	IS (2014)
Sayfullakh Shishani's Jamaat	Uzbek and other Central Asians	2013	Syria	Syria	Jabhat al Nusra
Special Purpose Islamic Regiment	Kist and other South Caucasians	1996	Chechnya	Inactive 2002	Unknown

<sup>139</sup> [washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/19/chechnya-terror-groups-and-ties-al-qaeda/](http://washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/19/chechnya-terror-groups-and-ties-al-qaeda/); [gordonhahn.com/2019/05/30/once-more-](http://gordonhahn.com/2019/05/30/once-more-)

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<sup>140</sup> By the start of the second Chechen war, the nature of CRI had evolved toward jihadism, despite its earlier secular nationalist character [gordonhahn.com/2015/10/20/report-an-anatomy-of-north-caucasus-tied-jihadi-groups-in-syria-and-iraq/](http://gordonhahn.com/2015/10/20/report-an-anatomy-of-north-caucasus-tied-jihadi-groups-in-syria-and-iraq/). See:

<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/chechen-republic-ichkeria>

<sup>141</sup> [www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/19/chechnya-terror-groups-and-ties-al-qaeda/](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/19/chechnya-terror-groups-and-ties-al-qaeda/). Last known terrorist activity was 2010.

<sup>142</sup> Also known as the Turkestan Islamic Party. [www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim](http://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim)

<sup>143</sup> [www.trackingterrorism.org/group/forest-brothers](http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/forest-brothers); [www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=2791](http://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=2791). Last known terrorist activity was 2009.

<sup>144</sup> [2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/65462.pdf](https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/65462.pdf)

<sup>145</sup> Operating as Ansar Jihad in Syria under command of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham [news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/32-iju](http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/32-iju); [undocs.org/S/2019/570](http://undocs.org/S/2019/570); [longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-jihad-union-operates-in-syria.php](http://longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-jihad-union-operates-in-syria.php)

<sup>146</sup> [www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/islamic-movement-uzbekistan-imu](http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/islamic-movement-uzbekistan-imu); <https://www.rferl.org/a/imu-islamic-state/27174567.html>

<sup>147</sup> There is some anecdotal indication that Tajiks may be more oriented towards IS, than Uzbeks, which have traditionally entered al Qaeda affiliates.

<sup>148</sup> Jabhat al Nusra was absorbed into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, declaring no affiliation in 2017

[www.counterextremism.com/threat/nusra-front-jabhat-fateh-al-sham](http://www.counterextremism.com/threat/nusra-front-jabhat-fateh-al-sham)

<sup>149</sup> [central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2016/08/05/feature-02](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/08/05/feature-02)

<sup>150</sup> Also known as the Kyrgyz Army of the Righteous Ruler [fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf](http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf); <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195545.htm>

<sup>151</sup> [www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/jund-al-khilafah-targets-kazakhstan#\\_ednb4370f08da18507e927599915fd7cba314](http://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/jund-al-khilafah-targets-kazakhstan#_ednb4370f08da18507e927599915fd7cba314);  
[www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/jak.html](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/jak.html)

<sup>152</sup> [gordonhahn.com/2015/10/20/report-an-anatomy-of-north-caucasus-tied-jihadi-groups-in-syria-and-iraq/](http://gordonhahn.com/2015/10/20/report-an-anatomy-of-north-caucasus-tied-jihadi-groups-in-syria-and-iraq/)

<sup>153</sup> Also known as Jannat Oshiklari [www.trackingterrorism.org/group/katibat-al-tawhid-wal-jihad](http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/katibat-al-tawhid-wal-jihad);

[www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-jihad-union-operates-in-syr](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-jihad-union-operates-in-syr)

<sup>154</sup> [www.trackingterrorism.org/group/imam-bukhari-jamaat](http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/imam-bukhari-jamaat); [www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-jihad-union-operates-in-syria.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-jihad-union-operates-in-syria.php)

<sup>155</sup> [www.trackingterrorism.org/group/malhama-tactical](http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/malhama-tactical); [foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/)

**Table 5: Implicated Organizations with Questionable Engagement**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Ethnicities from Region</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Place of Origin</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>Affiliation (known Bay'a)</b>
<b>Questionable Existence</b>					
Bayat <sup>156</sup>	Tajik	Unknown	Tajikistan	Unknown	al Qaeda
Hezba Nahda <sup>157</sup>	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Hizb ut-Nusrat <sup>158</sup>	Uzbek	Unknown	Uzbekistan	Unknown	Unknown
Jayshullah <sup>159</sup>	Azeri	1999	Azerbaijan	Unknown	Unknown
Jihadism <sup>160</sup>	Uzbek	Unknown	Uzbekistan	Unknown	Unknown
Muslim Liberation Army	Central Asians	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
<b>Deny Involvement in Violence</b>					
Tablighi Jamaat	Central Asian Cells	1991	Global	Global	Unknown
Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islami	Central Asian Cells	1991	Global	Af/Pak	Unknown
Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan	Tajik	1990	Tajikistan	Inactive	Unknown
Akramiya <sup>161</sup>	Uzbek	Unknown	Uzbekistan	Inactive	Unknown

<sup>156</sup> <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/hezba-nahda>

<sup>157</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/170210/Inventing\\_Akromiya\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Uzbek\\_Propagandists\\_in\\_the\\_Andijon\\_Massacre](https://www.academia.edu/170210/Inventing_Akromiya_The_Role_of_Uzbek_Propagandists_in_the_Andijon_Massacre)

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/muslim-liberation-army-0>

<sup>159</sup> Thirteen presumed members of an organization called Jayshallah were convicted for plans to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Baku

See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/uzbekistan> and <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2000/2433.htm>

<sup>160</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/uzbekistan>

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/1053007.html>

## CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDY - REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA<sup>162</sup>

### 5.1 METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents research conducted between April and June 2018 focused on the primary research question: Which risk factors of mobilization to violent extremism are present in areas of known vulnerability, including Pankisi Valley (Kakheti), upper Adjara, Guria, and Kvemo Kartli regions? The research included a review of scholarly and practitioner literature, field-based qualitative research, sense-making and preliminary observations-sharing. Washington-based consultations took place on May 1-2, 2018 with U.S. Government stakeholders and knowledgeable researchers. Between May 20, 2018 and June 8, 2018, interviews were conducted in Georgia, with key informant interviews and focus group discussions taking place in the regions of Kakheti (Telavi Municipalities & Akhmeta town), Kvemo Kartli (Tsalka, Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi Municipalities), Adjara (Khulo, Batumi, Keda Municipalities), Guria (Ozurgeti, Chokhatauri Municipalities), Samtskhe-Javakheti (Adigeni Municipality), and Tbilisi.

The field portion of this study included Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Stakeholder interviews in communities identified as sending communities and non-sending communities. For the purposes of this study, sending communities are defined as those places of origin of Georgian citizens who were mobilized to fight in Syria. Non-sending communities are those with similar demographics and geographic proximity to

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<sup>162</sup> This chapter is an adaptation of a paper written by the author on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development and FHI360, *Georgia Violent Extremism Risk Assessment*, following field research in the Republic of Georgia in Spring 2018. The author is grateful for the permission and support of FHI360 and the United States Agency for International Development for use of this material in this dissertation. The author would like to express gratitude to Nino Kukhianidze, Giorgi Gogvadze, Giorgi Khechinashvili, Tamara Sirbiladze, and Naida Zecevic-Bean for their assistance in data collection.

sending communities, but with no known foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)<sup>163</sup> originating from there.<sup>164</sup> The places of origin of 62 FTFs from Georgia was identified by USAID using publicly available sources and provided to the research team.<sup>165</sup> Given the restrictions highlighted in the limitations section below, this research focused on a sub-set of the known universe of sending communities.

### 5.1.1 DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected through face-to-face stakeholder interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions across the five studied regions of Georgia. Semi-structured instruments were developed, based on pertinent information gathered through the literature review and expert consultations. Pen and Paper interview (PAPI) technique was used. Subsequent to interviews, notes were typed and uploaded to NVivo 11 software for data cleaning, analysis and pattern identification.

*Expert Consultations:* Prior to conducting field-research, 19 experts were consulted to provide context beyond the extant literature on Georgian mobilization to violent extremism. Where possible, conversations were held in person in Washington, DC on May 1-2, 2018. Some experts spoke by phone or Skype.

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<sup>163</sup> Foreign Terrorist Fighters are defined as “[I]ndividuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.” (UNSCR 2178, 2014)

<sup>164</sup> USAID provided a list of sending communities based on unclassified sources.

<sup>165</sup> While full identifying information was available on most of these FTFs, some information remained unavailable at the time of this research, including first or last names or specific geographic places or origin or residence for some. All of the known FTFs were from Kakheti, Adjara, Guria, and Kvemo Kartli. Of the known FTFs, there were 12 full or partial records identifying specific places of origin or residence across eight villages outside of the Pankisi Valley. Due to travel restrictions preventing examination of the Pankisi Valley, only these 8 sending villages were possible to study during the course of the study.

*Stakeholder Interviews:* A robust set of 53 Georgia-based consultations were conducted with community and religious leaders, academics, local officials, and civil society organizations, international donors, and international implementing organizations as well as six post-field study discussions with key national government officials, including: Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equity, Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Ministry of Education and Science, State Agency for Religious Issues, Civil Service Bureau, and Ministry of Internal Affairs. An initial set of stakeholders was identified through the literature review, consultations with DC-based experts, and input from the USAID Mission in Tbilisi. This list of stakeholders was expanded through the study team's networks, as well as through further snowballing.

*Key Informant Interviews (KII):* Nine KIIs of acquaintances of known FTFs were conducted across the sending communities. These interviews were used to ascertain information about the background, characteristics, behaviors, and perceived motivations of these deceased FTFs for participating in the conflict in Syria. Due to time and resource constraints, the scope of the KIIs was not intended to develop detailed profiles of the FTFs. Subsequent research examining detailed personal histories and pathways to mobilization would be valuable additions to this study. Rather, the KII data was used to provide additional information on both individual-level motivations and vulnerabilities to VE participation, as well as to understand whether identifiable community-factors were potential considerations for involvement with VE. The nine KIIs were used as the principal data collection for information on deceased FTFs.<sup>166</sup><sup>167</sup> Key informants were, however, only familiar with a subset of the known FTFs from the studied sending communities.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> One must certainly avoid generalizing beyond this small sample. However, as foundational research, these insights provide the basis for hypotheses and future testing.

<sup>167</sup> There was great hesitancy to discuss living FTFs. Due to human subjects' protections requirements the team did not seek not gather details about living FTFs.

<sup>168</sup> It is worth noting that in many sending communities, participants in the focus group



*Focus Group Discussions (FGD):* 41 FGDs were conducted in both sending and non-sending communities. FGD primarily consisted of single gender and a single age category, including 18-35, 36-55, and older people 56+.<sup>169</sup>

### 5.1.2 SAMPLE

The study used purposive sampling for both the identification of geographic locations and for the selection of respondents for the KIIs, Stakeholders, and FGDs.<sup>170</sup> Specifically, the study employed a chain-referral approach for identifying Stakeholders and KIIs. This non-probability sampling is particularly appropriate for KIIs, as the acquaintances of FTFs are largely a hidden or difficult to reach population. Chain-referral through known networks allowed greater trust-building and access for the research team. Potential initial Stakeholder respondents were identified through desk research and expert consultations. During the duration of the research, this initial cohort of potential respondents was expanded through ongoing chain-referral. FGDs were formed with the assistance of local community mobilizers who were known and trusted within the studied communities.

Nineteen communities were visited and studied across five regions, including Kakheti, Adjara, Guria, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, including eight sending communities.<sup>171</sup>

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discussions mentioned that they were aware of the FTFs from that particular community. This familiarity with FTFs was not a surprise, given the very small population size of the studied sending communities.

<sup>169</sup> These age groupings are consistent with groupings used in regularly-conducted Georgian national opinion surveys.

<sup>170</sup> Given the nature of the topic, identification of respondents was most efficiently achieved through chain referral. While this approach has shortcomings related to potential clustering of opinions through like-minded respondents, the need for access outweighed this potential bias.

<sup>171</sup> Due to concerns about researcher safety in the Pankisi Valley of the Kakheti region at the time of this research, it was not possible to visit the full universe of known sending communities. Please see limitations discussion below

Eleven communities that are not places of origin or residence of known FTFs were visited and examined as a point of comparison and to ascertain whether there are identifiably different factors of risk or resilience to violent extremism.<sup>172</sup> These non-sending communities were selected based on similar size, and religious and ethnic composition, as the places of origin of known FTFs.<sup>173</sup> Communities are presented in Table 6. In addition to the interviews conducted directly in the 19 selected communities, additional data was gathered from stakeholders and KIIs who were residing in neighboring larger towns, including Khulo, Marneuli, Akhmeta, Telavi, and Ozurgeti. As these larger towns served as district gathering points and areas where services were obtained, these interviews provided access to people otherwise not continuously present within the villages. As the research team was not permitted by the U.S. Embassy to travel to the Pankisi Valley, interviews were conducted in Akhmeta and Telavi with residents of the Pankisi Valley who were attending university, working, or temporarily located in these cities.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> In addition to non-sending communities identified in Kakheti, Adjara, and Kvemo Kartli, non-sending communities were selected just over the regional border of Samtskhe-Javakheti where populations of Muslim Georgians from Guria and Adjara had been displaced by ecological catastrophes during the Soviet period.

<sup>174</sup> Despite the inability to travel to the sending and non-sending communities in the Pankisi Valley, these interviews provided important context and relevance.

**Table 6:** Sending and Non-Sending Communities Included in Study

Interview Locations of Sending and Paired Non-Sending Communities Georgia					
Sending Communities			Paired Non-Sending Communities		
Region	Municipality	Village	Region	Municipality	Village
Adjara	Khulo	Didachara	Adjara	Keda	Keda
Adjara	Batumi	Batumi	Adjara	Khulo	Ghurta
Guria	Ozurgeti	Nasakirali	Samtskhe-Javakheti	Adigeni	Adigeni
Guria	Chokhatauri	Zoti	Samtskhe-Javakheti	Zarzma	Mokhe
Kakheti	Telavi	Karajala	Kakheti	Akhmeta	Sakobiano
**			Kakheti	Akhmeta	Koreti
**			Kakheti	Lagodekhi	Kabali
**			Kakheti	Lagodekhi	Saruso
**					
Kvemo Kartli	Tsalka	Artsivani	Kvemo Kartli	Tbilisi	Ponichala
	Marneuli	Kachagani		Bolnisi	Khidiskuri
	Gardabani	Kesalo		Dmanisi	Tnusi

\*\* Additional Sending Communities not included in this study due to U.S. Embassy travel restrictions: Duisi, Joqolo, Birkiani, Tsinubani, Dumasturi, Omalo, Dzibakhevi, Kvemo Khalatsani, Zemo Khalatsani, and Shua Kalatsani

### 5.1.3 LIMITATIONS

*Pankisi Valley:* Upon arriving in Georgia for the field-based interview stage of the research, the U.S. Embassy imposed a travel restriction for the Pankisi Valley, citing safety and security concerns for the author.<sup>175</sup> The resultant limitation prevented the direct visit and examination of the ten sending communities, as well as a set of paired non-sending communities in this case-rich area for jihadi mobilization,<sup>176</sup> resulting in an unexpected adjustment to the research design, sampling plan, and data collection. A number of Pankisi-specific KII, FGDs, and stakeholder interviews were conducted just outside of the Pankisi Valley in Telavi and Akhmeta, with residents from the specific sending communities and areas proximate to those communities.

<sup>175</sup> As this research was funded by USAID and the author served as a contractor of USAID, this study was bound by restrictions imposed by the U.S. Embassy.

<sup>176</sup> The Pankisi Valley is the origin of the majority of known FTFs from Georgia.

*Migration:* While some level of labor migration was expected across rural Georgian communities, the extent of outmigration was far beyond what was anticipated. Interviews quotas were ultimately met across the five regions, though the age compositions of focus group discussions differed somewhat from originally envisioned. Additionally, the absence of perspectives directly from migrants, who are frequently cited in this study as a vulnerable group to VE mobilization, was an unavoidable gap and thus presents a potential source of bias.<sup>177</sup>

*Sending vs. Non-Sending:* This research designated communities as sending or non-sending based on available information at the time of the research. It is quite likely that additional villages in Georgia are also sending communities but are simply not in the public record. Some respondents in this research mentioned awareness of other sending communities, beyond those studied.<sup>178</sup> It was not within the scope of this research to explore this topic further, not least of which out of concern for human subjects and researcher safety.

*Perceptions:* While perceptions can certainly reflect facts, they can also be far from the true situation. However, if conveyed perceptions are actually believed by the respondent and not used

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<sup>177</sup> In nearly all studied areas, community members discussed temporary seasonal outmigration to work in agriculture, such as tea and hazelnut production in Turkey. This period of cultivation, harvesting, and processing that requires substantial manual labor between late spring and early fall, is an economic attraction for young able-bodied Georgian citizens. Additionally, longer-term migration within Georgia to places like Batumi for construction work or Tbilisi for education and other opportunities, serves as a draw away from rural villages. Further, both short-term and longer-term opportunities in Russia, Kazakhstan, Europe, or elsewhere were cited as regular places of migration. The net effect of both the short-term seasonal and the long-term migration was an emptying of villages. In some sending and non-sending communities, residents described their villages as half to three-quarters empty at the time of the research.

<sup>178</sup> For example, community members in the ethnic Azeri Sunni community of Kesalo, Gardabani said they believed that as many as ten people from their community had gone to Syria. Similarly, in the non-sending ethnic Azeri community of Ponichala there were general references to “Around ten people have gone from Ponichala...” In Didichara, one community member stated “Only one person is known to have gone from here. But I have suspicion that five or six others also went. They were all calm and quiet people who were misled and manipulated.”

as a form of intentional propaganda or promotion, then they can soundly reflect the *perceived* reality for that person or group of people. Regardless of actual veracity, if something is firmly believed to be true, then for that individual, it is indeed true. Through triangulation across multiple stakeholders and community members in identifying patterns, there is greater assurance of identifying a set of common beliefs, rather than exceptional outlying comments. Certainly, direct insights from FTFs from Georgia would have further helped to inform understanding of potential motivations for involvement in VE. Nonetheless, the experience of community and minority group members, regardless of their involvement or predisposition towards violence, reveals their experiences and observation of conditions that are believed to be contributing factors to participation in VE.

## **5.2 BACKGROUND**

Georgia's experience with Salafi jihadi mobilization is placed on the backdrop of its nearly thirty years of independence. Georgia has seen progress on social and economic fronts, the building of democratic institutions, and a continuing lean towards the West. Despite a largely peaceful political transition during the 2003 Rose Revolution, this semi-presidential country, however, only first realized transition of power at the ballot box in 2012. There have been periodic challenges to this progress, including the lack of resolution to the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and armed conflict in 2008 with Russia. Integral to these internal tensions have been issues of state policy and attitudes towards ethnic and religious minority populations in Georgia. And while not all minority areas experienced conflict, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, elements of fragmentation and disunity are evident across the peripheral areas of the country stretching from the Pankisi Valley near Russia to the southern flank of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti near Azerbaijan and Armenia, respectively, to Adjara near Turkey.

This is particularly important, since Georgia is in a difficult neighborhood. Most relevant to Salafi jihadi mobilization is the proximity and easy access to Turkey, the predominant transit country for foreign fighters joining the Islamic State and a key labor migration point for citizens of Georgia. Georgia's proximity to Chechnya and the North Caucasus has also placed the citizens of Georgia next to a major jihadi incubator. Two Chechen-Russian wars saw both the displacement of thousands of Chechens into the Pankisi Valley of Georgia, it also spurred changes in culture and religious practice among the population. And shared animosity towards Russia found common allies between Chechen insurgents and some Georgians who were drawn into the battle just across the border.<sup>179</sup>

The number of Georgian citizens believed to have been mobilized to jihadi movements is modest, with estimates ranging from 50-200 (Cecire, 2017; Gogvadze, 2017; Gogvadze & Kapanadze, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2014).<sup>180</sup> Since this study identified 62 individuals through public sources, the bottom end of this range identified in the literature can be discounted. Despite this overall small number of mobilized individuals from Georgia, two factors are notable: First, out of this small number, at least five individuals rose to senior leadership roles in IS. Individuals such as Tarkhan Batirashvili, who fought under the *nom de guerre* Omar al-Shishani ascended to the role of Minister of War for IS before his death in 2016, after having previously fought in the Georgian military in the 2008 Russia War. At least four other Georgian citizens rose to leadership roles, including Murad Margoshvili also known as Muslim Abu Walid

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<sup>179</sup> According to Cecire (2014 & 2016), a high percentage of foreign fighters from Georgia had direct field military experience with Imerat Kavkaz (IK). Clifford (2015) speculated that this can be explained not only by the military experience gained during the Chechen Wars, but for a small number of fighters, including Batirashvili, general military experience or combat experience in the 2008 Georgian-Russian War may have played a role.

<sup>180</sup> In Georgia, Article 328 of the criminal code prohibits Georgian citizens from engaging in or supporting foreign terrorist organizations.

al Shishani who was Emir Junad a-Sham; Fayzullah Margoshvili, also known as Salakhuddin Shishani who was Emir Jaish al Mujahireen wal Ansar; Ruslan Machalikashvili, also known as Seyfullah al Shishani who was Emir Jaish Khalifatel Islamiya, and Abu Musa Shishani as Emir Ansar a-Sham. Second, while a maximum of 200 individuals mobilized to Salafi jihadi organizations from a country with a population of 3.7 million people is perhaps not notable, all individuals known to have been mobilized were Sunni Muslim at the time of mobilization and were originally from large Muslim minority communities along the peripheral areas of the country.<sup>181</sup> Further, out of the known Georgian citizens who were mobilized, the overwhelming majority were Kists from the Pankisi Valley. Pankisi which sits along the Chechen border has a population of merely 5,000 people. While Georgians are predominantly Orthodox Christians, approximately 398,800 Georgians are Muslims, including a large population of ethnic Azeris and ethnic Georgians, as well as small populations of Kists, and Avars.<sup>182</sup> Therefore, as a percentage of the Muslim population of Georgia and of the population of the Pankisi Valley, the number of individuals mobilized to jihadi movements is markedly more notable than as a percentage of the entire population of the country. The prevalence rate for FTF among the Muslim population in Georgia is .50 FTFs per 1,000 citizens, while that of the Kist population is 40 per 1,000.<sup>183</sup>

The initial wave of Georgian citizens<sup>184</sup> that went to Syria and Iraq in the 2012-2014 period reportedly had connections with the North Caucasus Salafi Jihadi organization Imarat Kavkaz

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<sup>181</sup> This contrasts with the FTF phenomenon in some European countries, which include up to 30 percent recent converts to Islam.

<sup>182</sup> Estimates based on Georgia's 2014 Census. At the time 83.4 percent of Georgians are Orthodox Christian. 10.7% of Georgians are Muslim. See: [http://census.ge/files/results/Census\\_release\\_ENG.pdf](http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf)

<sup>183</sup> Assuming 200 FTFs.

<sup>184</sup> This wave included Murad Margoshvili, Ruslan Machalikashvili, Fayzullah Margoshvili, and Tarkhan's brother Tamaz Batirashvili.

(IK), including battle experience in support of the insurgency against Russia (Cecire, 2017; Civil Georgia, 2018).<sup>185</sup> Both the literature and the interview corpus for this study suggests that this first wave of FTFs to Syria was motivated, in part, by a shared desire to extend the fight against Russia by combating against Russian interests under the Assad regime (Cecire, 2017; Clifford, 2015).<sup>186</sup> The crackdown by Russian security services on IK in the North Caucasus also served as a forcing function for exporting fighters to a more conducive environment in Syria (International Crisis Group, 2016; Clifford, 2018). The subsequent wave of Georgian citizens in the post 2014 period appear to have less direct connection to North Caucasus insurgency, but through familial and friendship networks have, in large part, connections to people who travelled during the first wave.

Georgia has escaped the menace of terrorist attacks within its borders, with visible jihadi mobilization primarily existing as an external dynamic. There have, however, been three notable incidents that suggest violent extremists have used Georgia as a transit area or safe haven: (1) The 2012 incident in Lopota in the Kakheti region along the border with Dagestan, in which a clash reportedly occurred between Georgian special services and alleged militants, leaving eleven militants and three government troops dead;<sup>187</sup> (2) The November 2017 incident in Tbilisi, in

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<sup>185</sup> IK is believed to have pledged allegiance to al Qaeda initially, before shifting allegiance to IS upon the death of its leader Aliashkab Kebekov in 2015 (International Crisis Group, 2016).

<sup>186</sup> In a small set of stakeholder comments in the study, respondents hinted at Saakashvili's UNM for responsibility for the first wave of people going to Syria, by either turning a blind eye to participation, since those FTFs were fighting in opposition to Assad and against Russian interests. One respondent from Pankisi said: "The UNM was supportive of the Salafis during their time, because of funding flows from Arabs. 70% of Arab money went to UNM. 30% went to Pankisi. Arab guys joked that they could walk into the Ministry of Interior without even knocking on the door."

<sup>187</sup> Details on this incident remain vague and conflicting, with Georgia claiming that Russia provoked an attack on its sovereign territory, while Russia accused Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) of recruiting and training North Caucasus militants in Lopota.



which IS operative and suspect in the 2016 Istanbul attack, Akhmet Chatayev, was killed while he and associates battled with Georgian security forces after being discovered hiding in Tbilisi; and (3) The follow-up security operation in December 2017 in the Pankisi Valley that netted five individuals accused of harboring and supporting the violent extremists connected with Akhmet Chatayev. Additionally, two video posting in 2015 on a pro-IS social media channel of four western Georgian nationals directly threatening attacks against Georgia and of an additional western Georgian national threatening the Orthodox patriarchy, raised concerns in Georgia of an evolution of jihadi focus from the Syrian battlefield to the homeland, particularly among Muslim ethnic Georgians (Janashia, 2015; Kapanadze, 2015). As of the writing of this study, this feared evolution in jihadi focus had not transpired. It is important to note that there is no known video evidence of direct threats against the Georgian people, government<sup>188</sup> or Orthodox Church from FTFs from the Pankisi Valley, the overwhelmingly largest cohort of FTFs from Georgia.<sup>189</sup>

### **5.3 FINDINGS: DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY**

While some respondents were hesitant to openly reveal specific knowledge of Salafi jihadi mobilization in Georgia, there was broad familiarity that Georgian citizens had gone to Syria. For those who knew FTFs, the variety of responses from family, acquaintances, and community members suggests that, in many cases, they are still struggling to make sense of why their loved ones would go to Syria. There was regional variation in how respondents interpreted the risk. In areas outside of Kakheti, home to the Pankisi Valley, respondents typically described the

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<sup>188</sup> In spring 2019, the father of a young man killed by Georgian security services in a raid in the Pankisi Valley was arrested for making terrorist threats against the Georgian Government.

<sup>189</sup> Certainly, the limited incidence of threat does not allow us to draw any firm conclusions on this information. But as Gobronidze and others have noted, since Adjara Muslims were perceived to be more integrated than other Muslims in Georgia, any threat from this population had a disproportionate weight on perception of stability.

participants in jihadi organizations as principally ethnic Kists, implying that it was a localized phenomenon centered in the Pankisi valley. Indeed, there was recognition that there are examples of FTFs from other parts of Georgia; yet the level of concern regarding vulnerability of those other regions was far more muted than for Pankisi. The public information on the known FTFs in the eight studied sending communities outside of Pankisi were limited to single cases in most communities, with up to three in Karajala in Kvemo Kartli.<sup>190</sup> Perhaps as a function of social desirability bias, sending community members were often quick to point out that if a person had left their community to go to Syria it was a unique case and not representative of a broader issue in the community.

The sub sections below place findings into eight dimensions of vulnerability focused on religious and ethnic minorities, including: Group grievance; absence of governance; strains on identity; distrust in government; migration exposure; virtual and physical reach of jihadi organizations; kinship networks and community solidarity; and need for self-actualization.

### **5.3.1 SELF-ACTUALIZATION AS INCENTIVE**

The literature theorizes that anticipated rewards may be an important motivation for Georgians choosing to participate in jihadi organizations, particularly as a result of the depth of rural poverty in Georgia. A study by Sadzaglishvili & Partskhaladze (2014) included 158 people of all ethnic groups in the Pankisi Valley, and all cited high unemployment as the main problem facing the community, though did not directly link this with motivations for mobilization to jihadi organizations. With high poverty rates in the Pankisi Valley, foreign distribution of humanitarian assistance provided a means of survival for refugees from the Chechen wars and their Kist host

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<sup>190</sup> Two additional females were mentioned as ISIS brides, beyond the three known FTFs.

communities. Previous research has noted that the spread of Salafism via Chechnya into the Pankisi Valley was facilitated by the distribution of this humanitarian assistance (Tsulaia, 2011). Multiple respondents identified the common thread of proselytizing to economically and socially receptive communities, exposure to ethnic brothers in arms fighting just across the border, and a strong desire for outmigration for economic opportunity appears as a potential vector of vulnerability for individuals drawn into jihadi organizations. The literature equally supports this observation (Gogvadze & Kapandaze, 2015; Cecire, 2015; Zarandia, 2016).

However, in the research presented here, while rural poverty is endemic in many of the areas of origin of FTFs, there is a discernable range in levels of poverty among the sending communities that casts doubt on the speculation that poverty or the need for income as a consistent factor in jihadi mobilization of Georgian citizens. Beyond the community level, the interview data shows no firm pattern of extreme poverty connected with any of the known FTFs. Nor, as described earlier, is there a uniform pattern of labor migration or employment challenges described by acquaintances or community members familiar with the FTFs. Among the known FTFs included in this study, levels of wealth were described as ranging from poor to average. Some FTFs were known to have sought employment outside of their home communities, prior to departing for Syria, including in neighboring Turkey, while others did not.<sup>191</sup>

Despite this, there remains a strong belief among community members that money, along with other incentives and forms of persuasion, have been used as lures for recruits. It is certainly possible that some FTFs saw participation in the Syria conflict as a vehicle for earning money or paying off debt. But more interestingly were descriptions of known incentives or grooming

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<sup>191</sup> Among the known FTFs from Georgia, the age during participation or at time of death appears to range from 17 to 56, with the majority of FTF ages clustering in their 20s and 30s.

mechanisms with FTFs that offered them, for example, a conduit to receive additional religious education abroad, such as Istanbul, or to acquire access to sports equipment and mentorship to train as a professional athlete, in Batumi.<sup>192</sup> This raises a possibility that, regardless of wealth level, incentives might be a powerful motivator if they help to achieve personal ambitions.

Further supporting this finding were comments by family and friends of FTFs that identified advanced and differentiated skills among this cohort. Specifically, language ability, mathematics skills, memorization and recitation capability, advanced information technology and computer knowledge, and athletic prowess. The picture that is painted also hints at ambitions that are outsized for the small rural communities of their origins. Comments from acquaintances almost uniformly reflect surprise that these people joined a jihadi organization, given their talents and demeanor. When those aspirations are unrealized through traditional channels, people may pursue other options. And just as companies seek an appropriate workforce and set of skills for their needs, Salafi jihadi organizations need certain technical skills beyond foot soldiers and cannon fodder. The story of Batirashvili and his rise to prominence in IS after his dismissal from the Georgian army following his successful service in the 2008 Russian-Georgian War is the quintessential example of talent meeting ambition meeting mobilization in the Georgian FTF context.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> In the ethnic Georgian Muslim community of Didichara, Adjara, community members discussed wrestlers and sportsmen being at risk of recruitment to violent extremism, because of their physical prowess. The 2013 arrest in Batumi of a member of Georgia's Greco-Roman wrestling national junior team and former Didichara on charges related to terrorism served as an example.

<sup>193</sup> One potential perceived pathway for achieving self-fulfillment is by emulating local heroes in achieving something bigger than oneself. As stories circulate and grow in lore of Georgian minorities differentiating themselves on the battlefield in Syria, such as Batirashvili and the other prominent Georgian field commanders, the glorification and even their infamy can serve as a factor for youth.

Yet further examples emerged through the interviews for this research, with the implication that when Georgian citizens are not self-actualized and perceive themselves as undervalued, participation in jihadi organizations can emerge as a viable option.

One stakeholder described an FTF from Adjara: *“One person from Adjara was a member of the Labor Party, then the Republican Party and other parties. He could not find his place in political life. He also could not establish himself in Muslim communities as well. He went to Syria for self-realization.”*

Another described an acquaintance who presumably became an FTF: *“[He] was a professional sniper in the Georgian army and was kicked out of the army in 2012 - they sent him home. Later he went to Turkey. He spent 7 months there. Nobody knows what he did there. When he returned home he was limping. He didn't have problems with his foot before.”*

This introduces three interconnected possibilities: (1) Some FTFs, particularly outside of the Pankisi Valley, have skills and ambitions that were outsized for their rural communities; (2) Mobilization to jihadi organizations sometimes provides a pathway to receiving the support and affirmation needed for self-actualization; and (3) Salafi jihadi organizations intentionally recruited some individuals from Georgia, based on their advanced and differentiated skillsets. Importantly, the interview data suggests that there have been geographic differences in recruitment patterns. The density of FTFs from the Pankisi valley likely indicates a broad net for recruitment, based on family and friend connections, while smaller, geographically distributed cohort of recruits in Western Georgia suggests potentially more selective recruitment.

Table 7 on the following page presents three short vignettes on FTFs described by family and friends during this study that provide texture to these possibilities. It is important to recognize that these examples touch on only a small sample of the known FTFs. Yet, the picture that emerges potentially provides us with some early insights on potential aspects of vulnerability.

**Table 7: Georgian Foreign Terrorist Fighter Vignettes**

**FTF Example 1**

*Deceased FTF 1 was described in conversations that took place in his place of origin, Didichara, Adjara and in his place of subsequent residence in Artsivani, Kvemo Kartli. In both places, people described his family as a good family of average income, “neither rich nor poor.” His family had moved to Artsivani from Didichara in 2004, though his grandparents still remain in Didichara currently. He subsequently moved to Batumi, where his parents still reside. One acquaintance in Artsivani said that his family moved to Batumi because “they could see that their son had changed and tried to talk some sense into him.”*

*He was described in Artsivani as having a rich social life with many friends and an active interest in soccer. He was married and had one child. Some believe that FTF 1 was a recruiter in western Georgia, with close ties to Ayub Borchashvili, the accused IS recruiter from the Pankisi Valley in eastern Georgia.*

*People who knew him at an early age and people who knew him as a young man described an exceptionally talented person with high ambitions. One acquaintance mentioned an elementary school event where FTF 1 stood up at an assembly and said that he wanted to be President of Georgia. He was described as a hard worker and an avid reader in both places of residence. While residents of Didichara described the village as an observant religious community, FTF 1 stood out as knowing the Quran by heart by elementary school, with a high proficiency in Arabic. Beyond language abilities, his particular talent was mathematics. He was admitted to the prestigious Komarov School of Physics and Mathematics in Tbilisi.*

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**FTF Example 2**

*Deceased FTF 2 was described by respondents in his home village of Nasakirali, Guria, as well as in Batumi, Adjara where he lived for more than ten years. Family and acquaintances noted his talent with information communications technology (ICT). It was revealed that FTF 2 was so talented with computers that as a young man he was able to hack into the website of the Georgian Ministry of Interior. An act for which he was subsequently arrested. After joining Islamic State, this FTF used his talents to become the IT manager for all important ISIS web sites.*

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**FTF Example 3**

*Conversations in Kakheti revealed that three ethnic Kist Telavi University students from the Pankisi Valley had gone to Syria and joined IS. One of these students, deceased FTF 3, was described by faculty as a “cheerful and kind guy.” Another respondent described him as a “calm, polite, and disciplined guy” who had good relations with other students.*

*One of his classmates spoke about his advanced abilities at mathematics and physics and that he had studied IT at Telavi University. A person who was familiar with the three students mentioned that none of them could afford to pay their own tuition at the university.*

*One friend stated that FTF 3 had travelled to Turkey at least one time, before joining IS. When he ultimately went to Syria, he went with his cousin and joined Batirashvili’s camp. Family members believed he was going with his cousin for work in Turkey.*

### 5.3.2 GROUP GRIEVANCE: DISCRIMINATION, INJUSTICE, AND STIGMATIZATION

This study reveals a clear pattern of group grievance resulting from perceptions of discrimination, injustice, and stigmatization. The volume of comments emerged through discussions with male and female Muslims in all studied geographies of Georgia and notably in the precise areas of known FTF origin.<sup>194</sup> Community members and stakeholders from sending and non-sending communities, including the non-sending region of Samtskhe-Javakheti were comparably articulate of their frustrations. Muslims and Christians interviewed for this study stated that the law allows for the freedom of worship and that generally, the worship of religion is not directly hindered.<sup>195</sup> As conversations with Muslim respondents deepened, however, more anecdotes of frustrations and indirect interference emerged, including a perception that Muslims are generally seen as suspicious in Georgia as potential terrorists. Respondents described how the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the Administration of All Muslims of Georgian, is

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<sup>194</sup> Georgian border regions, specifically Adjara, Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kakheti, and Guria with their large minority ethnic and religious groups, have experienced socio-economic conditions and issues of inequity through the lens of majority versus minority, urban versus rural, and center versus periphery. The literature hints at inequity, relative deprivation, and discrimination as tension points among these communities (Trier & Turashvili, 2007; Gogvadze, 2017). And as reflected in global narratives of separatist movements and violent extremists, galvanizing attitudes around fracture points can assist in mobilizing individuals to violent action. This raises an important question of the extent to which individual life experiences in their geographic places of origin contribute to pathways for mobilization to VEOs. While not necessarily determinant of violent extremist participation alone, a body of global literature has suggested that perceptions that a group of people has been historically victimized by others, can be contributory to group grievance and assumed risk factors for violent extremism (Van Metre, 2016; Denoeux & Carter, 2009).

<sup>195</sup> This research predates the changes to the Georgian constitution that took effect in December 2018, providing for “absolute freedom of religion,” as well as the separation of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the state. At the time of this research, the Georgian Dream had circulated draft constitutional amendments that appeared to limit of freedom of religion on national security grounds, perceived to be targeting Muslims. This draft was subsequently withdrawn.



seen as the main vehicle for control over Muslims. This control over Imams, exercised principally through the payment of salaries and the failure to differentiate between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, undermines confidence in the official structures and religious authorities, opening the path for some to pursue private worship in unofficial mosques or to cease practicing.

Generally, community members described decent relations with people of different ethnicities and different religions within communities or in neighboring communities at a personal level, attributing difficulties to manipulation by the Orthodox Church.<sup>196</sup> But the personal one-on-one relations with neighbors is juxtaposed with perceptions of the Orthodox church and what is seen as its intentional suppression of other religions in Georgia. Descriptions of the hand-in-glove relationship between the Orthodox church and the state were widespread. While freedom of religion is protected in the constitution for all, the preeminent role of the Church is reflected in its integral relationship with the state identity (Popovaite, 2018). But the Church is not only viewed as superior in terms of numbers of believers or in relation to its guaranteed annual budget, but also in its behind-the-scenes stirring of tensions between Christians and Muslims and efforts to minimize the role and presence of Muslims.<sup>197</sup>

While the ethnic Azeris in Kakheti and Kvemo Kartli focused their frustrations on lack of political voice, partially as a result of linguistic separation, the Western Georgian Muslims described a more systemic set of conditions of discrimination at the workplace and in society.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> There were some encouraging examples of positive interaction between Christians and Muslims. In Nasakirali in Guria, a sending community, respondents described how the minaret of the new mosque was constructed without loudspeaker for the call to prayer as respect to the Christians. Similarly, the Orthodox church does not have a bell-tower. There were stories of Christians and Muslims working together to repair a church and mosque.

<sup>197</sup> The Georgian state budget allocates \$12.5 million annually to the Orthodox Church. \$2 million is allocated and shared by the remaining religious institutions (opendemocracy.net).

<sup>198</sup> "Tatar" is used as a derogatory moniker for Muslims, a particular irritant to ethnic Georgian Muslims.

For Muslims in Adjara or Guria and those displaced by ecological catastrophe during the Soviet period from Western Georgia to other places like Samtskhe-Javakheti, they are wholly ethnic Georgians who speak Georgian as their native language. Sharing ethnicity and language with the majority population results in an even greater expectation of full integration in a pluralistic democratic society. When those expectations are unmet, frustration is palpable.

The greatest concentration of comments on work-place discrimination, particularly among government positions, came from respondents in Adjara. There were descriptions of preferential hiring or promotion given to Orthodox Christians, including those hired from areas outside of Adjara to fill empty slots, including teaching. Respondents discussed both overt and subtle pressure to convert to Christianity, as a pathway to achieving employment. In the non-sending community of Keda, women in a focus group discussion recounted the case of a young man who had been killed in the Georgian military because he was circumcised. They stated that this was discouraging Muslims from circumcision. And pressure to convert was not only present in the workplace, according to community members. In a few examples, such as in Adigeni in Samtskhe-Javakheti, community members described how Orthodox teachers shamed Muslim students and pressured them to convert. In Khulo in upper Adjara, the presence of a school of higher education was described as a proselytizing vehicle for the government to convert poor Muslims to Christianity.<sup>199</sup> One stakeholder in Tbilisi noted that “The nationalism of public-school teachers is overwhelming: teachers believe that it’s their mission to convert Muslim Georgians into Christianity.” Another respondent from Samtskhe-Javakheti stated that

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<sup>199</sup> This school of higher education was described as the first of its kind opened in the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev years.

“Orthodox priests are leading religion classes in public schools and telling our kids to convert to Christianity. We don’t like it. We don’t like when priest is calling our kids infidels in front of entire class.”

Indeed, the phenomenon of conversion in Georgia since independence is well-documented. With Muslims in Adjara reportedly comprising a majority of the population in 1991, but by the 2014 census comprising approximately thirty percent (Pelkhams, 2002; Census.GE, 2014). Further mass outmigration from the Pankisi Valley since the mid-2000s has further dwindled that population to a mere 5,000 people. Some have argued that conversion is not only a function of intentionality by the government, but also a personal decision to return to the religion of forefathers, before the Ottoman empire captured western Georgia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>200</sup>

The most telling aspect of shared frustration and dissonance are the prominent examples of grievances from one location in Georgia repeated in Muslim communities in other distant parts of Georgia. One would expect to hear the retelling of local stories within the general vicinity of the incident.<sup>201</sup> But the conveyance of a common narrative of frustration in disconnected geographic areas suggests not only a strong network of communication, but also a strong sense of shared community among Muslim populations in the different regions of the country. Foremost

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<sup>200</sup> In the mountainous sending community of Didichara in Adjara region, Muslim respondents pointed out the direction of an ancient Christian religious site high on a peak near the village, dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>201</sup> Two examples of a localized stories that were not repeated more broadly: In Marneuli, Kvemo Kartli, community members mentioned that the Orthodox Church had placed crosses at the entrance to every village, including Muslim villages. In Keda, the mosque in which the focus group discussion was held, had previously been in disrepair. Community members had failed to convince the government to repair the mosque. The community, therefore, raised funds independently. Upon completing the repairs, they were subsequently fined by the government for having repaired the mosque without a permit.

among these was the story of the Muslim community's inability to secure permission from the Adjara municipal government to build a new mosque in Batumi. Community members and stakeholders described how the government has been blocking permission based on, what they believe to be, religious discrimination. Similarly, the story of someone nailing a pig's head to a madrassah in Kobuleti, without any arrests being made, was retold in the west, east and northern regions of the country.

Across the minority communities in each of the five regions, ethnic minorities and Muslims described under-representation in appointed and elected political office and limited influence and political voice in political life.<sup>202</sup> Election year 2012 and the change in government from the United National Movement to the Georgian Dream emerged in a substantial number of interviews as a perceived point of deterioration in the general situation in the country and the rights of Muslims. This change in government is also the beginning of the first wave of Muslim Georgians leaving the country to participate in the fight in Syria. While it is not possible to attribute the cause of FTF departures to changes in perception of Muslim rights, the timing is noteworthy as a potential contributing factor for general outmigration.

Kists from Tbilisi and stakeholders familiar with the Pankisi context described frustration with the policy of the Georgian Dream in not engaging with Salafis in Pankisi, limiting their outreach in the valley exclusively to traditional Muslim leaders, such as the Council of Elders. This approach was described consistently as a stark departure from the Saakashvili administration, which actively sought cooperation with the Salafi community. Across the country, including the

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<sup>202</sup> For Azeris, the situation is more profound. Lack of Georgian language skills is isolating them from full access not only to government or positions in Government, it is also discouraging them from accessing police and the courts. Even on the outskirts of Tbilisi in Ponichala, where one would expect a higher level of Georgian language proficiency, most residents interviewed were unable to converse in Georgian.

Pankisi Valley, the Georgian Dream began implementing stricter border controls, in response to the FTF phenomenon. Muslim respondents described undermining of their civil liberties when being hassled or delayed in crossing the border to Turkey or boarding an airplane in Tbilisi, because of their religion. A sense of marginalization by state authorities under the Georgian Dream emerged from the interviews. The only clear exception in opinion was found in interviews in the ethnic Azeri communities. Given their familiarity with civil liberties in Azerbaijan through information conveyed by relatives, ethnic Azeris in Georgia described being grateful for the extent of civil liberties that they have available to them.

Despite the plethora of minority grievances articulated by respondents in both sending and non-sending communities, no separatist sentiments were expressed in any conversation during this research. And respondents frequently pointed out that FTF video threats that emerged in 2015 towards Georgia were not well-received among the Muslim communities in the country, suggesting a bulwark against attacks. Ironically, many conversations revealed a strong sense of national loyalty, even in the face of frustrations with governance. Many participants in this study, whether ethnic Kist, Avar, Azeri, Georgian, Christian or Muslim, conveyed their love of Georgia. Despite the hardships and the perceived inequities, respondents painted a picture of Georgia being their home, being quick to caveat critical opinions with positive aspects of life.

### **5.3.3 STRAINS ON IDENTITY**

At the start of each interview for this study, open questions about respondent perceptions of the current stability and security situation facing Georgia were posed, without prompting the respondents toward jihadi mobilization. Certainly, the FTF phenomenon emerged organically. But notably, issues that arose from these conversations focused on a broader set of current problems driven by manipulative forces and loss of agency. While jihadi mobilization was

articulated as an important issue for the country, it coexists in the perceptions of respondents with other concerns centered on manipulation of vulnerable populations. Thus, jihadi movements, such as al Qaeda and IS, are largely perceived to have manipulated young ethnic and religious minorities to become FTFs. Similarly, the polarization of Georgian society along support or rejection of a European future and along liberal or conservative social values is perceived to be a product of Russian misinformation as a means of sowing seeds of discontent between generations and between urban and rural communities. Finally, right-wing nationalism, a concern articulated across the studied area, is described as a political foil supported by a confluence of divisive narratives from elements within the Georgian State, the Orthodox Church, and Russia.

These perceived manipulative forces coexist in a complex polarization process that is manifesting through competing visions for the future of Georgia. Some voices are advocating for a greater embrace of Europe, both politically and socially, while others see this European path as fraught with liberal democratic values that differ from the traditional Georgian identity. A number of respondents described the active involvement of Russia in disseminating “fake news” to dissuade the population from a European path. And some respondents saw the active hand of the Orthodox Church and actors in the Georgian government in messaging that aligns with Russia and right-wing ultra nationalist groups. This messaging on the immorality of the West also overlaps with similar narratives conveyed by Salafi jihadi organizations globally, raising concern of a reinforcing mechanism. Areas of large ethnic and religious minority communities were described by one respondent as a potential flash point for either those who see their differences as a threat to Georgian national identity or those within the communities who see their ethnic or religious identities under attack.

A prominent theme that is emerging from this polarization is an expression of Turkophobia, including stories that Turkey has designs on taking back control over Western Georgia, once NATO expands. Even the presence of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), sometimes the only acknowledged international organization operating in the studied communities, is considered as indicative of Turkish soft power. And for those who see Georgia through the lens of the ultra-nationalists, there appears to be broader xenophobia directed towards Muslim immigrants, who are perceived to be threatening Georgia's identity by funding the expansion of Islam through mosque and boarding school construction<sup>203</sup> and the spread of more prominent conservative attire in places with increased Salafi adherence.

Beyond attire and construction of infrastructure, there was notable concern from both Orthodox respondents and non-Salafi Muslims that Salafism is contributing to a mindset and enabling environment that creates a vulnerability to join jihadi organizations. Respondents described the spread of Salafism among certain populations, particularly the Kists, as a pro-active religious agenda by external actors and internal manipulators. Their responses suggest a desire for isolating this spreading agenda to shield their communities from identity-changing pressures. Salafism was described as an extreme interpretation of Islam, with frequent usage of the term "radical," suggesting, at one end of the scale, highly conservative non-indigenous religious practice and at the other end of the scale equating it directly with terrorism.<sup>204</sup> Certainly, there is a

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<sup>203</sup> Ten stakeholders from Tbilisi, Khulo, Batumi, Adigeni, and three focus group conversations in Didichara, Adigeni, and at the Batumi mosque each discussed the growth of Muslim boarding schools, often referred to as Madrassahs. The stated intent of these schools is to provide standard academic education, paired with Quranic education. The schools are reportedly attractive to poor Muslims, since there are no tuition fees. The respondents' concern that that these boarding schools may be conduits for Salafi jihadi indoctrination and recruitment, through Turkish financing and influence, demonstrates the fear of "the other."

<sup>204</sup> The terms Salafi and Wahhabi were often conflated and interchangeably used, with clear preference for usage of the latter as an umbrella term.

lingering stigma that plagues the Pankisi Valley, where much of the Salafi growth has occurred and where much of the FTF sending communities are located. The broad public perception is that the Pankisi Valley was ungoverned by central authorities, with lawlessness, drug smuggling, and the presence of Chechen insurgents in the 1990s and 2000s. And that the spread of Salafism and the link to jihadi mobilization are simply extensions of an endemic perception that Kists are a people prone to radical behavior and violence.

Further, the seemingly inexorable growth of Salafism is engendering cultural changes and generational differences in the few places where it is present. Pankisi is experiencing this to the greatest extent, but examples of Salafi communities were observed and discussed in Kvemo Kartli, as well. Where these cultural differences emerge, it is already giving rise to tensions.<sup>205</sup> Over time, this combative posture against the other, risks accentuating isolation and misunderstanding. And where Salafis are perceiving unfair targeting due to their specific beliefs, emergent frustrations will be difficult to resolve through institutions that are already perceived to be biased against them.

As a cautionary point, equating a form of religious adherence to the cause of violence is highly problematic. Not only do the number of global adherents to Salafism vastly eclipse the number of those who have been involved in violent extremism, there is an absence of firm evidence that this Salafi adherence predisposes individuals to violence. Nonetheless, while not all Salafis are jihadis, the known FTFs from Georgia are believed to have joined Salafi jihadi organizations and thus are presumed to be at least partially indoctrinated in the Salafi adherence.

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<sup>205</sup> Respondents described how the inflows of Salafi adherents to the Pankisi Valley, most notably as Chechen war refugees and through proselytizing of foreigners, as well as post-Soviet opportunities to travel and study abroad in places like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, have had a profound effect on the religious and cultural landscape of the Pankisi Valley.



### 5.3.4 DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT

One of the noted enabling environment characteristics for the presence of violent extremism in the extant literature is the presence of weak governance, with security services that are incapable or unwilling to protect the country (Denoeux & Carter, 2009). In Georgia, however, respondents largely described a strong central government in the context of security, that has made deliberate steps to control the border from people travelling to participate in violent extremism and preventing FTFs from returning to the homeland. There is wide familiarity of the Government of Georgia's adoption of article 328 of the criminal code penalizing people who support violent non-state actors abroad, suggesting that the Government has done a good job communicating the legislative and security efforts. Similarly, the arrest of high-profile recruiters, such as Ayub Borchashvili, have undoubtedly had a dampening effect on travel to jihadi conflict zones. Some respondents intimated that recruiters, while not all arrested, are being observed by the Georgian State Security Service and have gone to ground. Thus, the descriptions of the central government's security capacity largely indicate a perception of state monopoly over coercive power and control.

While the security apparatus is perceived as effective in quelling threats to the state, including Salafi jihadi mobilization, two specific security actions related to terrorism were identified by a substantial number of respondents as either ham-handed or deceptive approaches by the government. The first was the effort to capture known IS supporter and suspected architect of the 2016 Istanbul airport attack, Akhmet Chataev. The one-legged, one armed Chechen was living in the center of Tbilisi, purportedly unknown to authorities until a tip revealed his whereabouts. Authorities attempted to arrest him in Tbilisi in November 2017, when a shoot-out ensued, resulting in the death of Chataev and his four associates. Respondents, particularly from Kakheti and Kvemo Kartli, found it incredulous that the state security services

were unaware of such a high profile and easily identifiable character living in the center of the capital city, prior to receiving a tip. The second security action of note was the death of 19-year old Temirlan Machalikashvili, during a Georgian special security operation in the Pankisi Valley. His death sparked concern among a number of respondents in Tbilisi, Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli, and Guria. In all but one comment on the Machalikashvili case, respondents criticized the Georgian security services for not only killing the young man rather than arresting him, but for its lack of effective and clear communication to the public following the incident. In both the Machalikashvili and the Chataev cases, respondents viewed the State's lack of transparency around these events as intentional deception.

Beyond security, a plethora of statements across sending and non-sending rural communities indicate a belief that local government is weakly funded and not empowered by the central government to address many of the needs of the citizens in communities. And that the central government remains disconnected from the realities on the ground. Repeated comments emerged about the presence of government officials only during the election cycle, as they sought votes from constituents. While these issues may be present throughout Georgia, regardless of the ethnic or religious composition of communities, these respondents are reflecting their opinions from their vantage point. Frequently, connections were drawn between the absence of government support and the fact that these communities were largely minority communities. This casts a shadow of distrust towards the government and a perception of relative deprivation among the populations in these ethnic and religious minority communities.

### 5.3.5 MIGRATION AS A VECTOR FOR VULNERABILITY

Vast numbers of residents of the sending and non-sending communities in Georgia, including minors, have left their villages for long and short-term work and education in more urban settings of Batumi and Tbilisi or abroad, including in Turkey doing manual labor principally in the tea and hazelnut plantations.<sup>206</sup> Similarly, time spent working or studying in Turkey or rural to urban migration within Georgia features in a number of the descriptions of FTFs. Certainly, migration domestically or abroad is a phenomenon that involves far more people than just those who are lured into Salafi jihadi organizations. While it is clear that Georgian citizens passed through Turkey en route to Syria, the evidence is less clear, from both the interviews and from the existing literature, whether those Georgian citizens were already working in Turkey when they decided to go to Syria or whether Turkey was simply a transit hub for a decision that they had already made earlier. There is much supposition in the interview texts that at least some FTFs started their journeys as migrant workers. And that the harsh conditions in Turkey and the isolation from both Turkish society and from their home communities served as a push towards participation in Syria.

Some respondents reflected on how economic migrants, while simply seeking to earn money abroad, may have thus been placed in a location, social group, or mental state that made them more vulnerable to targeting by Salafi jihadi recruiters. In Adjara and Guria, in particular, respondents discussed how people might arrive in just such a situation, by enduring difficult labor conditions and harsh treatment by supervisors or others in Turkey. One respondent who worked

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<sup>206</sup> While overall migration of Georgians still includes Russia as the primary location, despite tensions between the two countries, Turkey is the third most important location, after Greece. While data on origin of migration by religion is not available, interviews indicate that Georgian Muslims prefer Turkey for economic migration, due to proximity and ease of access. See: [http://census.ge/files/results/Census\\_release\\_ENG.pdf](http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf)

in Turkey over 9 years, for example, stated that “When I worked in a factory in Turkey, the conditions were horrific...There was a guy that offered me \$800 per month to go to Syria for a job.”<sup>207</sup>

The process of migration, whether to Turkey or to the cities of Georgia, separates people from the community support structures that are in place back in their home communities. The guidance of parents, family, home communities and trusted religious leaders is absent, as young people spend months or years away. One respondent described the arrival in more urban settings for these people from the countryside as a moment when they first encounter negative influences such as drugs and gambling. Further, both parents and teachers in FTF sending communities in Georgia described how people in small rural communities lack the necessary soft skills and critical thinking skills to navigate criminal or violent extremist overtures.

### **5.3.6 COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY AND IDENTITY FUSION**

Both the literature and the interviews suggest that family and friendship connections matter when it comes to mobilization decisions toward Salafi jihadi organizations. In one study on the Pankisi Valley, 44.8% of the 29 studied foreign fighters had a family member that also fought in Syria or Iraq for a Salafi jihadi group (Clifford, 2018). But persuasion by blood relatives is only one form of connection that appears to matter for mobilization. Both Clifford and Cecire refer to

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<sup>207</sup> Descriptions of animosity towards Turks and their poor treatment of migrant Georgians echoed similar descriptions from migrant Central Asians and their experiences in Russia. In the Central Asian migration experience, there is supposition that a portion of FTFs emerged from the social exclusion and marginality produced in the squalor of migrant life (Tucker, 2015). As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Rosenblum noted in testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, “*Research suggests that the vast majority of Central Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq are recruited while outside their own countries, mostly while in Russia, where millions of them live as migrant workers.*” See: <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20150616/103623/HHRG-114-FA14-Wstate-RosenblumD-20150616.pdf>

“fictive kinships” or the concept of creating bonds of affinity based on common beliefs and ideology in the Georgian context (Cecire, 2015; Clifford, 2018). Family and acquaintances of known FTFs in this study reveal that at least in a few cases, points of aggregation, such as universities or sports clubs, reflect that extant affinity groups may be an avenue for mobilization of clusters through contact and familiarization. The shared experience of intense education or athletic competition likely helps to form interpersonal bonds, particularly when those individuals are already from a minority group. People in sending communities ascribed a shared duty to protect Muslims in Syria as a unifying motivation to join Salafi jihadi organizations. While some expressions of this shared duty appeared to reflect overt peer pressure, the frequent use of words like “convinced” or “persuaded” reflects a belief that there was an indoctrination process of these future FTFs that resulted in them seeing their role as part of a shared commitment to defending Muslims under siege. Descriptions from respondents suggested that FTFs experienced a form of identity fusion with the global *Umma* and those seeking to protect them (Swan, et al, 2012). One respondent described comments from his friends who were already in Syria: “They stated that jihad was a responsibility. ‘If you are not going to Syria, then you are not a real Muslim.’” Other respondents identified pride and self-fulfillment in knowing that you have done your duty to defend the faith and religious community. Another respondent stated that: “Nobody goes [to Syria] because of money. They are Muslim. They respect their religion and that’s why they fight.”

The scope of this study did not include an examination of online communications and vulnerabilities associated with Salafi jihadi organizations. However, the topic was described in all geographic areas as a critical concern, both as it relates to direct communication from family members and friends already mobilized in Georgia as a source of recruitment and as it relates to broader social media messaging and videos that slowly acclimate viewers to both Salafism and a

jihadi mindset. The 2015 video threats by a limited number of FTFs while abroad shows one aspect of the reach that the internet and social media is affording jihadis back into the homeland. Similarly, descriptions by in Pankisi about this same period when FTFs were uploading numerous videos per day on social media showing the excitement and adventure of the situation in Syria. Focus group discussants and stakeholders from Marneuli, Ponichala, Khulo, Didichara, Batumi, and Tnusi described the preference for Facebook as an entry point for Salafi jihadi engagement, with limited mention of the use of Odnoklassniki, a Russian social network resource.

As recounted by parents and teachers alike, internet consumption is high among young people, even in the remotest parts of Georgia. Similar to comments about migration of young people from these remote areas of Georgia, respondents voiced their concern that lack of internet literacy and critical thinking skills among young people makes it challenging for young people to navigate a steady and ever-present stream of sophisticated jihadi media content. Even if young people are not immediately inspired for recruitment, they can become inured to the images of violence and groomed to accept the delivered narrative, particularly if those narratives come directly from family, friends, or people from their broader networks. A limited set of stories emerged of women who had travelled to Syria for marriage or to join their husbands after communicating through WhatsApp.

The presence in Georgia of Ayub Borchashvili and Akhmet Chataev, known recruiters for IS, as well as descriptions by community members in Adjara, Guria, and Kvemo Kartli of the presence of recruiters, suggests that connections through family and friends were also being supplemented by physical presence of IS representatives inside Georgia. But respondents pointed to the combination of arrest of Borchashvili and death of Chataev as demonstrating capability and willingness by authorities to deal with the recruitment issue. Combined with the deterioration of

territorial holdings of IS in Syria, which diminished demand for foreign fighters, the threat from in-country recruitment was believed by respondents to have diminished by 2018.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSIONS**

This study does not find a clear pattern of differences in risk and resilience factors to Salafi jihadi mobilization between the 8 sending and 11 non-sending communities directly visited in the studied areas of Georgia. With a limited number of FTFs originating from any single community in the areas outside of the Pankisi Valley, a lack of discernable difference is possibly a reflection that decisions to join Salafi jihadi organizations among this cohort may have been principally motivated by specific individual choice, rather than particular community-level considerations. The one caveat to this, is in places of multiple departure, direct connections to friends, family, or a recruiter seems to provide a likely entry point for mobilization. Further, with at least some of the FTFs known to have been residing outside of their home communities at the time of mobilization, factors present in those locations may have played a more immediate role in mobilization than that in their places of origin. Finally, as intimated by some of the respondents in this study, at least some of the communities identified as non-sending, appear to have actually had community members who participated as FTFs, suggesting that the breadth of known places of origin of FTFs is broader than that conveyed by publicly available information.

It is undeniable that citizens of Georgia have been mobilized to Salafi jihadi organizations, with some having risen to leadership positions. Arguably, however, the extent of the phenomenon in absolute terms pales in comparison to levels seen in other parts of the world, even with relatively high concentrations of mobilization in ethnic and religious minority areas of Georgia. The lack of manifestation of jihadi violence within the country supports the perception presented by interlocutors that the participation in these organizations was likely never intended as a vehicle for

targeting Georgian interests, but rather was an externally facing dynamic focused on the Syrian conflict. While the deterioration of geographic holdings of IS could result in a return of experienced foreign fighters to Georgia, enhanced legislation and penalties for FTF participation, stronger border controls, and proactive security measures throughout the country contribute to a diminished risk of clandestine returns. Diminished, should not be interpreted as zero, however. Georgia's border areas are vast and mountainous. While difficult to traverse, the possibility for undetected entry remains. Similarly, those FTFs emerging from Syria via Turkey also have the distinct possibility of blending into the legitimate Georgian migrant workforce for a period, then returning to Georgia along with seasonal and other longer-term workers. But the issue is not whether FTFs can and will return to Georgia. The more relevant question is whether FTFs that return to Georgia will attempt and succeed in mounting domestic attacks. And if so, to what end?

There are certainly strong stabilizing factors against domestic mobilization and attacks, beyond the legal and security aspects. Perhaps most importantly is a strong desire from citizens and government alike to prevent violent extremism from being a domestic problem that mars the brand image of Georgia as open for tourism and open for business. The Black Sea coast of Adjara, the hiking hills of Guria, the vineyards of Kakheti, and the trekking areas of Pankisi are all critical to Georgia's tourism interest and economic stability – a benefit seen by both majority and minority populations.

But there is also the existence of two experiences in Georgia: Those who perceive themselves as full citizens and those who wish to be full citizens but perceive a secondary status. From this research, we see expressions of the latter coming through clearly in Muslim communities throughout the country. And while the Georgian securitized approach to addressing jihadi mobilization has been improving since 2017, the focus on Muslims and specific minority



communities raises the perception of group stigmatization and targeting, further weakening the trust in and legitimacy of the Georgian security services and the Georgian Dream administration. Absence of trust in the Georgian Dream is notable among this specific portion of the population, with emphasis on discrimination, stigmatization, multiple facets of relative deprivation, and perception of deteriorating political rights and civil liberties since 2012. A review of the interview data paints a picture of a community struggling with identity-threatening dynamics in their home country, yet not feeling capable of truly affecting change. Certainly, these factors have festered and serve as an irritant and hindrance to national cohesion. But they have not served as a vehicle for violence, begging the question of why.

This study provides a few possible explanations. Perhaps the most telling is the absence of separatist sentiment or desires for self-autonomy among the minority communities or in the known communications of FTFs. This suggests that frustrations, while palpable, are not at a point of evolving towards violent expression among minority populations or in outlying areas of the country. There is certainly a collection of issues that are polarizing the country. And there is ample perception of manipulation towards societal fracturing. But potential for broad based support of violence appears muted.

At a macro level, the Georgian population is shrinking. Since a high of 5.5 million people in 1990, the country has steadily seen a year to year decrease in population to the 2019 forecasted level of 3.8 million.<sup>208</sup> A major contributor to this population decline has been long-term emigration, with the 2017 level at 78,200 people. Statistics on seasonal migration are more problematic to track, since a large number of people migrating abroad for labor do so informally. Nonetheless, as seen in the studied areas for this research, many of the villages visited were

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<sup>208</sup> For further detail on Georgia's population size, see: [www.migration.commission.ge](http://www.migration.commission.ge)

completely empty of young people between young adulthood and middle age, illustrating the large numbers of people who cross borders for income. Statistics show that personal remittances, as a percentage of GDP have been high, equaling 12.2 percent in 2017<sup>209</sup>.

Salafi jihadi organizations typically seek recruits in this precise age demographic. With much of the population absent, including heavily from minority areas, finding ready recruits to spark revolt inside the country is challenging. And even if there is a spark, there is insufficient kindling to truly catch fire. And while this research suggests that Salafi jihadi organizations demonstrated some intentionality of recruitment among Georgian Muslims with advanced skills and possibly outsized ambitions, finding jihadi recruits with the desired set of skills is more difficult in an environment with ever flowing populations, then perhaps in known labor pools abroad.

Beyond the decrease in size of the overall population of Georgia, the religious makeup of the country is also changing. The increasing concentration of Orthodox Christians suggests a possible disproportionate outmigration of religious minorities, particularly Muslims. But more likely, the large-scale conversions of Muslims to Orthodox Christianity are responsible for this concentration. The challenge of such a small minority population successfully advocating for its rights and maintenance of its identity in an overwhelmingly homogenous ethnic and religious country as Georgia inevitably results in the resigned futility of the endeavor for some: “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” The choices are thus limited for the minority Muslim population as it seeks to redress frustrations: Continue to advocate for change; adapt to the norms of an ethnically Georgian and Christian society, including conversion; or leave to find other opportunities. For

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<sup>209</sup> For a searchable database on migration statistics, see: [www.migrationdataportal.org](http://www.migrationdataportal.org)

those who are incensed by the perception of injustice, the choice does not appear to be a violent backlash toward the country, but rather to employ one of these other coping mechanisms.

Certainly, some of the FTFs may have had grievances against Georgia, their personal circumstances, or their lack opportunities. But the expressions of violence have, to date, been directed towards foreign targets. If the strategic goal of Islamic State or al Qaeda had been destabilization of Georgia, they have been slow to realize that initiative. And, unlike in Central Asia or West Africa or a myriad of other places, there is no current evidence of local jihadi insurgent movements seeking to undermine the state order. It thus appears that jihadi mobilization in the Georgian context has been a function of aspirations to join an existing campaign against a shared enemy, rather than to open a new front where galvanizing motivations are uncertain, recruits are limited, and the security apparatus is strong.

## CHAPTER 6: CASE STUDY - KYRGYZ REPUBLIC<sup>210</sup>

### 6.1 METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents research conducted between March and May 2016, focused on understanding risk factors of mobilization to violent present extremism that are among youth in the areas of violent extremism vulnerability in the Kyrgyz Republic. The research included a review of scholarly and practitioner grey-literature and in-country interviews focused on migrant youth and youth remittance-recipients. For the purposes of this research, youth are considered between the ages of 18 and 24.<sup>211</sup> Between March 8 and May 20, 2016, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Osh, Jalalabad, Batken, and Issyk-Kul, as a comparator region. The in-country portion of this study included Stakeholder interviews and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in communities broadly considered vulnerable to violent extremist mobilization. Given the history of communal violence in Kyrgyzstan, this research also considered vulnerabilities to broader political violence. The simultaneous phenomenon of young foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from southern Kyrgyzstan participating on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq and the rapid change in household remittance income in Kyrgyzstan and changes in employability of migrants

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<sup>210</sup> This chapter is an adaptation of a paper written by the author on behalf of Mercy Corps: *Vulnerable to Manipulation: Interviews with Migrant Youth and Youth Remittance-Recipients in Kyrgyzstan*, following field research in the Kyrgyz Republic in spring 2016. The author is grateful for the permission and support of Mercy Corps for use of the material in this dissertation. The author would like to express gratitude to Tazhykan Shabdanova and her team at the Foundation for Tolerance International for their assistance in data collection.

<sup>211</sup> The United Nations defines youth as 15-24. In the Central Asian context, people younger than 18 are considered children. For the protection of human subjects, this research only included legal adults. The 18-24 age range aligns with the predominant age range for known FTFs from Central Asia.

as a result of the deep economic crisis in Russia raised speculation that new pressures on the Kyrgyz population may be affecting youth vulnerabilities towards participation in violent extremism.<sup>212</sup>

### 6.1.1 DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with 159 respondents across the four studied regions of Kyrgyzstan, including Osh, Jalalabad, Batken, and in the northern province of Issyk-Kul. The southern regions of Kyrgyzstan, specifically Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken, were chosen due to an understanding that these provinces are the origin of the preponderance of citizens of Kyrgyzstan who have departed for Syria to join Islamic State (IS) or Jabhat al-Nusra, with official figures at the time of this research citing approximately 500 people from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>213</sup> Additionally, southern Kyrgyzstan saw an outbreak of violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek citizens in 2010, resulting in mass casualties, displacement and destruction of physical infrastructure in these same regions of the South.<sup>214</sup> Some reports suggest that in the wake of the 2010 clashes, up to 400 ethnic Uzbeks from the South may have fled to Pakistan, where they joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Swift, 2011). Issyk-Kul was selected as a comparator province due to its multi-ethnic composition and lack of conflict history or known FTF departures.

Semi-structured instruments and detailed probes were developed in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek languages, based on information gathered during the literature stage of research. Data

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<sup>212</sup> Secondary research questions focused on issues of migration and economic change.

<sup>213</sup> U.S. Department of State Country Report on Terrorism: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>; and <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-return-from-syria>; <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kyrgyzstan-fighters/26969666.html>. Montgomery and Heathershaw discuss the challenges in knowing how accurate numbers are in relation to FTF participation in Syria. See: Montgomery & Heathershaw, 2015.

<sup>214</sup> This violence is known locally as the Osh events.

was collected with Pen and Paper interview (PAPI) technique. Subsequent to interviews, notes were typed and uploaded to NVivo 11 software for data cleaning, analysis, and pattern identification. The following data collection methods were used:

*Stakeholder Interviews:* 60 stakeholder interviews were conducted with community leaders, civil society leaders, religious leaders, business leaders, police and government officials in the studied regions.

*Key Informant Interviews (KII):* 99 key informant interviews were conducted with migrant youth aged 18 through 24 as well as with youth aged 18 through 24 who had not migrated but were from remittance-receiving families.

### 6.1.2 SAMPLE

The study used purposive sampling for both the identification of geographic locations described above and for the selection of respondents. Pre-determination of vulnerable locations

**Table 8:** Southern Interview Locations in Kyrgyzstan

Interview Locations in Kyrgyzstan	
Region	Community
Osh	Osh City
	Mady
	Tepe-Korgon
	Chek-Abad
	Mirmachmudova a.o.
Jalal-Abad	Jalal-Abad City
	Yrys
	Suzak
	Bazar-Korgon
	Ala-Buka
Batken	Batken City
	Isphana
	Kyzyl-Kya
	Uch-Korgon
	Andarak
	Masalieva a.o.
	Samarkandek a.o.

was based on informed expert consultations and the extant literature on places of origin of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria to identify a judgement sample. Stakeholders and key informants were identified through snowball technique, with initiating points for the snowball in rural and urban areas and ethnically homogenous and heterogeneous communities spread across the four provinces. Table 8 presents the interview locations in the areas of vulnerability.

Out of the 159 people interviewed, 129 were located in the South and 30 people in the North. Quotas were established to ensure that the voices of ethnic majority and ethnic minority youth, as well as male and female youth were captured. Sixty-five percent of those interviewed were ethnic Kyrgyz; thirty percent were ethnic Uzbek, and five percent were ethnic Tajik or Dungan. Thirty-three percent of all interviewed were female; sixty-seven percent of all interviewed were male. While this research did not specifically seek out people who mobilized to jihadi organizations, some respondents were directly aware of neighbors, friends, acquaintances or people from their communities who had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the so-called Caliphate.

### **6.1.3 LIMITATIONS**

*Generalizability and Trends:* Interviews conducted in Spring 2016 can only represent perceptions during that specific moment in time and thus do not provide insights into changes in perceptions over time. Thus, changes in vulnerabilities from one moment to another are a matter of speculation. It is the hope of this author that subsequent research will be conducted in these same geographic areas, to mark any changes in attitudes. Additionally, if resources become available and government comfort with broad based population surveys on the sensitive topic of violent extremism becomes a reality, a quantitative survey would provide additional insights not possible with this current study. As this research incorporated a non-probability sample, the

findings and conclusions are only applicable to the people interviewed for this study. That said, it is the intent of this research to provide a solid foundation for consideration in future studies.

*Sensitivities:* Given the highly sensitive topic and illegality in Kyrgyzstan of involvement in inter-ethnic violence, participation in extremist groups, or acting as an FTF, researchers did not identify or intentionally seek out youth involved in acts of violent extremism inside of Kyrgyzstan or abroad. In Kyrgyzstan, as in all of the Central Asian countries, there is fear of arrest and prosecution if one is perceived to be knowledgeable of issues related to terrorism. In order to conduct this research in Kyrgyzstan, the instruments and specific questions were required to be thoroughly vetted by government interlocutors, before providing a letter of support from the President's office. In absence of such support, researchers would have faced the inevitability of delay, detention, or termination of the project. While the elimination of a limited number of questions from the original questionnaire was not ideal, the questionnaires proved effective in raising the necessary topics to spur fruitful conversations.

With individual respondents, open discussion of such sensitive topics is challenging without substantial trust being built between the interviewer and the respondent. This dynamic is even more profound among minority communities in southern Kyrgyzstan than among the majority ethnic Kyrgyz in the north. The use of field researchers from the respective provinces, allowed for contextual familiarity that aided in building early trust. Additionally, the decision to use snowball technique in identifying potential respondents was, in part, to assist in establishing early trust. Despite the shortcoming of similar types of respondents with similar mindsets potentially emerging from a snowball sample, the pragmatism outweighed the shortcomings.



*Migration:* Similar to the research conducted in Georgia, this study was faced with massive levels of outmigration from the studied communities. It was not uncommon to arrive in villages only to find a majority of older people and their grandchildren, with young people mostly abroad earning income to support their extended families. While all key informants in this research were either young migrants or young remittance recipients of migrants, the absence of so many people open the possibility that an absence of perspectives from those residing abroad, may present bias in the interview data. Given the scope of this research, it was not possible to engage with migrants outside of the country.

*Acquaintance Descriptions of FTFs:* While researchers had the opportunity to speak with acquaintances of FTFs, the acquaintance perceptions of motivations for FTFs for mobilization may not align with how the FTFs themselves would have described their own motivations. It is, therefore, necessary to consider that these perceived motivations are but some of the possible reasons why these individuals became involved with jihadi organizations.

## **6.2 BACKGROUND**

Kyrgyzstan, bound by the Tian Shan, Ala-Too, and Pamir mountain ranges is a land of raw beauty and deep divisions. Along its modern-day border with Kazakhstan, the Abassid Caliphate met the Tang Dynasty in 751 in the battle of Talas that marked the farthest eastern reaches of Muslim territory. And despite the muting of religious practices during the Soviet years, Kyrgyzstan has seen a rapid and steady resurgence in Islamic practice with each passing year since independence, particularly in southern and rural areas. In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has been regarded as a democratic island in an archipelago of autocracy. Yet, the country's deep

political and ethnic divides have given rise to conflicts in the South and popular revolts resulting in turbulent Presidential transitions.<sup>215</sup>

Kyrgyzstan has also been plagued by mobilization of citizens to Salafi jihadi organizations. Estimates of Kyrgyzstan nationals who have gone to Syria and Iraq with jihadi organizations range widely. Figures from the International Crisis Group, the U.S. Department of State, and the Kyrgyz Government placed estimates, at the time, at a high of a few hundred.<sup>216</sup> Knowledgeable stakeholders from the government of Kyrgyzstan indicate that, while not exclusively a minority phenomenon, a large percentage of those Kyrgyzstan nationals in Syria and Iraq are ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Tajiks from southern provinces.<sup>217</sup> Interviews with acquaintances and community members, primarily from Jalalabad and Batken, affirm this description.

Unlike neighboring Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan does not have an overt example of a domestically grown jihadi separatist movement. Yet, assertions of the infiltration of sympathizers and members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in southern Kyrgyzstan and the arrest of members of outlawed Islamist organizations, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir has underscored the perception that Kyrgyzstan is fertile ground for recruitment to Salafi jihadi organizations. Between 1996 and 2017, Kyrgyzstan experienced thirty-five terrorist attacks, out of which 10

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<sup>215</sup> While there was optimism that peaceful transition of power was finally achieved from Almazbek Atambayev to Sooronbai Jeenbekov, the 2019 arrest of the former President over charges of a coup attempt only show that crisis was delayed, not fully averted. And that Kyrgyzstan has yet to realize a fully unblemished transfer of power since independence.

<sup>216</sup> Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia, by the International Crisis Group, 2015. U.S. Department of State cited official Government of Kyrgyzstan sources stating 200-400 Kyrgyzstan nationals traveled to Syria in 2014:

<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>

<sup>217</sup> One security official in Osh cited 75 percent of FTFs as southern ethnic Uzbeks in private conversations in March 2016.

people died and 26 were injured (START Global Terrorism Database). While two in the ethnic Uzbek enclave of Kara Suu were attributed to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 2000 and one in Bishkek to the Turkestan Islamic Party in 2016, the remaining attacks were committed by unknown perpetrators.<sup>218</sup>

Three high profile examples of terrorist attacks associated with people originally from Kyrgyzstan also have risen in the global media. These include the 2017 St. Petersburg subway bombing, committed by a person born in Kyrgyzstan, the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, which was carried out by brothers from the North Caucasus who had spent substantial time living in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2017 Istanbul airport bombing in which one Kyrgyzstan national was accused of involvement.

### **6.3 FINDINGS: DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY**

This research suggests common themes of frustration, anger and animosity across migrant and remittance-receiving youth, particularly among ethnic Uzbeks, that present concern of the vulnerability of young people to the lure of violent avenues to redress their grievances. Of particular concern is the identification of themes through this research that align with the recruitment messages used by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in Syria and Iraq (Tucker, 2016), which identify political leaders as illegitimate when they are corrupt, inequitable, and unjust.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> START's GTD lists three of the thirty-five attacks as having been attributed to "Uighur separatists" or "jihadi-inspired extremists" and "Muslim extremists." As none of these is precise enough to determine if it was group affiliated, the author has considered these as unknown attacks.

<sup>219</sup> These themes are also consistent with findings from Mercy Corps' multi-country research into youth attraction to violence, particularly related to corruption, inequality and injustice. See: Mercy Corps, 2015.

While this research did not specifically seek out people who migrated to Syria, some respondents in six specific communities stated that they were directly aware of acquaintances or people from their communities who had gone to Syria. The pathway to mobilization among these FTFs varies, according to their acquaintances: Prior to departure for Syria, some of these young people had been economic migrants in Russia, others had never been in Russia and traveled directly from Kyrgyzstan to Syria. In some of the cases, acquaintances observed a rapid change toward Salafi religious observance just prior to departure for Syria, while others observed no outward changes.<sup>220</sup> The economic means of FTFs prior to departure were described as ranging from poor to average income, with acquaintances suggesting that some of these FTFs were driven by economic factors, including the repayment of outstanding loans. Though motivations for involvement appear to vary across the FTFs described in this research, references to recruiters and access to finances for travel, suggest that these people each interacted with someone who facilitated or encouraged travel.

The sub sections below categorize findings into five dimensions of vulnerability to conditions that place youth in Kyrgyzstan at risk of manipulation towards violent agendas, including violent extremism: Ethnic distrust and separation; strains on identity through religious expression; distrust in democratic processes and government; unmet economic expectations and pressure to migrate; insufficient understanding of risks of mobilization to jihadi organizations.

### **6.3.1 ETHNIC DISTRUST AND SEPARATION**

The events of 2010 have left a legacy of caution between ethnic groups, with ethnicities gravitating even more so than before to their own linguistic and ethnic circles. With the shadow

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<sup>220</sup> One respondent who attended mosque with an FTF described his motivation to participate in jihad as a desire to speed entry to heaven.

of the 2010 events still present in people's minds, open conversations about inter-ethnic relations remain difficult, with inter-ethnic animosities and distrust evident from numerous comments made throughout this research. Invocation of undefined "third parties" or "bad people" as agitators and manipulators of youth into violent action was a common narrative. More than one-third of all respondents mentioned continued tensions between minority and majority ethnic groups or displayed tensions by making overtly negative statements about another ethnic group. The greatest frequency of comments and depth of tension in the interviews occurred between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in the three southern Oblasts. But expressed distrust and animosity was not unidirectional, notable in various comments both from ethnic Kyrgyz towards ethnic minorities and from ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Dungans towards ethnic Kyrgyz, suggesting broader division between majority and minority ethnicities than simply animosities as a result of the 2010 events.

Defense of ethnic honor plays out in the few explicit statements in which youth affirm that violence is justifiable. Ethnic honor also presented itself as a response to inter-group jealousy or relative deprivation. Not only did it emerge in conversations related to exclusion and injustice in access to jobs or equitable treatment from minorities, but also in descriptions about superior economic and living conditions of certain ethnic groups or superior ability of minorities to start businesses or access less-labor intensive trade jobs abroad. Research on inter-group inequalities in the social, political and cultural dimensions finds that such perceptions can be markers of the potential for future instability (Stewart, 2000; Stewart, 2008).

At the time of this research, border tensions between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were notable. Disputes over boundary delimitation and access to pasture lands or water resources were prominent political discussion points, often taking on an ethnic pejorative

hue. On the ground, border tensions between Kyrgyzstan and neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were a daily reality, not only for the people directly experiencing these tensions, but also through the media portrayal. Among the twenty-seven comments about the borders, people discussed their perception that the tensions along the border not only reflects on the Kyrgyzstan State's weak ability to protect its people, but also how inter-state animosity is also manifesting in local tensions between ethnic groups within Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Batken and Jalalabad provinces.

While southern Kyrgyzstan has long had both ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous communities, this research indicates that there are increasingly fewer places and opportunities for people of differing ethnic groups to meet: Ethnic Uzbeks are pursuing education in Uzbek schools, rather than the public schools; ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks frequently worship in different mosques; private sector employment, when available domestically, is only accessible through family and acquaintance networks, often ethnically-based. Whereas intermarriage between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz was not uncommon in the Soviet period and the early years of independence, some respondents described challenges and threats that they have faced due to a mixed marriage or attempts at inter-ethnic dating.

The separation between ethnic groups is, in part, exacerbated by language differences. Kyrgyzstan has taken the step of requiring Kyrgyz language proficiency for entry into university or for hiring for state jobs. While some see linguistic integration as a step towards facilitating greater national harmony and identity, others see the outlines of Kyrgyz nationalism. Some ethnic Kyrgyz youth, for example, voiced their strong dissatisfaction that ethnic minorities speak in their own languages, rather than the language of the state. At the least, the short-term result of the language law, voiced by young people in this study, is exclusion of ethnic minorities in

higher education or in the few salaried jobs that exist in southern Kyrgyzstan. Particularly for ethnic Uzbeks who often study at Uzbek-language schools, the hurdles of acquiring these necessary Kyrgyz language skills can seem insurmountable.

Minority exclusion also emerges in the perceptions of injustice through the uneven application of rule of law, manifested both through police interactions and through the courts. All but one of the explicit comments made by young adults about unfair treatment by police officers came from ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Tajiks. Further, the perception that the police are predominantly, if not exclusively, ethnic Kyrgyz, was described by some as a likelihood that bias is inevitable. This perception of group inequity combines with the physical and social separation of ethnicities is fostering insular homogenous communities, particularly in rural areas, hindering inter-ethnic reconciliation. These sentiments call into question the very essence of shared national identity and the overall concept of Kyrgyzstan as an organizing principle for all ethnicities.

### **6.3.2 STRAINS ON IDENTITY THROUGH RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION**

The deepening expression of Islam in Kyrgyzstan was broadly noted by respondents throughout the country, with particular emphasis in Batken, Jalalabad, and Osh. But even without interview remarks, this author's frequent trips to Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s provides a history of visible observations of the evolution of Islam adherence in southern Kyrgyzstan. In 1991, there were 39 registered mosques in the country. By 2019, this number had risen to 2,300, with a substantial presence of foreign funds supporting the construction boom.<sup>221</sup> In the early days of independence in Kyrgyzstan, only half of ethnic Kyrgyz and slightly more than three-

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<sup>221</sup> See: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/12032016-kyrgyzstan-experiencing-mosque-building-boom/>

quarters of ethnic Uzbeks identified themselves as Muslim, as compared with nearly universal identification among ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks a decade later (McGlinchy, 2009; Swift, 2011). While there is some debate on what constitutes religiosity, the increasing number of mosques, enhanced attendance at Friday prayer, decreases in alcohol consumption by young generations, change in dress, elimination of music at weddings and earlier marriage for girls suggests that not only piety, but also an increasingly visible conservative form of religious observance, with Salafi practice described as increasingly present in southern provinces.

Yet, it is important to note that the increasing religious adherence itself is not seen by respondents as problematic, with a number of people highlighting the stabilizing and calming effect of Islam. Rather, the concern that emerges from the interviews are the differences in opinion of what constitutes appropriate understanding of Islam in the cultural context of Kyrgyzstan. These differences are prominent and appear to be generating at least two fault lines in the population. Such fault lines, if unaddressed, open the potential for gravitation or manipulation to violence.

The first fault line is along ethnic divisions. When asked about differing levels of religiosity in Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Kyrgyz invariably, and frequently with a critical voice, responded that ethnic Uzbeks appear more religious than others in Kyrgyzstan. As evidence, respondents mentioned young girls wearing hijab, males dressing like Arabs or Pakistanis, Uzbek boys being educated in madrasah rather than public school, and weddings following a more muted and conservative style. Further, ethnic Uzbek attraction to extremism or jihadi organizations in Syria was mentioned repeatedly by non-Uzbek respondents during this research, with numerous insinuations of how Uzbeks' view of Islam predisposes them to extremism. These views from respondents do not stand in isolation: The Kyrgyz government has been vocal that



the majority of those from Kyrgyzstan who have joined IS in Syria are ethnic Uzbek (Kudryavtseva, 2015), feeding into the public narrative.

Thus, the perception that a specific minority ethnic group is dressing differently, displaying differing religious behaviors, and is demonstrating attraction to extremist violence abroad and potentially back in Kyrgyzstan risks creating identification of this group as a deviant threat. Ethnic Uzbeks in this study were aware of these sentiments from people in the majority population, sometimes citing Kyrgyz nationalism as a contributor to this polarizing viewpoint. Researchers have suggested that groups with distrust and a perception of vulnerability from another group are at enhanced risk of conflict (Eidelson, & Eidelson, 2003).

The second fault line exists between the practice of traditional cultural Islam and more conservative Islam. There is near uniform agreement in the interview corpus that, unlike Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan better protects freedom of religion. And research conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016 supports this finding, identifying Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan as having very high levels of government restrictions on religion, while Kyrgyzstan is described as having a high level of restriction and Georgia having a moderate level (Pew Research Center, 2018).<sup>222</sup> But some are expressing concern that there is too much freedom of religion and that with an accommodating legal structure, Kyrgyzstan opens itself to risk of growing a Salafi presence and a glidepath to extremism. Among comments related to this slide toward extremism, respondents cited their perceptions of a disproportionate number of madrassahs in southern Kyrgyzstan, compared with

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<sup>222</sup> Similarly, the 2014 edition of the Pew Research Center report identified the same ranking levels. The data in the 2014 stated that 32 percent of respondents indicated that they did not feel free to practice their religion (Pew Research Center, 2014)

public schools; the appearance of *daavatchi*<sup>223</sup>; the decreased participation in cultural celebrations like Nooruz<sup>224</sup>; and wearing foreign Muslim attire<sup>225</sup> is an affront to those who see Central Asia's syncretic form of Islam as part of the national culture and heritage.<sup>226</sup> For many young adults in this study, particularly among ethnic Kyrgyz, Islam is described as playing more of a cultural role in their identity than strictly a religious role.

### **6.3.3 DISTRUST IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES AND GOVERNMENT**

The concept of a unified pluralistic state appears to be deeply fractured among a notable portion of the young adults interviewed in this research. The expressed lack of confidence in government and state bodies to be in touch with the people and to address economic challenges top the list of issues raised by many young adults who were interviewed, with no discernable difference between comments made by young adults migrants or young adults remittance-recipients on this topic. And while there were some noted differences in issues of equity and justice across ethnic groups as mentioned above, criticism of elected officials and state entities to satisfactorily serve the people was evident in voices across ethnicities and regions.

Beyond the, perhaps predictable economic issues, other common themes of frustration emerged. Approximately thirty percent of all respondents raised the topic of corruption and nepotism, both generally, as well as citing specific examples of situations that they have encountered in day-to-day life. Approximately the same proportion of migrant young adults,

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<sup>223</sup> These were described as itinerate conservative imams, typically spreading Salafi views.

<sup>224</sup> Salafis view Nooruz as inappropriate to celebrate due to its origin outside of Sunni faith. This spring festival has its origins in Iranian culture and Zoroastrian faith but was widely celebrated in Muslim regions of the Soviet Union as a secular holiday.

<sup>225</sup> Typically described as attire from the Gulf countries or from Pakistan.

<sup>226</sup> Public statements, at the time, by former Prime Minister Temir Sariiev stressed the need to remove "foreign adaptations" of Islam from Kyrgyzstan, such as the hijab (Tucker, 2106).

remittance-recipients and stakeholders expressed indignation towards apparent systemic corruption experienced at the hands of school teachers, traffic police, doctors, and other state officials.

More than one-third of all respondents made statements related to lack of confidence in political parties, state entities or officials, with common remarks repeating around elections and the perception of unfulfilled promises. While some of the young adults from this study stated that they voted in the recent parliamentary elections, many did not. For some, work abroad or a missing passport or biometric data prevented them from voting.<sup>227</sup> Others did not vote, simply expressing a lack of belief that their vote would bring changes. It is unclear the extent to which apathy is playing a role in not voting. If there is indeed a significant portion of young adults not exercising their right to vote, yet expressing substantial frustration with issues of governance, then there is a gap in this key democratic process.

Of further concern were descriptions by some youth in this study that they were paid up to 1,200 Kyrgyz Som<sup>228</sup> to vote for a particular party or candidate. Efforts by Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev to discourage the population from selling votes during the parliamentary elections, would appear to have been ineffective.<sup>229</sup> The fact that some young people in southern Kyrgyzstan are willing to accept money to vote a certain way, raises the question of whether money could also be used by conflict entrepreneurs, such as Salafi jihadis, to encourage youth to commit acts of violence.<sup>230</sup> Research suggests that poorer countries, such as

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<sup>227</sup> Biometric data reading devices and electronic ballot boxes were mandated by the Government of Kyrgyzstan prior to the 2015 Parliamentary elections to help minimize the possibility of voting irregularities.

<sup>228</sup> Equivalent of \$16.24 on March 1, 2016. This can equal two or more weeks of wages in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>229</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/world/821551>

<sup>230</sup> There is some unsubstantiated speculation that some perpetrators of violence during the Osh

Kyrgyzstan, have a higher risk of conflict as a result of attraction to financial compensation for participating in political violence (Collier, 2007). 23 people interviewed for this study believe that “third parties,” “third forces,” or “influential people” were the catalyst of political instability in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan and have the potential to ignite instability in the future by actively encouraging young people towards violence. While these are opinions, the large number of comments indicates a belief that there is both a history of and current presence of conflict entrepreneurs and that young people continue to be susceptible to this type of influence.

When the belief in governance is fractured, there is a risk that young people will be attracted to alternatives.<sup>231</sup> If there is confidence in the transparency and accountability of government and assurance that election processes are honest, then there is a hope that young people will be encouraged to seek those alternatives through peaceful change at the polls. Steps taken by the government of Kyrgyzstan related to polling transparency and discouraging vote buying and selling are important. Confidence-building in such democratic processes is invaluable. The notable distrust and critical assessment of the political processes in Kyrgyzstan suggests that, at least for some, the voting booth has not demonstrated tangible improvements in the issues that are meaningful to young people. Those who bring the promise of a different future and inspire trust have the potential to galvanize populism (Bodea & Elbadawi, 2007).

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events of 2010 were paid.

<sup>231</sup> Goldstone et al note that “most states have potential insurgents with grievances and resources, but almost always possess far greater military power than do insurgents. A united and administratively competent regime can defeat any insurgency; it is where regimes are paralyzed or undermined by elite divisions and state-elite conflicts that revolutionary wars can be sustained and states lose out to insurgencies.” See: Goldstone, J (2010), “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 54(1), pp. 190-208.

#### **6.3.4 UNMET ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS AND PRESSURE TO MIGRATE**

Modern Kyrgyzstan has a young vibrant population, a robust civil society, and increasing investments from abroad, but has demonstrated an inability to emerge from high levels of rural poverty and insufficient domestic jobs. It thus relies heavily on Russia and Kazakhstan as places for migrant labor and essential remittances back to families. Official statistics place the number of migrants from Kyrgyzstan at nearly half a million; with unofficial reports substantially higher.<sup>232</sup> At the time of this research in 2016, Kyrgyzstan faced a precipitous reduction in remittances from Russia due to contractions in its economy that began in 2014. Simultaneously, changes in the Russian Ruble/Kyrgyz Som exchange rate diminished the real value of remittances still being sent back to Kyrgyzstan, abruptly shifting the population's sense of stability. There was speculation that changes in the socio-economic stability of the country was potentially encouraging some people to consider mobilization to Salafi-jihadi organizations.

In the 2014-2016 timeframe, Kyrgyzstan experienced economic shock as a result of the Russian Ruble/Kyrgyz Som exchange rate and the decreased need for migrant labor in a plummeting Russian economy. A profound drop in remittance flows and value adversely affected household spending, according to the young adults and key informants that we spoke with. Many described the previous long-term consistent exchange rate as approximately 1 Ruble for 1.5 Som and the more recent rate dropping to approximately 1 to 1 (See Figure 6). For those relying on remittances from Russia, the impact was profound and described extensively by nearly every person interviewed.

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<sup>232</sup> [http://en.rescue.org.ru/1108\\_the-number-of-kyrgyz-labor-migrants-in-russia-has-increased-due-to-the-eu.html](http://en.rescue.org.ru/1108_the-number-of-kyrgyz-labor-migrants-in-russia-has-increased-due-to-the-eu.html) <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/migrants-rejoice-kyrgyzstan-joins-russia-led-eurasian-economic-union/ri9627> and <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15838&LangID=E>

**Figure 6:** 2012-2016 Ruble/Som Exchange



Source: Data compiled from XE.com

The second impact, described by migrants, of the Russian economic crisis was the increased difficulty during this period of finding steady employment in Russia. The net result is that many economic migrants interviewed were realizing decreased income while abroad. Frequently working multiple jobs, predominantly as unskilled labor, young people described the substantial increase in difficulty to make ends meet abroad. While decreased incomes caused migrants to use a relatively larger percentage of their income to support their own living conditions in Russia, many reported that they were still sending money back to their extended families in Kyrgyzstan when they would have surplus. But those transfers are happening less frequently and at lower levels according to both migrants and remittance-recipients. Research suggests that high levels of migrant remittances can have a dampening effect on the risk of instability for a country, with a substantial reduction in the value of remittances reducing this dampening effect (Regan and Frank, 2014).<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Respondents recognize that their earning potential abroad was still superior to that in Kyrgyzstan, despite the deep economic crisis. Russian Central Bank data from 2016 shows that while the remittance value sent to Kyrgyzstan dropped, the number of migrants actually increased over the previous year (IWPR, 2016), potentially reflecting additional family members travelling abroad to fill the income gap.

The concerning aspect for stability, however, is not likely the result of dire absolute poverty from these remittance reductions, though that undoubtedly exists in southern Kyrgyzstan. The real issue revealed in conversations with young adults and key informants alike is the experience of relative deprivation that seems to be pervading all corners of the southern population. People may be better off today than they were in the 1990s, but these young people, born between 1991 and 1998, had keen awareness across all ethnicities and geographies in this study that they were far worse off in 2016 than they were just two years prior to that.<sup>234</sup> The years of high remittances, ability to remodel or build homes, celebrate weddings or purchase higher-end commercial goods created expectation among these young adults that was no longer achievable at the same level. Further, the overwhelming majority of southern youth migrants and remittance recipients described primary uses of remittance money for housing improvements, consumables and events, with scant mention of investments in future income-producing assets, such as cattle or businesses, raising concern about household resilience.<sup>235</sup> It is the unmet expectation of purchasing power, quality of life and growth that is a source of economic frustration revealed in the interviews. Relative deprivation theory highlights that large differences between expected and actual economic and living conditions can be a factor that fuels instability and increases the chance of rebellion (Gurr, 1970).

15 percent of the youth respondents in our research indicated that work abroad was a necessity to pay off their debt, for both unexpected needs such as agricultural losses and planned

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<sup>234</sup> The physical asset base of quality housing stock, large number of imported vehicles, and enhanced infrastructure is notably advanced from those early post-Soviet years. It would be hard to deny that the flow of remittances created a significant level of favorable economic conditions for many people.

<sup>235</sup> A few youth respondents in Issyk-Kul mentioned purchase of land or animals with remittance money. But the evidence is insufficient to draw conclusions on whether there is a difference in consumption patterns in the north and south.

expenditures like weddings and home construction. In a handful of statements, some of the people we spoke with who knew community members who had migrated to Syria or Iraq said that recruiters used loans as a way to bring in new recruits, particularly among people who were already indebted. While one cannot neatly draw a line from the likely presence of broad indebtedness in Kyrgyzstan to a motivation for jihadi mobilization, references to high indebtedness among the migrant population and examples of use of loans as an incentive for jihadi mobilization reflects similar observations in research conducted in Nigeria with former Boko Haram combatants (Mercy Corps, 2016). In that research, many young adults described loans as a means of receiving capital for their small informal businesses. This topic provides an avenue for further research.

While the absence of so many young people undoubtedly creates some social negatives for a country, having a large number of young people outside of the borders has the likely potential benefit of minimizing malcontents who can become active participants in violence. There is strong belief, however, that it is precisely during this time abroad that some young adults from Kyrgyzstan are in fact coming into contact with networks and individuals that draw them into violent extremism. Arrest reports, martyrdom statements, and social media accounts created by Central Asian recruits show that they come to Syria and Iraq almost exclusively from a third country (Tucker, 2015). Though the interviews for this study revealed some examples of FTFs who had never lived in a third country, such as Russia, a number of community leaders, religious leaders, government officials and other key informants echoed the view that third countries are the predominant location for mobilization.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Two key informants mentioned that they knew people who had never been in Russia, but had travelled to Syria, demonstrating that there may be multiple recruitment avenues.



There were certainly clear expressions of dissatisfaction with having to travel abroad to find adequate work. There were also descriptions by migrants of having experienced prejudice in Russia or having been deported or blacklisted for unknown reasons, implying injustice in Russia. While the popular narrative is that individuals mobilized to jihadi organizations while in Russia encountered isolation and lack of sense of belonging abroad, prior to mobilization, the interview corpus does not reflect this view. Critical comments about the migration experience were not particularly robust among the interviews, save for the description of long-hours, hard work, and sometimes cramped living conditions.

Many migrants we spoke with described living with extended family members or friends from their communities in Kyrgyzstan. Interview data shows that familial and acquaintance networks are important determinants of the types of jobs that many migrants obtain, particularly during this current economic crisis in Russia. Clusters of school classmates, family members, and communities from Kyrgyzstan working in the same industry, company or geographic location are frequently noted in the interviews. This raises a question about the applicability of these same types of clusters towards more nefarious pursuits, such as IS. In multiple statements by acquaintances or community members who knew people who travelled to Syria, often more than one person from the same area, such as 21 people from Jalalabad city or an entire family from Aravan were known to have gone. Many scholars have identified clusters and social networks as a common source of influence on participation in violent extremist groups (Atran, 2010; Mercy Corps, 2015).

Interviews also provided plenty of examples of migrants who were living and working with strangers, mostly from other Central Asian countries or Turkey, and separated from traditional family and community networks. Some of the acquaintances of FTFs noted changes in

behavior and attitudes during their time in Russia, including changes in religious behavior. Many speculated that these young people, who were separated from their families and community networks, had fallen in with people who influenced their behavior. Some scholars have described how displacement or economic migration can create a sense of having a foot in two worlds but really fully in neither. It is argued that this can be a critical factor in driving individuals to find a community that gives them that sense of belonging and purpose (Sageman, 2008; Blattman & Ralston, 2015). But even these insights from acquaintances of FTFs do not reveal a unique mobilization pattern abroad. In two examples from the interview corpus, respondents mentioned how jihadi recruiters approached people in their own communities in Kyrgyzstan who had never travelled to Russia or elsewhere abroad. While some migrants in Russia may be actively recruited for violent extremism, direct recruitment within communities in Kyrgyzstan appears also to have occurred.

#### **6.4.2 INSUFFICIENT UNDERSTANDING OF RISKS OF MOBILIZATION**

Across all regions, researchers heard frequent stories of how teachers, police, or imams have been highly visible in conveying the dangers of going to Syria. People were aware of public outreach events by the Ministry of Interior in Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad in 2016. Multiple respondents talked about the active engagement of the 10<sup>th</sup> Department of the Ministry of Interior in raising awareness among the population, including through meetings and roundtables. Similarly, media reports of arrests of people in connection with Syria migration or having affiliation with groups like Hizb-ut Tahrir were commonly mentioned. The breadth of outreach from these stakeholders and from the media is apparent from the numerous references throughout this research. Young people readily demonstrated awareness of the illegality of being

involved with extremist groups or operating as a foreign terrorist fighter. And they also appear to understand that death is a potential outcome of mobilization to jihadi organizations in Syria.

However, nearly half of the young adults interviewed in this study overtly stated that while they may have heard of Wahhabis or Salafis or could name groups like Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida, IS, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or others like the Taliban, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Ahmadiyah or Akramiyya, they are not really aware of the specifics on why they are considered a threat.<sup>237</sup> Rather, these respondents simply have been told that these organizations are radical and banned. There is, of course, the possibility that some of these young adults were being disingenuous for fear that they would be perceived to be adherents of these movements but describing in-depth knowledge. But the number of similar comments made by young people across the four provinces supports that the preponderance of these are genuine statements of ignorance. In absence of information pertaining to *why* groups are a threat, there is a risk that extremists can fill in those narratives in a way that appeals to young people who are ill-equipped to consider alternate narratives.

## 6.5 CONCLUSIONS

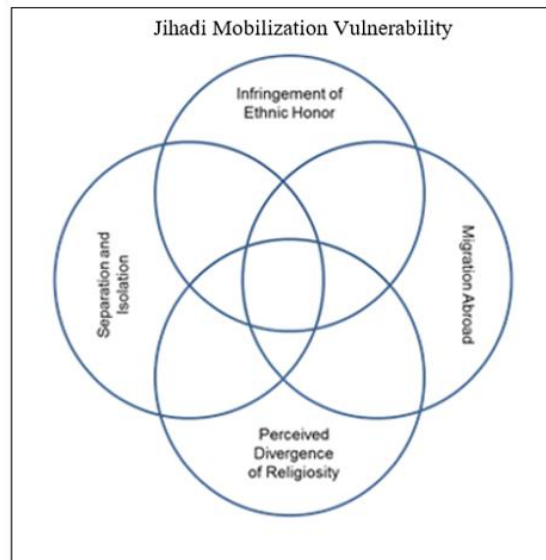
This research reveals key themes that raise concern of a base set of grievances across youth in southern Kyrgyzstan in areas of known mobilization to Salafi jihadi organizations. Further, these grievances are compounded by polarizing elements related to ethnic differences and divergence in religious practice. This research in four provinces, indicates that while vulnerabilities exist in southern Kyrgyzstan, as well as in the northern province of Issyk-Kul, the

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<sup>237</sup> ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan follow Salafi-Jihadi ideology. Akramiyya also follows Salafi beliefs, however the extent to which jihadi violence is part of their philosophy is unclear. The Taliban follow Deobandi ideology. While Hizb ut-Tahrir has some features in common with Salafi groups, they pursue a broader view of pan-Islam.

frequency and texture of interview responses suggests that there is comparatively enhanced overall risk of manipulation among youth populations from Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken in the south. While the interview responses do not provide sufficient evidence to suggest imminent risk

**Figure 7: Jihadi Mobilization Vulnerability**



of expanded mobilization to Salafi jihadi organizations, the key themes that emerge are consistent with known narratives used by jihadi organizations to garner support and recruits. Specifically, youth in southern Kyrgyzstan are heavily exposed to four specific elements of vulnerability: Infringement of ethnic honor; separation and isolation; perceived divergence of religiosity; and migration abroad.

This research identifies clear indications of ethnic divisions that are infringing on group identity. Majority and minority ethnic groups are seeing this as an affront to their group and thus besmirching their ethnic honor. For ethnic minorities, particularly the ethnic Uzbeks who comprise 14% of the total population of Kyrgyzstan, but a majority or near majority in a number of southern cities (HRW, 2010), the perception of exclusion and injustice is loudly expressed. Ethnic Kyrgyz who view themselves as guardians of their ethnic homeland perceive a threat to

their national identity and culture emanating from the strong presence of ethnic Uzbeks in the south. One respondent said: “I do not support violence in terms of attacking. If the question is about [defending] your family, ethnicity or faith, it is not only possible, but also necessary that this will not happen again in the future.” Another said: “When your honor is hurt, when wrong is called right, then we can use force.”

Ethnic differences are not only a matter of language and culture. There is also a strong perception that differences in both religiosity and religious practice are largely drawn along ethnic lines, with ethnic Uzbeks perceived as both more religious and predisposed to radical forms of religious adherence. One respondent, for example, said: “As for the Uzbeks, they seem to have another understanding of Islam. They believe that if they kill the infidel they go to paradise. For this reason, they join the Wahhabis.” Both the official record of ethnicities of known FTFs from Kyrgyzstan and the perception of respondents, underscores a public narrative that equates ethnic Uzbeks with *a priori* vulnerability to Salafi jihadism. An actual or perceived affinity for participation in violent extremism due to ethnicity can further exacerbate ethnic tensions, harden ethnic identity, and risk destabilizing communities, particularly if targeting on the basis of identity is allowed to occur.

Ethnic groups in southern Kyrgyzstan often live in, worship, and attend schools that are homogenous in their ethnic composition. This physical separation of ethnic groups in neighborhoods, communities, schools, or mosques, yet still proximate to each creates islands of insular communities. Diminished opportunities to interact with each other hinders the ability to counter any negative perceptions that may be lingering from the 2010 interethnic violence. One respondent, for example, said: “I think that [Islamic State] may appear in Kyrgyzstan...since there are so many illiterate youths who can easily be deceived and recruited, especially among

Uzbeks who probably want to take revenge for 2010.” Further preserving any lingering tensions from 2010 are the large numbers of citizens of Kyrgyzstan who have migrated abroad for seasonal and long-term employment. Literature suggests that large diaspora communities preserve the memory of conflict and thus slow down the healing process in a country (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

Youth who have migrated are exposed to new people and ideas; often living, working, and worshipping with other central Asians, Russian speaking migrants, or Turks. Exposure to new people and networks has, in some cases, brought youth from Kyrgyzstan into contact with recruiters or others who have helped facilitate mobilization into jihadi conflict zones, such as Syria. One migrant described it this way: “Recruiters are everywhere, including in Moscow. They tried to handle me in Moscow. But I said that I do not need this. How many other guys can they process and deceive?” While migration itself cannot be considered a cause of jihadi mobilization, migration for labor purposes has the potential of placing young people in environments where they are more easily approached and lured into jihadi organizations than they might be in their tightly securitized communities in Kyrgyzstan, where the authorities, parents, or religious leaders are often keeping a watchful eye.

Kyrgyzstan lacks a conceptual construct of what it means to be a Kyrgyzstan national. No compelling or accepted narrative is evident that conveys a uniform sense of national pride across ethnic groups, religious adherents, or northerners and southerners. In absence of a unifying identity through shared citizenship in the State, there is a potential that alternate identities will emerge to supplant the concept of State. Some respondents discussed the power of religion, specifically Islam, to serve as this unifying idea. Our interviews showed that nearly half of the respondents spoke positively about Sharia, with some describing how Islam and Sharia could be a

potential complement to the current governance structure.<sup>238</sup> One stakeholder, for example, said that: “Compared to the national constitution, which has been changed several times, the Sharia norms are the same since the moment of their creation. They are more stable and universal.” The narrative of the IS version of the Caliphate, potentially offers a concept of state that transcends ethnicity and nationality, promotes a transparent and consistent legal framework, albeit brutal, punishes corruption, and promulgates inclusion under the banner of Islam. For those who see government as distant, corrupt and failing them, any credible option may be valid. For those who can look past the brutality of IS or see that brutality as an important part of the cause, this narrative may become appealing.

One should not conclude that this research reveals a probability of violence in Kyrgyzstan or that respondents in this research are predisposed towards violent action domestically or internationally. However, the expressed themes emerging from conversations with these youth point to many of the same set of frustrations and issues that are being used to galvanize support to jihadi organizations in other places. Globally, Salafi jihadi groups have demonstrated that exploiting divides between true believers and apostates is fertile ground for destabilizing activities. Most commonly, this division is realized along areas with pronounced Sunni and Shi’a divides or along places with pronounced differentiation between Salafis and Sufis or Salafis and secularists (USIP, 2015). While the Sunni and Shi’a divisions are not present in Kyrgyzstan, the tensions between Salafis and Sufis or secularists are quite real. This

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<sup>238</sup> Interestingly, however, many young people conveyed their interest in Sharia, while simultaneously stating that they are insufficiently educated in understanding Sharia. Many respondents speculated that low religious-knowledge is one reason why recruiters may be successful in attracting people. Recent examination of 4,600 Islamic State personnel records, including that of 65 residents of Kyrgyzstan, revealed that approximately 70% of these people self-certified only basic knowledge of Sharia (Dodwell & Ressler, 2016).

divide has the potential to be exploited, particularly with the overlay of the ethnic issues described above.

The presence of these elements in geographies in southern Kyrgyzstan that have already demonstrated a level of Salafi jihadi mobilization abroad is not only worrying for further jihadi mobilization, but more broadly for any form of political violence. While it is unlikely that any of these factors in isolation is sufficient to cause devolution into communal violence or recruitment into Salafi jihadi organizations, the combination of any of these factors could increase the potential for youth to be successfully manipulated by those seeking political, economic or ideological gain within Kyrgyzstan and beyond its borders. If young people are persuaded or manipulated, any of these elements could be used galvanize support to serve the purposes of political elites, extremists, or other conflict entrepreneurs.



## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**

### **7.1 THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

The preceding chapters have presented analysis for identifying common risk and resilience factors that contributed to or hindered Salafi jihadi mobilization of citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus and for determining the extent to which these factors had differing internal and external outcomes on Salafi jihadi mobilization. Three levels of analysis provided an examination of regime characteristics, behavior of jihadi organizations that mobilized individuals from the region, and case studies through interviews in communities affected by jihadi mobilization in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia.

This research reveals that early distinctions in Islamist subnational struggles had oriented violence towards governments within Central Asia, while neighboring struggles in the North Caucasus oriented jihadi participants from Azerbaijan and Georgia towards external authorities in the north. Further, this research suggests that the dual phenomena of domestic manifestation of jihadi violence and foreign fighter mobilization to external theatres are inversely related and affected by the patterns of jihadi organizational displacement, co-location with larger entities engaged in conflict abroad, and expansion of jihadi organizations seeking new members within these external jihadi theatres. Additionally, state behavior, including state coercive capacity, solidification of elite cooperation, and regime legitimation through the construction of well-curated national identities, has served as a strengthening bulwark against jihadi organizational effectiveness internally in the region. Yet, interview data from this study indicates that state behavior has also engendered notable grievances among ethnic and religious minority populations in areas of jihadi foreign fighter origin. Despite these society-fragmenting perceptions of injustice, prejudice, and lack of trust in governance, grievances have not

galvanized into viable sustained internal jihadi action throughout the region. Rather, this research suggests that punitive state pressures on outgroups and patterns of economic migration across the entire population have resulted in a venting process that limits the potential manpower available for internal violent agendas. Yet this same venting process presents some individuals avenues for jihadi mobilization, strengthening the recruitment possibilities for offshore jihadi organizations. These points are briefly outlined below:

*All countries in the region witnessed identity-shaping Islamist influences following independence, yet explicit Islamist subnational challenges to State authority in Central were initially oriented internally, while Islamist subnational challenges in the Caucasus were oriented externally to the north. This divergence affected differences in domestic vulnerability to Jihadi violence.*

The first years of independence established the glidepath for future vulnerability or resilience to Salafi jihadism. At its core, subnational tensions and the struggle over governance that emerged through the lens of Islamism were oriented differently in Central Asia then in the South Caucasus. In the early days of independence, each of the countries of the region were exposed to external ideas, including Salafi expression of Islamism, which brought with it the promise of a new organizing framework for governance. In the chaos of independence, the opportunity for consistency, equity, justice, and lack of corruption were important touchstones for populations experiencing identity-confounding transition in that first post-Soviet decade. Exposure to Salafi ideas in Central Asia and the South Caucasus built an important cognitive framework as a first step toward justification of defense of Islam and the Ummah.

In outlying subnational regions, the Salafi world view had particular resonance among younger people, coming to age in the post-Soviet period. For Central Asians, the Ferghana Valley and its three country-intersection between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the proximate areas of southern Kazakhstan and mountainous Tajikistan were the epicenter for Islamist activism, where militant Salafi groups, like Adolat (Justice) emerged. Here Islamist expressions were situated locally with aspirations that extended to the national level. In Georgia and Azerbaijan, Islamist activism emerged on the periphery of the countries, in areas where Sunni adherents lived along the border with Chechnya and Dagestan. And in these areas, minority ethnic groups were historically, linguistically, and culturally more connected to neighboring areas in the North Caucasus, then they were to the titular ethnicities of the countries in which they resided. It was through this connection to the people of the North Caucasus and the exposure to refugees and fighters during the Chechen conflicts that expressions of subnational Salafi-catalyzed struggle largely focused on Russia and the North Caucasus governments, rather than the governments in Baku and Tbilisi. The South Caucasus countries were thus a haven from the struggle abroad, while the Central Asian countries were the epicenter of the struggle. The pattern of jihadi attacks between 1991 and 2018 show this dynamic, with a near exclusive focus on Central Asia.

***Displacement of jihadi organizations from the region and the co-location with larger entities engaged in other jihadi theatres abroad muted the manifestation of domestic jihadi violence.***

The limited number and infrequency of jihadi attacks across the region, as well as the emphasis on Central Asia over the South Caucasus suggests an organizational dynamic that has helped to mute frequency of jihadi engagement in the region. Specifically, jihadi organizations

that originated in Central Asia, as well as those that originated abroad with the stated goal of removing governments in the region, shifted their organizational focus, once they were co-located and affiliated with larger movements that were engaged in conflict. Certainly, al Qaeda had articulated an early strategic plan to expand its range of operation from Chechnya across the Caspian Sea through Central Asia into Afghanistan and Pakistan. And a network of domestic-oriented jihadi organizations would have facilitated achievement of this vision. But Coalition pressure in late 2001 conspired against this aspiration by forcing the focus of jihadi action back into Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The example of Adolat and its successor organization, the IMU, is illustrative of the process of displacement from its place of origin in Uzbekistan to Tajikistan, where its members became directly engaged and absorbed in the Tajik civil war. And while IMU attacks against Uzbekistan emerged after the conclusion of the Tajik civil war, the IMU's forced departure from its haven in Tajikistan into Afghanistan ultimately led to allegiance with the Taliban and active involvement in that jihadi theatre. In late 2001, Coalition forces had diminished the Taliban and al Qaeda's area of operation in Afghanistan, forcing not only these larger entities, but affiliated organizations, to seek haven in Pakistan. In Pakistan, jihadi organizations displaced from Afghanistan and affiliated with the Taliban and al Qaeda, such as the IMU and JAK or newly formed groups such as IJU engaged in the struggle with Pakistan authorities, suffered U.S. drone strikes, and remained further distracted from a Central Asia-focused agenda.

*The processes of consolidation of state authority and the crafting of national identity served as a bulwark against jihadi organizational effectiveness, but simultaneously created an in-group and out-group dynamic that penalized ethnic minorities and religious conservatives, raising the stakes for their dissension.*

For newly formed governments which were trying to consolidate power while dealing with jockeying elites, expressed desire for alternate governance models was seen as a direct challenge to their authority. But the application of state authority was not only restricted to explicit challengers. The example of the Tajik civil war served to further underscore the political vulnerability that potentially awaited leaders who did not quickly consolidate power and firmly close the door to explicit or implicit challengers. Not wishing to see such violence play out in their own countries, governments on both sides of the Caspian Sea outlawed religious political parties and heavily restricted or banned foreign proselytizing and charitable organizations. Governments across the region took firm measures, suppressing political opposition and labeling Islamists as extremists. Religious freedom was *de jure* undercut in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan and *de facto* undercut in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, where a range of pressures were put in place on religious practice and attire, designed to maintain the narrow bands around acceptable indigenous practice.

The polarizing effect of crackdowns against anyone painted as an extremist or radical began the process of curating the narrow frame of an acceptable national identity, resting on indigenous moderate religious practice and conformity with the cultural norms of the main ethnic group. Georgia, the only Christian majority country in this study, similarly promoted ethnic Georgian heritage and Orthodox Christianity. And Azerbaijan, aware that it resided in the sphere of both Iran and Turkey, cautiously crafted a secular state narrative. Authoritarian legitimation

secured popular support by promoting national ideology and leader-centric myths that conveyed the state stability. Those who did not adhere to the emergent identity and narrative of the in-group in these seven countries, became part of the out-group and a perceived threat.

Perceptions of discrimination, injustice, and lack of equitable opportunities became the norm for populations not only in ethnic Uzbek-heavy southern Kyrgyzstan or in the Muslim minority border regions of Georgia, but also in religiously conservative Namangan and Andijon, Uzbekistan or in the Karategin Valley of Tajikistan. The 2005 Andijon massacre, the 2010 inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, and the 2015 outlawing of the IRPT and subsequent persecution of former members each underscored that opposition to the in-group meant harsh penalties. These outgroup populations were thus left with few viable options but to conform, migrate abroad, or to suffer ongoing indignities.<sup>239</sup>

***Mobilization to domestic-oriented jihadi organizations has likely been further mitigated by the enormous scale of economic migration of young people.***

Not only have state pressures and perceptions of inequity and injustice created inhospitable environments and diminished opportunities for self-realization among out-groups, lack of economic opportunity and viable employment across the region has resulted in substantial permanent and temporary emigration of young people across the region's population. In 2018, nearly 10 million people from these seven countries migrated abroad, according to data

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<sup>239</sup> Documents retrieved from the IMU in Afghanistan capture this quandary: "If the Uzbekistani Muslims can find a safe way to immigrate, they would immigrate by the thousands [1000's], because of the tyrant government's pressure and the alienation of religion under which they live. But the rout is very difficult, and in addition, the government is closely monitoring those who are religious, The faithless government will confiscate the possessions of whoever it suspect of intending on immigrating to Afghanistan." (Project Harmony, 2001)

from the International Organization on Migration and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.<sup>240</sup> Only Azerbaijan has had net positive migration. Field research conducted in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in 2016 and 2018, respectively, demonstrated that many communities were completely devoid of young adults who were working in Russia, Turkey or elsewhere. These absences are particularly noteworthy, since studied areas were in places of large minority populations that had expressed clear grievances towards the state. Given the absence of so many young people, even if grievances were sufficient to encourage protest, civil unrest, or mobilization to domestic jihadi organizations, the pool of potential recruits is smaller than it otherwise would be. Yet, this same venting process appears to have placed some individuals within easier reach of jihadi recruitment channels while they are outside of the region in places like Russia and Turkey.

***Mobilization choices emerged as new jihadi organizations developed, existing organizations shifted geographic orientation, and competition between groups expanded. These organizations became conveyor belts for new recruits from Central Asia and the South Caucasus, not for intra-regional focus, but for engagement in prioritized external jihadi theatres.***

The opening of the Syrian jihadi theatre encouraged the creation of new organizations, battalions, and brigades that drew in citizens from the Central Asian and Caucasus region. Groups like Sayfullakh Shishani's Jamaat, Jund al-Sham, Jabhat al Nusra, and the jihadi military contractor Malhama Tactical. In addition, previously existing organizations with participation from citizens of the region shifted their geographic orientation or established Syria operating wings. Organizations like the Caucasus Emirate or Sabri Jammatt that originated in the North

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<sup>240</sup> Current and historic data tables are available at: <https://migrationdataportal.org>

Caucasus became actively engaged in Syria. Similarly, Katibat Imam al Bukhari, IJU, and TIP, which came into being in the Afghanistan and Pakistan theatre, had each established operation in Syria by 2018. Certainly, involvement in Syria was propelled by the compelling historical and apocalyptic significance of the region. But state pressures in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Russia, as well as diminishing options for neighboring havens likely further encouraged orientation toward Syria.

Additionally, shifts in alliance, such as the IMU's 2015 pledge of bay'a to IS and its declaration that it would work to expand the so-called Caliphate in South Asia, underscored not only the competitive pressures between al Qaeda and IS, but also the perceived strategic importance for both organizations to be present in the two primary jihadi theatres of Syria/Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan. Conflicts in these theatres had global significance in the face of powers like Russia and the U.S. The ongoing conflicts in these principal locations and the prevalence of universal galvanizing criteria around defensive jihad that were largely absent in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, created momentum for both organizational action and recruitment of personnel abroad. In the aggregate, the growth of jihadi organizations, expansion into Syria, and the shifting of alliances created an environment with multiple offshore options for mobilization of citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

## **7.2 LOOKING FORWARD**

This dissertation fills a lacuna in the body of literature on risks and resiliencies to jihadi mobilization. Specifically, it provides a comparative examination of factors present in two geographically proximate areas of the former Soviet Union. This research differs from other scholarly endeavors, not only by its comparative nature, but also by establishing a basis for



understanding these risk and resilience factors in the context of history, community perceptions, and key actor behavior, including that of Salafi jihadi organizations and of regimes in the region. This research shows that contrary to persistent narratives about Central Asia and the South Caucasus as hotbeds of jihadism, internal jihadi organizational action has been limited, infrequent, and perpetrated by a narrow set of jihadi actors.

This research suggests that organizational locations and affiliations play an important role in determining not only where jihadi violence will occur, but where mobilization options are available. In the case of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, that emphasis has been external and concentrated in two principal geographies. As the territorial holdings of IS in Syria are eliminated, there is much speculation about whether displaced foreign fighters will return to their homes in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, relocate to other jihadi theatres, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, or seek haven in other locations. Chapter 4 of this dissertation identifies a slightly greater number of domestic jihadi attacks in the 2015-2017 period but cautions against prematurely assuming this blip is reflective of enhanced jihadi wherewithal or portends greater jihadi activity on the home front. In absence of additional attack data, it is simply too early to assess patterns. As the Global Terrorism Database is further populated, additional analysis will be essential in illuminating the extent to which deterioration of the so-called Caliphate and the decrease in FTFs has an impact on domestic jihadi attacks.

In addition to examining forthcoming historical attack data, researchers should strive to fill the persistent gap in insights from citizens of Central Asia and the South Caucasus who have actually been mobilized to Salafi jihadi organizations. The highly limited first-person interview data currently available in the literature corpus hinders the ability for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to gain full perspective on mobilization pathways, self-described motivations for

involvement, as well as decision-making process used by individuals in choosing which organization to join. Certainly, the case studies in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia presented in this dissertation suggest that personal relationships may have played a role for some individuals who were mobilized. But with a variety of organizations, units, and battalions affiliated across al Qaeda and IS, understanding whether there are factors beyond convenience, personal relationships, or happenstance would help to build strategies to dissuade future mobilization. Arguably, safe access to willing respondents, ideally outside of prison settings, poses difficulties, otherwise it would already have been done. As some countries in the region begin to introduce amnesty programs for returning FTFs and their families in the 2019 period, opportunities could increase for identifying potentially willing respondents. Naturally, the bounds of human subject protections for both respondents and researchers would need to be carefully weighed and observed.

This research suggests that state behavior has been a double-edged sword: strengthening authority over time, but simultaneously ostracizing some members of society, raising and concentrating grievances among outgroups. The migration safety valve for easing out malcontents and injecting much-needed remittance funding into the economy is certainly perceived by authorities as invaluable for stability. But stability in the long-term cannot be assured by relying on migration and remittances, arrest or venting of potential outgroups members, or the distraction of jihadi organizations in larger foreign theatres. Yet, it would be naïve to think that leaders in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are easily persuaded that they will be less vulnerable to instability through rapidly improving civil liberties and greater political openness. The more authoritarian countries of the region simply need to point to comparatively more open Kyrgyzstan to see that absence of full control has, at times, yielded violent transitions,

albeit not jihadist in nature. Yet, as it appears that minorities and outgroups are well-represented among the FTFs from the region, it is essential that governments be encouraged to understand the relationship between policies of marginalization and involvement of some citizens in violent agendas. And ideally to find ways to limit both through incremental steps towards inclusion and broad societal development.

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## **APPENDIX: INSTRUMENT EXAMPLES**

### **STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for All Stakeholder Consultations

**Georgia**  
**May-June 2018**

#### **Guidance to Research Teams: Please review this prior to conducting Stakeholder Consultations**

This interview guide serves as the key instrument for interviews with Stakeholder Consultations in all studied regions of Georgia for the Georgia VE Risk Analysis. This guide is intended for use by research team members only and should not be shared with respondents.

The questions presented below are designed to initiate a conversation about the research topic yet provide sufficient flexibility to probe for fuller understanding. Each question is followed by a short set of recommended probes that can assist the researcher with alternative ways of eliciting information relevant to the research topic. Interviewers should listen closely to responses and probe with logical follow-up questions to ensure full clarity and depth of response. Strategic pauses and appropriate pacing can help to reveal more meaningful responses.

Researchers should make an effort to actively encourage responses from all participants and avoid allowing a limited number of participants from monopolizing the conversation.

Demographic information will be gathered prior to the start of the Stakeholder Consultation.

Notes and transcripts of conversations should be taken by hand using notepads and pens. Please make note of any relevant non-verbal cues (e.g., anger, frustration, tension). Computers will be used, only if there is no objection from participants. Audio recordings will not be used.

Interview data needs to be uploaded to the shared drive each evening.

#### **Semi-Structured Stakeholder Interview Questions:**

The main Stakeholder Consultation questions are listed in the questionnaire below. Each question is followed by bulleted *recommended* probes. It is only necessary to use probes, if the conversation is not already yielding clear or robust responses. The interviewer should probe toward the intent of the principal research questions, without sharing or being explicit about the research questions.

**Pre-Interview Information:** Please gather the following information before the start of the Focus Group.

Date : Month: _____ Day _____ Year: 2018						
Region:		Municipality:			Village :	
Please make note of the following information:						
Participant Number	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation	Ethnicity	Religion
1.						
Interviewer Name:						
Start Time : ___:___ AM/PM (circle one) Finish Time: ___:___ AM/PM (circle one)						
Comments:						

**[Introduction]**

1. Please tell me about yourself and your work as [government official, community leader, religious leader, civil society leader, etc]
  - *Do you do any specific work on social cohesion, stability, or deterring extremism?*

**[Stability]**

2. How would you describe the current stability and security challenges facing Georgia?
  - *Is there a VE challenge facing Georgia?*
3. Are there any differences in how the regions are experiencing these challenges? If so, what are they?
  - *What about in this region where you live?*
4. Have these challenges changed in the past couple of years? How?
5. What do you think will happen if people who fought abroad return to Georgia?

6. What are your impressions of the Georgian government's efforts to prevent instability or extremism?
- *Do you know anything about the national countering violent extremism action plan?*

*Ask the following to Georgia-based stakeholders outside of Tbilisi*

**[Rule of Law and Justice]**

7. Please tell me about law and justice in your region.
- *What works well with the police, laws, and courts? Does anything about the police, laws, and courts need improving?*

*Ask the following to Georgia-based stakeholders outside of Tbilisi*

**[Living Conditions and Livelihoods]**

8. Please describe for me what life is like here in your community?
- *Social conditions? Economic conditions?*
9. What, if anything, has changed in the past few years?
10. Do people from your community migrate for opportunities? If so, to where and for what type of opportunities?

*Ask the following to Georgia-based stakeholders outside of Tbilisi*

**[Governance and Civic Engagement]**

11. Tell me about governance here in your region and in Georgia.
- *What works well about governance? Does anything about governance need improving?*
  - *Do people have a voice in how they are governed?*
12. How would you describe the relationship between your region and Tbilisi?

*Ask the following to Georgia-based stakeholders outside of Tbilisi*

**[Ethnic and Religious Identity]**

13. Can you tell me about interethnic relations here and in Georgia?
14. Please describe for me religious practice in your community?
15. Are people free to worship any religion or confession here?
16. Do you feel that all ethnic and religious groups in Georgia are treated equally and have equal opportunities?
- *Economically? Politically? Educationally? Other?*
17. How could interethnic or inter-religious relations be strengthened in Georgia?

**[VEOs]**

18. What do you think caused people from Georgia to go to conflict places like eastern Ukraine or Syria/Iraq?

19. If there were people from your community that went to these conflict zones, how did they get involved and were able to travel there?

- *Were they recruited? If so, how?*

20. How could someone here in this community learn about radical organizations or ways to join the fight in a foreign country?

- *Face-to-face? Internet and social media?*

**[Resilience]**

21. What do you think helps prevent people from getting involved with armed groups and conflict zones?

*Actively prompt with this question.*

- *Do you know anyone who rejected recruitment to join an armed group or to travel to a conflict zone?*

22. Are there other activities that could be done to help prevent people from getting involved with armed groups and conflict zones?

23. What is currently being done by the community, government and others on the reintegration of people in Georgia who had gone abroad to conflict places or participated with violent organizations?

**[External Actors]**

24. Can you tell me about the effectiveness of local organizations [that are operating in your community] to improve conditions or address issues of stability or extremism?

25. What more can be done by local government, community groups, businesses, schools, religious institutions and others to address issues of stability or extremism?

**[Conclusion]**

26. Are there any other comments you would like to make that we have not already discussed?

27. Do you have any recommendations of people who would be willing to talk with us who either are friends, family members or acquaintances of people who have joined armed groups in conflict zones like Syria? If so, could you help make introductions to our team?

*Thank the respondents for their time.*

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION INTERVIEW GUIDE**  
Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Community Members

**Georgia**  
**May-June 2018**

**Guidance to Research Teams: Please review this prior to conducting Focus Group Discussions**

This interview guide serves as the key instrument for interviews with Focus Groups in all studied regions of Georgia for the Georgia VE Risk Analysis. This guide is intended for use by research team members only and should not be shared with respondents.

The questions presented below are designed to initiate a conversation about the research topic yet provide sufficient flexibility to probe for fuller understanding. Each question is followed by a short set of recommended probes that can assist the researcher with alternative ways of eliciting information relevant to the research topic. Interviewers should listen closely to responses and probe with logical follow-up questions to ensure full clarity and depth of response. Strategic pauses and appropriate pacing can help to reveal more meaningful responses.

Each Focus Group Discussion will consist of 5-10 people of only one gender. There will be three sets of focus group discussions consisting of participants in the following age groups: 18-35; 36-55; 56+.

Researchers should make an effort to actively encourage responses from all participants and avoid allowing a limited number of participants from monopolizing the conversation.

Names of participants should not be gathered. Demographic information will be gathered prior to the start of the Focus Group Discussion.

Notes and transcripts of conversations should be taken by hand using notepads and pens. Please make note of any relevant non-verbal cues (e.g., anger, frustration, tension). Computers will be used, only if there is no objection from participants. Audio recordings will not be used.

Interview data needs to be uploaded to the shared drive each evening.

**Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Questions:**

The main Focus Group Discussion questions are listed in the questionnaire below. Each question is followed by bulleted *recommended* probes. It is only necessary to use probes, if the conversation is not already yielding clear or robust responses. The interviewer should probe toward the intent of the principal research questions, without sharing or being explicit about the research questions.

**Pre-Interview Information:** Please gather the following information from each participant before the start of the Focus Group.

Date : Month: _____ Day _____ Year: 2018						
Region:		Municipality:			Village :	
For each participant, please note the following:						
Participant Number	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation	Ethnicity	Religion
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						
9.						
10.						
Interviewer Name:						
Start Time : ____:____ AM/PM (circle one) Finish Time: ____:____ AM/PM (circle one)						
Comments:						

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**[Living Conditions and Livelihoods]**

1. Please describe for me what life is like here in your community?
  - *Social conditions? Economic conditions?*

2. What, if anything, has changed in the past few years?
3. Do people from your community migrate for opportunities? If so, to where and for what type of work?

**[Governance and Civic Engagement]**

4. Tell me about governance here in your region and in Georgia.
  - *What works well about governance? Does anything about governance need improving?*
  - *Do people have a voice in how they are governed?*
5. How would you describe the relationship between your region and Tbilisi?

**[Rule of Law and Justice]**

6. Please tell me about law and justice in your region.
  - *What works well with the police, laws, and courts? Does anything about the police, laws, and courts need improving?*

**[Ethnic and Religious Identity]**

7. Can you tell me about interethnic relations here and in Georgia?
8. Please describe for me religious practice in your community?
9. Are people free to worship any religion or confession here?
10. Do you feel that all ethnic and religious groups in Georgia are treated equally and have equal opportunities?
  - *Economically? Politically? Educationally? Other?*
11. How could interethnic or inter-religious relations be strengthened in Georgia?

**[VEOs]**

12. What do you think caused people from Georgia to go to conflict places like eastern Ukraine or Syria/Iraq?
13. If there were people from your community that went to these conflict zones, how did they get involved and were able to travel there?
  - *Were they recruited? If so, how?*
14. How could someone here in this community learn about radical organizations or ways to join the fight in a foreign country?
  - *Face-to-face? Internet and social media?*



15. What do you think helps prevent people from getting involved with armed groups and conflict zones?

*Actively prompt with this question.*

- *Do you know anyone who rejected recruitment to join an armed group or to travel to a conflict zone? Why did they reject recruitment.*

16. Are there other activities that could be done to help prevent people from getting involved with armed groups and conflict zones?

17. What is currently being done by the community, government and others on the reintegration of people in Georgia who had gone abroad to conflict places or participated with violent organizations?

18. What will happen if people who fought abroad return to Georgia?

**[Stability]**

19. Are there any challenges in your community or in Georgia (besides Abkhazia and South Ossetia) that could lead to serious tensions? If so, what are they?

20. What is the best way to address these challenges so that instability does not occur here?

21. What are your impressions of the Georgian government's efforts to prevent instability or extremism?

**[External Actors]**

22. Can you tell me about the effectiveness of organizations that are operating in your community on issues of stability or tolerance?

23. What more can be done by local government, community groups, businesses, schools, religious institutions and others to address issues of stability or tolerance?

**[Imagining the Future]**

24. Describe to me what the future looks like for this community?

25. What can be done to bring about a secure and prosperous future here?

*Thank the respondents for their time.*

## **KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for FTF Family, Friends, Acquaintances

**Georgia**  
**May-June 2018**

### **Guidance to Research Teams: Please review this prior to meeting with key informants**

This interview guide serves as the principal instrument for interviews with key informants (FTF family members, friends, or acquaintances) in all studied regions of Georgia for the Georgia VE Risk Analysis. This guide is intended for use by research team members only and should not be shared with respondents.

The questions presented below are designed to initiate a conversation about the research topic yet provide sufficient flexibility to probe for fuller understanding. Each question is followed by a short set of recommended probes that can assist the researcher with alternative ways of eliciting information relevant to the research topic. Interviewers should listen closely to responses and probe with logical follow-up questions to ensure full clarity and depth of response. Strategic pauses and appropriate pacing can help to reveal more meaningful responses.

Names of key informants should not be gathered. Demographic information will be gathered prior to the start of the conversation.

Notes and transcripts of conversations should be taken by hand using notepads and pens. Please make note of any relevant non-verbal cues (e.g., anger, frustration, tension). Computers and audio recordings will not be used.

Interview data needs to be uploaded to the shared drive each evening.

### **Semi-Structured Key Informant Interview Questions:**

The main key informant interview questions are listed in the questionnaire below. Each question is followed by bulleted *recommended* probes. It is only necessary to use probes, if the conversation is not already yielding clear or robust responses. The interviewer should probe toward the intent of the principal research questions, without sharing or being explicit about the research questions.

**Pre-Interview Demographic Information:** Please gather the following information from the key informant at the start of the interview.

Date : Month: _____ Day _____ Year: 2018						
Region:		Municipality:			Village :	
For the respondent, please note the following:						
Participant Number	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation	Ethnicity	Religion
1.						
Interviewer Name:						
Start Time : ____:____ AM/PM (circle one) Finish Time: ____:____ AM/PM (circle one)						
Comments:						

**[Background]**

1. Please tell me about the person you know who travelled to Syria/Iraq and how you know that person?

*Specific prompts that should be asked, if not readily stated by respondent:*

- *Is the person still alive?*
- *How old is that person now, if still living or when died? How old was he/she when he went to Syria?*
- *How would he/she identify ethnically?*
- *What was their role in Syria/Iraq?*

2. What was that person like growing up here? How was his/her character?

*Specific prompts that should be asked, if not readily stated by respondent:*

- *What kind of education did he/she have?*
- *Did he/she practice a religion? How?*
- *Was he/she in the military?*

3. Tell me about that person's family before he left Georgia.

*Specific prompts that should be asked, if not readily presented:*

- *Was he/she married? Children?*
- *Who did he/she live with?*
- *How did he/she earn a living?*
- *How was his/her family's economic situation compared with others in your community?*

4. How do you think people in this community currently view that person and his/her involvement in Syria/Iraq?

#### **[Motivations, Access, and Recruitment]**

5. How do you think he/she first came into contact with jihadist organizations?

- *Any noticeable behavior changes?*

6. How do you think he/she and others from your community were able to travel to Syria/Iraq?

- *Were they recruited? If so, how?*

7. What do you think were the motivations for this person to go to Syria/Iraq?

8. How could someone here in this community learn about organizations like Islamic State/Daesh or ways to join the fight in a foreign country?

- *Face-to-face? Internet and social media?*

#### **[Resilience]**

9. What do you think helps prevent people from getting involved with armed groups and conflict zones?

*Actively prompt with this question.*

- *Do you know anyone who rejected recruitment to join an armed group or to travel to a conflict zone?*

10. Are there other activities that could be done to help prevent people from getting involved with armed groups and conflict zones?

11. What is currently being done by the community, government and others on the reintegration of people in Georgia who had gone abroad to conflict places or participated with violent organizations?

12. Do you have any concerns about the return to Georgia of people who fought abroad?

13. How do you think the people in this community view the government of Georgia's response to extremism and radicalization?

#### **[Imagining the Future]**

14. What can be done to bring about a secure and prosperous future here?

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE A**

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Male and Female Youth (18-24) Returned Migrants

**Kyrgyzstan March 2016**

### **Guidance to Research Teams:**

This interview guide serves as the basis for discussions with respondents. As with most qualitative semi-structured interview guides, this serves as a living document that will evolve iteratively during the life of the research. These questions have been developed and will be continuously tested and refined based on the research teams' observations following each interview. The general questions presented below are designed to initiate a conversation about the research topic. Each question is followed by a short series of follow-up probes.

It is essential that research teams listen closely to the conversation and probe with logical and timely follow-up questions that help reveal relevant information for the research topic. Do not rush the conversation. Use strategic pauses to elicit meaningful responses.

To ensure maximum trust between the research team and respondent, note takers [research assistants] will only take notes by hand using notepads and pens. Interview data will be reviewed, discussed and entered into the computer database each evening.

As the research methodology relies on snowball technique for identifying potential subsequent respondents, research teams will be certain to ask for recommendations and contact information for others to be interviewed.

Honest feedback between research team members is essential for ensuring collection of valuable and reliable information. To this end, team members should reflect on the interviewer language, interaction and behavior during the interview in order to make any needed adjustments for subsequent interviews.

### **Interview Procedure:**

*Upon meeting the respondent, please take as long as you need to establish rapport with the respondent. Please inform that respondent that before beginning the interview, you will need to clarify the project and obtain verbal consent to proceed.*

### **Please read the following Informed Consent Statement:**

*“You are volunteering to participate in a research project conducted by Mercy Corps, an independent global organization. You understand that the project is designed to gather information about changes and effects of social and economic factors in Osh, Jalalabad, Batken, and Issyk-Kul. You will be one of approximately 100 people being interviewed for this research.*

1. *Your participation in this project is voluntary. You understand that you will not be paid for participation. You may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time.*
2. *If you feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, you have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.*
3. *Participation involves being interviewed by researchers from Mercy Corps. The interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. The conversations will not be recorded.*
4. *The respondent's identity will not in any way be captured or shared, and all responses will be anonymous. Absolutely no attribution will be made between the respondent and the responses, and an identifying number will be created by the interviewer that will be used for any quotes included in the research. Your confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.*

*Uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals.*

*Do you have any questions before we begin? Do you give verbal acknowledgement and consent to be interviewed?"*

**Please make note whether the respondent gave consent to be interviewed? Yes/No**  
*If yes, please proceed to the questions.*

**Pre-Interview Information:** [Please determine and note the following information through observation, where possible. If not readily observable, please ask the respondent.]

- Interview number [sequential order of interviews conducted by the research team]
- Respondent record number [assigned according to the protocol established by the research team]
- Date of interview
- Name of region
- Name of town/city
- Name of village/community
- Gender of respondent
- Age of respondent [please ask for precision]
- Ethnicity of respondent
- Were the respondent and the research team alone for the interview

**Semi-Structure Interview Questions:** [Initial questions are numbered. Probes are bulleted under each numbered question. Probes are intended to be used to keep the conversation flowing and focused. It is not essential to ask the probes, if the conversation is already yielding robust responses. Remember, this is a semi-structured interview, not a highly structured survey. The interviewer must remain flexible during the interview process, and remember to probe toward the

intent of the underlying research questions. Success of the interview is dependent on the interviewer's ability to dig deeper for meaningful responses, without leading towards a specific response.]

**[Ascertain extent of flow of economic migrants back to Kyrgyzstan and original community]**

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your background.
  - Education? Wife? Children?
  - Are you originally from this community? If not, why are you here now?
  
2. Tell me about your experience working abroad.
  - What caused you to go abroad?
  - What type of work did you do abroad? Was it seasonal?
  - Did you live with other people from Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia? Did you know them beforehand?
  - Are you still planning to work abroad?
    - Were you forced to leave Russia/Kazakhstan? (As a result of low income, family matters, problems with migration services)
    - Are your friends/family/acquaintances from Kyrgyzstan still working abroad?
    - How many friends/acquaintances have returned to Kyrgyzstan in the last 1-2 years?

**[Ascertain if there is increased economic pressure on households due to remittance reductions]**

3. Tell me about how the remittances were used by those supported in Kyrgyzstan.
  - To whom did you send the money?
  - How did you send the money to Kyrgyzstan?
  - How important were remittances to their income?
  - Did they save any money? How? [Capital purchases, livestock, property, etc]
  - Is/was remittance money their only/largest source of income?
  
4. How has your household income been affected by changes in foreign-earned wages or remittance reductions?
  - Are remittances still a portion of your family's income? From where?
  - How has the change in value of the Russian ruble affected you?
  - What are you doing differently to cope with any changes in income for you and those you supported?
  - How would you describe your family's economic situation compared to others in your community?

5. Since returning from abroad, have you been able to earn enough income for yourself and those you previously supported?

- How do you make a living now?
- Do you have single or multiple income streams?
- Has your education helped you find work?
- Do you feel that you have gaps in your knowledge/skills that are affecting your employability?

**[Ascertain level of satisfaction with the government]**

6. Since you returned home from abroad, have you used the local or central government for help in reintegrating and finding work in Kyrgyzstan?

- What has been most helpful and why?
- What has been least helpful and why?

7. Are there any challenges in your community or in Kyrgyzstan that could lead to conflict?

- What would be the best ways to prevent this from occurring?

8. Who do you see as responsible for addressing these challenges in Kyrgyzstan?

- Do you feel you are receiving all of the services that you are entitled to as a citizen of Kyrgyzstan?
- Should the government and elected officials be doing anything differently to serve you and your community?
- What do you think about government role in addressing challenges?
- Do you believe political, ethnic, religious, social groups can be effective in addressing the concerns of young people in Kyrgyzstan? How?

9. Did you vote in the recent parliamentary election?

- Are you part of a political party?
- Do you do any other political activities?

**[Ascertain extent of satisfaction with religious freedom (including political voice)]**

10. Do people in your community feel free to practice their religion as they wish?

- Are ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz equally religious/pious?
- Do you know about laws on religion in Kyrgyzstan?
- What is your opinion about the laws and enforcement on religion?
- Do people modify their behaviors related to religious expression to avoid problems? How?

11. Do you think people in your community are aware about Sharia?

- Do you think there is interest in using Sharia in this community? As a legal framework for Kyrgyzstan?



**[Ascertain extent of satisfaction with ethnic reconciliation and integration (including political voice)]**

12. Do you feel that all groups of people in Kyrgyzstan have equal opportunities in life?
- Economically? Politically? Educationally? Rural vs Urban? Other?
13. What do you think about interethnic relations in the country?
- How could relations be further improved?
  - What factors and conditions are the main causes of ethnic tensions?

**[Ascertain affinity towards violence as an acceptable expression of grievance]**

14. Are there ever instances where people might feel that conflict would be acceptable?
- Under what circumstances?

**[Ascertain attitude towards jihadi organizations]**

15. What can you say about the situation in Iraq and Syria?
- What do you know about ISIS?
  - Do you believe that ISIS may become active in Central Asia?
16. Have you heard of radical trends in Islam?
- What drives radical trends and organizations in Islam?
  - What do you know about such radical organizations in Kyrgyzstan?

*Thank the respondent for his/her time and helpfulness.*

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

William B. Farrell has worked in leadership positions in multilateral organizations, the United States Government, and non-profit organizations over the past twenty-five years. His experience in fragile countries has given him significant background in confronting the challenges of instability through evidence-based policy guidance and high-impact program design. Farrell regularly speaks internationally and domestically on topics of fragility. Farrell holds a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a Bachelor of Arts, *magna cum laude*, in International Relations and German from Tufts University.

Farrell is currently Principal Consultant at Maine-based Swordfish Consulting International, LLC. Farrell and the team at Swordfish work globally on situation analysis, strategy formulation, impact articulation, and influence mapping in fragile and transitional countries. In addition, Farrell has served as cooperating faculty at the Maine Business School since 2013 and at the University of Maine's School of Policy and International Affairs since 2014.

Prior to his current work, Farrell was Vice President of Corporate and Foundation Relations and Vice President of Global Sectoral Support at the international humanitarian organization Mercy Corps. Earlier in his career, Farrell was seconded by the United States Department of State to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, where he was substantially involved in the formal peace negotiations between Georgians and South Ossetians as well as between Tajiks, during the civil war in Tajikistan. His work with the United States Agency for International Development in Central Asia helped communities and governments develop stronger partnerships to enhance the lives and well-being of citizens. He has worked in support of emergency response in Sudan. And he has conducted field research in large parts of the Sahel, Caucasus, and Central Asia for concrete ways in which development assistance

can be used to counter violent extremist activity, build stability, and support national cohesion.

Farrell is a member of the Maine Advisory Committee of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition. He also holds membership in: the Alliance for Peacebuilding; American Political Science Association; Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; Central Eurasian Studies Society; International Political Science Association; and the Society for Terrorism Research.

He lives in Orono, Maine with his wife Jennifer and their five children, Liam, Aila, Siobhan, Seamus, and Killian. He is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Maine in December 2019.