RICE UNIVERSITY

"Poor Religious Understanding": Peacebuilding, Secular Islam, and Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan

By

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2020
Abstract

This dissertation considers the intersections of Islam and secularism in the post-Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, as well as how international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have worked to promote peace and counter violent extremism in the country. By introducing two intertwined concepts – Islamic secularism and secular Islam – the author describes the spaces where state policy, development goals, individual freedoms, and religious practice meet. Through analysis of interviews with friends and associates of some Kyrgyzstani nationals who became foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the piece also identifies certain contextual push factors for violence. Ultimately, using Saba Mahmood's critique, this dissertation rejects the liberal motive of promoting secularism within Islam for civilizing purposes, in favor of six concrete considerations for practically countering violent extremism in the Kyrgyzstani context.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without many open and sometimes difficult conversations with countless friends and interlocutors in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, who shared with me their thoughts and perspectives, as well as advice and interpretation. Many must rename anonymous. Edil Baisalov, Aizatbek Beshov, Farhod Yuldashev, Kevin Gash, Dan Malinovich, Peter Sondergaard, and Kristel Maasen have been wonderful friends over the years with strong Kyrgyzstan ties who introduced me to a number of helpful people during my research. Keneshbek Sainazarov, William Farrell, Makhabat Alymkulova, and Garrett Hubbard made much of this work possible. All my fellow graduate students in the Rice Anthropology Department have been much appreciated friends and advocates. My advisor throughout this process, James Faubion, gave me a wealth of insight and encouragement. Dominic Boyer asked many illuminating questions and pointed me in the direction of some very helpful resources. David Cook gave me important context for this project, and my work is much better for it. My sister, Brook Wilensky-Lanford, coaxed me ever onward with many words of encouragement and confidence, as did a great friend a few years ahead of me in the program, Ian Lowrie. I wish to thank my parents, Sheila Wilensky and Henry Lanford, and stepmother Ann Davis Lanford, for always encouraging me to pursue an advanced degree and believing that I could complete it. I had many chats with my brothers-in-law, Gianmarco Leoncavallo, Craig Opitz, and Scott Opitz, who always encouraged me to finish. Thanks very much to my father-in-law, Lyn Opitz, whose generous support these past few years has made life much easier while I completed this undertaking. My mother-in-law, Kay Martin, and her husband Jerry Martin, supported me tremendously by helping to care for my children during several extended writing retreats. Those sweet kids, Foss and Shay, constantly inspire me to try and make the world a better place. Most of all, I wish to thank my incredible wife Steph, for her full faith in me and my ability to complete this project, her unending love, her deep reserves of patience, as well as her many sacrifices of time and energy these past nine years of graduate school. She is an awesome person whom I could not have done this without, and I dedicate this dissertation to her.
Introduction – Inspiration, Methodology, and Investments

I first arrived in Kyrgyzstan in June of 2001, three months before the world as I knew it would change dramatically, forever. I had just finished a year hiatus from my studies at Reed College, where I had taken a year of Russian language my sophomore year. Kyrgyzstan was attractive to me, because it was in a part of the world that, before I went there, I knew very little about. I remember talking one night with friends at Reed over a map of the former Soviet Union. My two friends were Russophiles – even more than me at the time, despite the fact that I had ancestral roots in the region. I remember talking with one of them, Ben Eder, about this large swath of territory I thought of then as the ‘Stans’ – those five countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. I was perhaps a bit embarrassed that I didn’t know as much as Ben did about the place, and I wanted to change that. From that moment of young male geographic insecurity emerged within me a curiosity and commitment that has lasted the past twenty years, and shows no sign of abating.

And so, there I was, my first moments in the country, meeting with a family that would host me for the next month and a half as I taught English to kids while living in a yurt on the shores of the majestic Issyk-Kul, a massive lake in the middle of a desert basin, high in the mountains in the eastern part of the country. I had taken the train into the country, all the way from Moscow. It was a three-day ride, back when people in the region were truly interested and excited to meet Americans. I was regaled with vodka, food, and song by my cabinmates, those down the hall, and even the lady attendant whose job it was to stoke the samovar and sell tea to the passengers. The communal apartment blocks interspersed with trees and then forest southeast of Moscow unfolded into a steppe, and then desert, before farmland again in Kazakhstan. I remember the feeling of excitement as we rolled into Bishkek at around 4 in the morning.
The country would become my home for a total of more than four years out of the next twenty, longer than I would live in one place consecutively even to this day. It became something of an obsession – a place so seemingly different and, at times, challenging, that only by spending time there would I, could I, learn what kind of life I wanted to lead.

That first summer, out at the lake, I was literally the first American many had seen, and this felt like both a privilege and an obligation. It was all new to me, and I was new to the people I met. There was a palpable pride of place there, particularly evident in terms of the way my hosts talked about the yurt, but also the lake, the mountains, the small farm there. Although I was living mostly with urban people who had family ties to the village where we ran a makeshift school for the summer, near Tyup, on the northeast corner of the lake, there were some local people amongst our group that lived there year-round. The landscape was like nothing I had seen before, or since. Towering mountains, with glaciers and snow visible even at the height of summer, deep ravines with churning rivers, grassy slopes spotted with wildflowers and free-grazing horses and sheep. It felt incredibly rustic and romantic, untouched by the complications of life in a city or anywhere else I had known.

I probably knew I wanted to come back pretty soon after I got there. One evening, while I was walking with two young women about my age from the yurt camp to a village well to fill up the jerry cans we would use the next day, I learned about a practice that felt so foreign, shocking, and strange to me that I would spend the next two years researching it. Bride kidnapping. One of the young women made a comment to the other, presumably for my benefit, I thought at the moment, that they were lucky I was walking with them. I asked what she meant, and she explained to me that young women like them walking without a man at night were at risk of being taken violently to be married, often to a complete stranger. What had seemed like innocent
flirtation suddenly took on a whole new level of meaning. I was aghast, and felt a drive to better understand this terrible practice. To make things more complicated, as I soon learned, many women were also involved in the kidnapping, and it was the potential bride’s soon-to-be mother-in-law who would often play the defining role in forcing the young woman to stay with her new family after a kidnapping. What’s more is that many women – not only men – spoke to me about how this practice spelled a distinction for the Kyrgyz people. It was a tradition that many were proud of, which might have meant one thing during nomadic times, when the marriages that transpired from the kidnappings were planned ahead of times, I was told, and served to unite families and even competing clans, but now meant something very different. In the chaos of post-Soviet life (Nazpary 2002), the bride kidnapping motif became a lens through which I could tell a story about the way that society was changing, which I eventually did in my thesis at Reed (Wilensky-Lanford 2003).

I became interested in what I term secular Islam---and, relatedly, Islamic secularism---with this work in mind, but largely through and as a result of my experiences as a journalist in the region. One link between my work early researching and considering gender relations and traditions around marriage in Kyrgyzstan and my investment in the topics I focus on in this dissertation is around the question of how people with different moral frameworks talk about their actions and the values that inform them. I like to think in that space where what is right and good varies based on perspective, politics, and experience. In my studies of Kyrgyz bride-kidnapping, I wanted to hear and try to understand the reasons why people thought this practice was good. That does not mean that I became an apologist for the practice – far from it. What I sought, instead, was to hear the justification or, more accurately, the logic behind the practice. I thought at the time – naively, no doubt - and to some extent still feel today, that the best way to
come to some kind of agreement with another person about what was right and good was to first hear their views on a matter, and then hope that they would want to hear yours.

The same basic maxim motivates my interest in considering what justifies or explains a person’s movement toward religious militancy. While this dissertation is not directly about religious militancy and what motivates one toward it, at some level that is the dissertation that in an ideal world I would have undertaken. Hurdles abounded, and continue to abound; access and safety primary among them. I came to study, instead, the practice around setting out to counter or prevent violent extremism, through first arriving at an interest and inquiry into the precepts of a Muslim political party that espouses nonviolent methods, called Hizb ut-Tahrir (literally, Party of Freedom/Liberation in Arabic). I became interested in that group through my work reporting amongst the refugees of a violent police crackdown in Andijon, in eastern Uzbekistan, in 2005, which I delve much deeper into in the pages that follow. Suffice it to say now that my experiences interviewing and getting to know these refugees, who fled such extreme violence, propelled me to consider the explanations of the perpetrators of that violence – in this case, the Uzbekistani state, led by then-President Islam Karimov – used to justify it (Tisdall 2005).

In those heady days of 2005, when regimes were falling across the region, I would personally witness the overthrow of President Askar Akayev, and watch for, wait for, the changes that everybody expected, it seemed, yet never came. A few months later, when I met these refugees, most of whom were innocent civilians who had been caught up in a pro-democracy rally, I began to look consciously and subconsciously for links between the two uprisings---one ostensibly successful, the other clearly not. The popular protests I saw in Bishkek that led to the president fleeing to Moscow and resigning his position took on a different meaning and significance in my mind when I spoke with the refugees in southern Kyrgyzstan.
who had fled from Uzbekistan. The Bishkek protests were possible, as I will discuss in depth later, because of myriad factors, including US support for a vibrant civil society and relatively free press in Kyrgyzstan that encouraged people to come to the streets, as well as a decision by the weakened president to not use force to disperse the crowds. All of this was absent in the Uzbekistan case. Surely there were other very significant differences between the two uprisings, but this much was true, as I will demonstrate in this text.

My commitments in this dissertation, then, born largely from what I experienced interviewing the refugees from Andijon, and an effort to understand the justifications the Uzbekistani state used to explain the violence they experienced, coalesced into two primary and related research questions. The first was: How do state secularism and Islamic practice interact to inform “secular Muslims’” ways of life in Central Asia? In other words, given the history of professed atheism and ostensible rejection of most religion in Soviet Central Asia, how did contemporary citizens in the region navigate life’s moral decisions in such a way as to give credence to their god as well as their state? What was this in-between space like?

My second major research question that I sought to answer was: What happens when religious identity supersedes national identity, and why does this sometimes lead to opposition to the state? This question gets closer to what I wrote above would have been my research question in an ideal world, around motivations for religiously motivated violent extremism. I thought that I could get at these thematics by talking with those making interventions intended to counter violent extremism within Islam. To some extent, I have. But, as I write in the pages that follow, I became as interested in and learned as much about the assumptions inherent in this sort of peacebuilding, or countering violent extremism, as I did about the assumptions that would-be
violent jihadists make. Both groups, after all, exist in a world mediated and defined, at least in part, by the other.

METHODODOLOGY

This dissertation is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the course of four research trips to Kyrgyzstan, during the summers of 2012, 2013, 2014, and then for 12 months during 2015–16. It also occasionally draws from previous time in Kyrgyzstan as a reporter for The New York Times, The Moscow Times, and CNN; major points made from this time as a journalist are cited. As an ethnographer, between 2012–16, I conducted over 100 interviews, including with development workers, civil society organization employees, politicians, government officials, religious leaders, university professors, journalists, local and regional administrators, and other would-be beneficiaries of development or peacebuilding initiatives. In my analysis and writing, in keeping with the customary form of ethnographic work in the repressive contexts of Central Asia (e.g. Liu 2012), I have used pseudonyms to identify all interlocutors who are not public figures.

During my ethnographic work, I borrowed heavily from the frameworks of monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation, often abbreviated as “M&E,” is a growing practice within the fields of “development,” as well as governance. It is a useful and revealing activity for anthropologists to consider, because through the lens of monitoring and, in particular, evaluation, an ethnographer can see not only how a project, policy, or program is viewed by those conducting it – the “developers,” if you will – but also how it is experienced, conceived, and conceptualized by those who are “to-be-developed” (Mosse 2004: 666). In the course of the research that produced this dissertation, I was interested in both the “developers” and the people...
“to be developed.” As a practice, evaluation was particularly useful for me, as it provided access to development workers and those intended to benefit from their work. It gave me a reason to be around the development projects, for lack of a more precise description, in a way that was easily understandable by those I needed to convince to give me access—more easily understandable, that is, than anthropology alone would have been.

In what follows, I will first explain briefly what monitoring and evaluation are, drawing a quick comparison between the two activities, and then describe their object, “development,” paying some attention to how I have found the concept to be conceived of in Kyrgyzstan. I will then return to the topic of evaluation of development initiatives as ethnography, describing the methodology that I used, which incorporates both practices in tandem. Finally, I will touch briefly upon potential problems and challenges that could arise when using this methodology, including potential moral qualms about aiding the “development industry” (Ferguson and Lohmann 1994).

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation are both activities that are used to study the efficacy and effects of a particular intervention, be it a project, program, or policy. Evaluation can be carried out during the planning processes of a “development” project, mid-way through it, or afterward. Evaluation can and often does stand alone from monitoring processes, or it can be dependent on and complementary to ongoing monitoring processes, which generally include surveys or questionnaires after trainings or other components of a particular intervention. Monitoring data typically inform evaluation analysis. In other words:
Monitoring is a continuing function that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing development intervention with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives and progress in the use of allocated funds (OECD 2002: 27-28).

Note that monitoring is typically carried out internally, by staff working for the intervening organization (Morra Imas and Rist 2009). Also, questioning the broader strategy and objectives of an intervention is not part of the purview of monitoring; meanwhile, it can be a crucial component of evaluation, particularly when that evaluation is being done by an anthropologist, as we shall see below. Indeed:

Ultimately, the purpose of any evaluation is to provide information to decision makers to enable them to make better decisions about projects, programs, or policies. Evaluation should help decision makers understand what is likely to happen, is happening, or has happened because of an intervention and identify ways to obtain more of the desired results (Morra Imas and Rist 2009: 12).

A key reason for evaluation, according to Morra Imas and Rist (2009) – a definitive textbook on evaluation for the World Bank and USAID, and therefore dozens of other organizations around the world – is to promote greater transparency in and of the “development industry.” Ostensibly, evaluation is done to make development interventions better. Whether or not it does this is a separate question, of course.

A related practice that is sometimes confused with evaluation is auditing. The textbook on evaluation mentioned above, which grew out of a two-week course at Carleton University in Ottawa intended to train evaluators from around the world (Morra Imas and Rist 2009), describes some of the history of evaluation design and practice. In the past, auditing was much more common than evaluation of the style that is of growing importance today. The intervention project that James Ferguson studied, for example, likely underwent more of an audit than a series
of results-based evaluations. The difference is substantial. An auditing tradition “has an investigative, financial management, and accounting orientation... Auditing tends to focus on compliance with requirements, while evaluation tends to focus on attributing observed changes to a policy, program, or project” (Morra Imas and Rist 2009: 23–25). Put another way, auditors seek answers to normative questions, while evaluators seek answers to cause-and-effect and descriptive questions (Wisler 1996). Clearly, there is more room to question the precepts underlying a project when evaluation methodology is used than under auditing methodology. There also seems to be much more room for qualitative analysis in evaluation than auditing, which mostly makes use of quantitative analysis. The process of attributing observed changes to a particular intervention is not foreign to anthropologists, although it is an activity that anthropologists are often more comfortable critiquing than constructively undertaking. Critical anthropologists are often pointing out just how complicated the world is, and how many different factors can lead to particular outcomes. This kind of perspective could be very useful in development project evaluation, and the ability to question causality could be particularly useful. That is, of course, assuming that stakeholders of development interventions actually want to have a critical evaluation carried out, which is not always a given.

WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

On an early research trip to Kyrgyzstan, in 2013, I conducted a far-reaching interview with a long-time World Bank consultant specializing in Kyrgyzstan. When I asked him what development was, he could not provide a meaningful answer, saying only “That is a very good question.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls development “the dominant global denomination of
responsibility” (1994: 52). Seen in this light, we cannot reject development altogether, unless we wish to deny our very human responsibilities to those who are living without, say, access to food and clean water. However, as Joel Wainwright points out, this dominant denomination is “no good.” In a Marxist-inspired account of development practice, he writes that development is an impassable aporia: “Development remains an absolutely necessary concept and also absolutely inadequate to its task” (2008: 10, emphasis in original). “Development” clearly has a long and complicated relationship with anthropology, colonialism, and state control (Escobar 1991, Wainwright 2008, Crewe and Harrison 1999, Tsing 1993, Scott 1998, Mitchell 2002, etc.). While I conceive of some development interventions as vestiges of colonialism, that doesn't mean that all international interventions meant to improve society are imperialistic. Escobar would say I am wrong to make this argument, and that development always entails and inculcates a discourse of domination and even violence: “As practiced today, the development encounter - with or without the participation of anthropologists - thus amounts to an act of cognitive and social domination” (Escobar 1991: 675). His argument seems to imply that anyone endeavoring to improve or “develop” a society, if they are not of that society, is imposing their own norms and standards on a country. Crewe and Harrison (1999) point out that “development” is often predicated on the paired assumptions that increased technology and, more importantly, increased money, in a society after an intervention are markers of success. In the 1990s, it is likely that most development was actually about, first and foremost, neoliberalism (Wainwright 2008: 11). I argue that this has changed, at least in some cases. Notably, the German “development” agency active in Kyrgyzstan does not use “development” in their title; they instead use the word zusamenarbeit, or cooperation. If members of the German government want to intervene in a cooperative manner in Kyrgyzstan, that seems to be further reflected by
their policies. According to interviews I conducted with a country representative of the German organization – GIZ - every two years, representatives of the national government of Kyrgyzstan and their organization meet and discuss areas where they can cooperate. This is very different from the policies of the United States, for example, which, on the eve of my concentrated year of fieldwork, had prompted a diplomatic fall-out between those two countries, and, ultimately, denunciation and eventual dissolution (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2015) of a 22-year-old bilateral agreement that had made all aid provisions by United States government exempt from import tax. The ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to the United States told me by phone in 2015 that the Kyrgyzstan government wanted greater involvement in the planning of USAID interventions. The ambassador’s exact words were that “The new agreement should be about joint effort on assistance, and meeting our needs. Previously all assistance has had unilateral designs.” Of course, much of the US “aid” has been about promoting democracy, free speech, and human rights, which may or may not be something that the Kyrgyzstan government wants. According to media reports, this diplomatic disagreement I’ve summarized here stemmed from the United States Department of State awarding a prestigious award to an ethnic Uzbek human rights defender who was been imprisoned by the Kyrgyzstan government in the aftermath of the interethnic conflict of June 2010 (Putz 2015).

The context around this diplomatic debacle surrounding development funded by the United States government in Kyrgyzstan likely negatively affected my access to development workers during my fieldwork. In negotiating access to my would-be interlocutors, I found that by offering something in return I was able to ingratiate myself somewhat. At one organization, I became a formal intern, and helped conduct a baseline study for a potential USAID-funded project on economic migration and vulnerability to extremist recruitment. At another
organization, I helped evaluate a multi-year countering-violent extremism project, participating in interviews with religious leaders and other program participants around the country. For the latter organization, I also volunteered to edit and collaboratively rewrite a number of white papers and other reports on violent extremism in the country, which helped introduce me to a number of new interlocutors, subjects, and themes.

ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION

As I mentioned above, the contemporary style of evaluation that is currently in vogue is often called “results-based evaluation” (Morra Imas and Rist 2009). Unsurprisingly, this type of evaluation, as opposed to auditing or the previously common method of simply demonstrating that project employees were busy, places more of a focus on demonstrable, countable outcomes. A series of inputs and outcomes are typically described in the planning stages of a project, such that the evaluators and, in turn, project managers can measure the intervention's success by looking at particular indicators. This approach may be all well and good when reliable statistics are available, but anthropologists, better than other social scientists, know that numerical indicators are often problematic, lacking contextuality and nuance, and can present only a false illusion of objectivity. Project managers probably often know that, too, as do evaluators, and this is where and why qualitative analytic methods are particularly useful for evaluation. In a country like Kyrgyzstan, statistics are often even more suspect than in other contexts, because the population is particularly mobile, with at least 20% of the population working overseas at any given time. Part-time, untaxed work is very common, and fixed addresses are not. I don't believe a reliable census has been carried out since the country's independence, and any demographic information is going to be correspondingly suspect. These are some of the reasons why a German
former project manager told me recently that, in Kyrgyzstan, one “won't get very good numbers.” As a result, the organization he worked for is particularly interested in utilizing qualitative analysis in its project evaluation, he told me.

Qualitative ethnographic and evaluative research share many methodological features: establishing relevant questions, conducting interviews, and observing people in everyday life can all be used for either academic or intervention-supporting ends. The key for balanced academic ethnographic work is to observe the observers as well as the observed, in this case. This means that semi-formal and formal interviews of the interveners as well as their “clients,” “partners,” or “beneficiaries” “to-be-developed” should be conducted. But, in addition, the nuances and details of everyday life of the evaluators is interesting for academic work, in their own right. These nuances are where data about power-sharing dynamics and relationships can be gleaned.

In several cases, I was also able to go back and visit some of the supposed beneficiaries of previous infrastructure development projects that were intended to have ancillary peacebuilding benefits, across the national border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and among other divided communities. Researching these projects granted me valuable experience and perspective on the conditions that can and have led to conflicts in the past.

By focusing on the underlying images that development workers have of their ideal world, as well as the goals and priorities of the “targets” of interventions, whether we consider them beneficiaries, partners, or something else entirely, I asked questions about how people make sense of the world. Some development theorists call this view the “future positive” where countries work together to agree upon and solve common problems (Edwards 2004), while others link development to colonialism (Escobar 1991), such that the industry benefits the interests of the powerful in the so-called First World, or perhaps even nobody at all except some
of the development workers themselves (Ferguson 1994). At the end of the day, I did not set out to judge the overall merits of the development, peacebuilding, or countering violent extremism-oriented projects I studied. Borrowing from David Mosse, “My concern is not whether, but how development works” (2004, emphasis in original). Particularly, I set out to analyze the assumptions people evaluating and programming an initiative, as well as those who are meant to benefit from the initiative, have about the world.

In reviewing the anthropology of development literature, Mosse describes instrumental (e.g., Brinkerhoff 1996, Duffield 2001) and critical (Ferguson 1994, Escobar 1991, Shore and Wright 1997, etc.) scholarly camps, faulting both (2004). The instrumental camp that sees development work as a way to solve problems is hopelessly naïve, Mosse writes, but the critical camp, of which Ferguson of course is an exemplar, ignore the substance of their object by looking only at power dynamics. Invoking Latour, Mosse critiques Ferguson's analysis (1994): "The effect of things does not explain their properties" (2004: 644). He continues: "Both the critical and instrumental perspective, then, divert attention away from the complexity of policy as institutional practice, from the social life of projects, organizations and professionals and the diversity of interests behind policy models and the perspectives of actors themselves" (ibid.). With this critique in mind, I spent a much larger portion of my time than Ferguson did in his research actually talking to and researching development workers themselves. Ultimately, they are at the center of my research, and through evaluative ethnographic inquiry, I sought a way to learn about their motivations and assumptions, as much as about the interventions they conducted. Although, of course, it was necessary also for me to learn a great deal about the goals and methods of the interventions themselves, through the evaluation and ethnography that I
conducted, in order to speak to and learn about the individuals conducting the practice of development, as an anthropologist, it was the people who I was interested in first.

ETHICAL CONCERNS AND INVESTMENTS

If we agree with Spivak that “development” is a “denomination of responsibility,” then we should feel compelled to support some kind of societal change through intervention, assuming that we acknowledge our responsibility to benefit others in human society. In grappling with the question “What is to be done?” to alleviate poverty and empower the population of the so-called “Third World,” James Ferguson (1994) strives to disambiguate the question by pointing out, rightfully, that there are almost limitless potential doers, each in very different situations, rather than an all-powerful political collectivity that can snap a finger and correct the world's problems. He writes: “Any question of the form 'what is to be done' implies both a subject and a goal, both an aim and an actor who strategizes toward that aim...'What is to be done?’ demands first of all an answer to the question 'By whom?’” (279–280). Bearing this in mind means that we must be particularly careful when attributing causality to a particular project, or even to a particular actor within the context of a project's activity. It means that we must be conservative, in the sense that we can only posit cause and effect when we can “connect the dots” between action and outcome.

Ferguson goes on to talk about what like-minded anthropologists might do as “experts” in their particular field, to find an appropriate role that may help empower their “informants, neighbors, and friends.” He writes: “My own sense is that opportunity for such a role would exist only (1) where it is possible to identify interests, organizations, and groupings that clearly represent movements of empowerment, and (2) when a demand exists on the side of those
working for their own empowerment for the specific skills and expertise that the specialist possesses” (1994: 286). Although the development project that he writes about in the book, he argues, furthers the power and interests of the Lesotho state while simultaneously usurping political power from the population, I maintain that not all foreign aid projects operate in the same way.

Most development interventions have changed substantially in the 35 years since the Thaba-Tseka Project that Ferguson examines and critiques. While I maintain that many of Ferguson’s criticisms of the World Bank and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) were entirely appropriate to what he was writing about, and may well be applicable in certain cases today, it is no longer safe to assume, as he does, that failure appears to be the “norm” for the development industry. What we can surely say is that many projects operate with the expressed purpose of expanding markets, access to trade, and otherwise promote neoliberalism. With this agenda comes an assumption that access to money increases livelihood (Crewe and Harrison 1999), a claim which can reasonably be questioned. But what can we as analysts say about an intervention that does exactly what the ostensible beneficiaries desire? What if the rural residents want increased access to capital, new technologies, and whatever else an intervention might bring? In such a case, is the “development industry” that brings it still about “dependency and control” (Escobar 1991: 676)?

The initiatives that I studied in Kyrgyzstan were complex and multilayered, with different funders and affording me differing levels of access. All, however, made explicit claims to be considering the needs and interests of their stakeholders, be those stakeholders government officials, religious leaders, or informal village leaders. Convening dialogue sessions between different stakeholders was a mainstay of one organization’s practice; funding and facilitating a
process to supply new water infrastructure across an international border was another. In both cases, the nongovernmental organizations were doing the work that the state governments arguably should have been doing.

I did not set out to pass final judgement on the overall appropriateness of the development, peacebuilding, and countering violent extremism-oriented projects that I observed. Given the changes in development and its evaluation since the 1970s and even the 1990s, I set out to research the ideas, goals, and methods of development industry employees, as well as the interests and ways of life of the intended beneficiaries of the interventions that they work on.

Chapter 1: The Context

This dissertation is about efforts to promote peace and prevent violent extremism in Central Asia, particularly Kyrgyzstan. It emerged from fieldwork both with employees of international nonprofit organizations committed to these ends, and religious Muslims intended to be affected by this work.

Kyrgyzstan, surely, was on the periphery of the Soviet Empire and the Politburo’s power, and today revolves around Moscow in a distant yet steadfast orbit. It also is on the periphery of the incredibly diverse but readily oversimplified “Muslim world,” oriented, so much as it is, around the Kaaba in Mecca. These two symbolic reference points – Moscow and Mecca – are good starting points for talking about what is happening in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. And yet, as my account will describe, these two cities are only two touchpoints in a constellation of influences on the place today. As is surely the case everywhere, the world is richer, more complex, and more full of life than it first may seem.
This chapter provides a basic sketch of the context of the rest of the dissertation. In introducing some important themes relevant to the place and the people involved in this story, I am drawing mostly on my own direct personal experiences in the region going back to 2001.

Chapter 2 takes a close look at some of the divisions in the country, both ethnic and religious. Chapter 3 introduces a term “Islamic secularism” to mark the intermediary space informed in the areas where both (post-)Marxist and Muslim worlds overlap. Chapter 4 examines a media project intended to promote peace in Kyrgyzstan, whose creator is hesitant to focus on the most apparent cleavage line in society. Chapter 5 presents an argument against the essentialization of a religious/secular divide, in acknowledgement of Muslims’ political contributions. Chapter 6 introduces and explores a concept of “secular Islam,” building off and complicating an interpretation of secularism within Islam as “moderate” Islam.

MIGRATION

Today’s Kyrgyzstan is home to about 5.5 million people, but as many as 1 million of those, at any given time, are working outside the country – mostly in Moscow and other parts of Russia, although also in Kazakhstan, Turkey, South Korea, Europe, and the United States. Those hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyzstani citizens in Russia occupy a marginality in terms of legal status and acceptance. Stories of xenophobic attacks on Central Asians and people from the Caucasus are widespread; I’ve even met a man in Southern Kyrgyzstan whose son was killed by an angry mob in Moscow. Payment for services rendered by Central Asians is occasional at best (Wilensky-Lanford 2008), leaving Kyrgyzstani citizens in a state of near-slavery at the hands of their Russian brethren. Go to any construction site in Moscow, and you’ll see Muslim men native Muscovites say are from Chernistan (~Darkland) working and living in the bare skeletons of
buildings. Ask them when they last were paid, and some will likely tell you that they have been waiting for back wages for months. Yet their countrymen and countrywomen still make the trek north, at an astounding rate, because conditions at home are so desperate.

In Moscow, in order to work legally one needs a residence permit, which is very hard to come by for those who weren’t born in the city. This holdover from Soviet times restricts freedom of movement across the former Soviet Union, and even recent overtures by President Vladimir Putin to relax immigration standards within the Eurasian Customs Union, which includes Kyrgyzstan, seem to have done little to change the fate of Central Asian migrants.

Many of these migrants are from southern Kyrgyzstan, which is generally poorer than the north, especially now that the Uzbekistan government has closed the border so tightly. Cross-border trade has historically been an important business in the south, particularly around the area of Kara-Suu, just northeast of Osh, a border town that once hosted the largest market in the Ferghana Valley. Cheap goods from China would were trucked across the border at Irkeshtam, then through Osh, and from there it was just a few minutes’ drive to the border with Uzbekistan. Kara-Suu was one town up until 1991, and for years after the border was nominal only. But today, following such crises as the Andijon Massacre in 2005 and the interethnic violence in Osh and Jalal-Abad in 2010, which sparked a refugee crisis, each country requires a visa for citizens of the other country to visit. A large handful of small border posts have been closed in the past ten years, and now the only one that’s open in the eastern end of the Ferghana Valley is just outside of Osh itself. It is called, as if due to some twisted postsocialist irony, Dostlik, or “Friendship.”

GEOGRAPHY
Kyrgyzstan is often thought of as divided geographically, topographically, climatically, and, by many, conceptually, into North and South. The Tien Shan mountains arch from the northeastern tip of the country, where they ring around the tourist magnet of Lake Issyk-Kul, west and south to the mountainous border with Tajikistan in the center south of the country, then flair along this border west, past Osh and even Batken, in an unbroken spine of mastiffs and glaciers that flank the southern extreme of the Ferghana Valley, which itself is divided amongst Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The borders between the three countries are still being officially demarcated in some areas, and are often fraught and contentious (Reeves 2014). Between the northern capital of Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek – and the southern “second city” of Osh is ten hours’ drive of often remote and unpopulated road, which crosses a mountain pass that peaks in a (3-km)-long tunnel reachable only by miles of switchback hairpin turns in either direction. Before that tunnel was built, the road between the two most important cities in the country (or, more accurately, the then-republic) was only passable half the year, and, even today, claims many lives each winter to avalanche. And yet, even here, Moscow’s magnetism can be felt. Not only was the tunnel built by the same team that constructed St. Petersburg’s magnificent subway system, which was built so deep in the city of marshes and islands that it could theoretically have been used as a bomb shelter, but, as of the past three or four years, there has been a Gazprom service center with all the bells and whistles out on the plateau near the tunnel as an outpost of global capitalism, shiny in its splendor. No other permanent structure is around it for miles, but in the summer the rich pastureland nearby blossoms, as sheep, horses, felt yurts, tiny tarpaulin enshrouded outhouses appear along the roadside.

ISLAM AND ETHNICITY
Increasingly, Kyrgyz people will mention Islam as part of their identity (Ro’i and Wainer 2009). Many men now grow beards and shave their moustaches, citing the Koran for inspiration. Women, increasingly, wear headscarves and occasionally even the dark *niqab* that’s *de rigueur* in Saudi Arabia. Many of the more apparently secular Muslims I asked told me that there has not a long-standing precedence for this, that this fashion is Salafi-influenced, and comes with the influx of Gulf Arab money for mosques and various charities, which has been burgeoning in the past ten years or so, especially from Qatar. Until as late as the second half of the 19th century, an animistic paganism was prevalent here, complete with shamans, ancestor worship, and shrines (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016). There is also a history of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism in these mountains, and since independence a new secular faith has arisen: Tangrianstvo. Some subscribers to this faith have told me it is a philosophy. It is definitely political, and its adherents celebrate a pre-Islamic Kyrgyz past, in staunch rejection of the increasing influence of Sunni Islam visible all around them. Tangrianstvo occasionally embraces a mythology of Kyrgyz identity that is linked to the north and east, to the Kazakhs and, before that, to a broad Turkic identity that stretches all the way back to the Altai Mountains, where the Kyrgyz supposedly migrated from, and, before that, the Yenisei River Valley (Federova 2017). Before relatively recently, Islam was practiced more deeply to the south of the Kyrgyz-dominated parts of Kyrgyzstan, out of the mountains, where the Uzbeks lived and still live today (Heyat 2004). This richer history of Islamic religious practice was born out of earlier and more sustained contact with Arab-speaking Muslim traders traveling the fabled Silk Road, which passed through the cities of Khiva, Samarkand, and Bukhara, now all in Uzbekistan. The Uzbeks have historically been settled on farms and in cities, rather than living as shepherds in the mountains like their Kyrgyz neighbors (Roy 2007).
PEOPLE INVOLVED

I lived in Bishkek for the course of much of my ethnography, and traveled around the country frequently. Much of my ethnography was focused on the staff and practices of a group called Search for Common Ground, which is based in Belgium and Washington, DC. A senior staff member of the country office told me that the organization has recently been playing up Belgium as its headquarters, in favor of the United States, presumably because of the United States’ increasingly unfavorable view among Muslims following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The country office of Search has been in operation since 2012, and employs about a dozen people, depending on project funding, which comes from the UK Government, as well as USAID, other governments, and foundations. The staff is all Kyrgyzstani, and all of Kyrgyz ethnicity, with the notable exception of one man, an ethnic Uzbek. The headquarters of the organization is in an area of Bishkek with many ministerial buildings or compounds, and is literally next door to the walled campus of the GKNB, the successor organization to the Soviet-era KGB. On the other side is a Russia-dominated regional anti-terrorism task force headquarters. When I started hanging out at the organization’s offices, the country director expressed fear that the security forces in their neighborhood would be suspicious about an American coming and going from the offices.

Search for Common Ground’s Kyrgyzstan office exists to promote peace in Kyrgyzstan and the broader Central Asian region. The organization pursues this broad goal by convening conversations between different groups of people, especially government officials and members of the religious community. To a lesser extent, SFCG is interested in preventing further violence
between different ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, by again, promoting dialogue across ethnic divisions and also modeling good “cosmopolitan” behavior through such media as a television drama they are working to produce. The needs for this kind of work are, unfortunately, great, as there is a real disconnect and distrust between government security forces and much of the Muslim religious community. Repression, including suspicious deaths and controversial imprisonments, on the part of the government are somewhat common, although not as much as in neighboring countries. Violence between the titular Kyrgyz ethnic group and Uzbek minority has flared up dramatically on occasion, most recently in 2010, when as many as 400,000 people were displaced, mostly Uzbeks. The goals of the program are “increasing collaboration across various dividing lines through common ground policy making, religious tolerance, and community resilience” (Dhungana 2016).

This goal is pursued by three avenues: national level policy interventions, targeted interventions in prisons, and local level community interventions. The desired outcomes of these interventions include stronger civil society at the national and local levels, and better awareness about what constitutes extremism throughout society, particularly among the prison population and prison guards. In addition, the organization strives to produce scholarship about extremism.

Encouraging collaboration between disparate groups can be difficult pragmatically, in my opinion, because sometimes the groups that are being supported are at odds with one another. For example, the religious community representatives SFCG seeks to enfranchise may well be in conflict with the state security officers it also relies on and emboldens.

Process goals include convening various groups including the Consultative Working Group (CWG), and facilitating their meetings. Product goals are to promote stronger connections between the individuals in this group, ideally beyond the scope of their regularly scheduled
meetings. Although I have not heard this from the SFCG representatives directly, it stands to reason that in order for their actions to achieve desired outcomes, the individuals SFCG has brought together must successfully reach out to one another in times of crisis, not just relative peace.

The Search organization cooperates quite a bit with the security forces, particularly the tenth division of the Interior Ministry, which is responsible for policing terrorism threats. It was not unusual to see security officials in the organization’s offices, and Search employed several of these men to write articles about radicalization and supposed extremist threats.

The country director of Search for Common Ground, whom I’ll call Almazbek, is in his forties. He grew up in a small village in southern Kyrgyzstan, near the border with Tajikistan. He learned English, he said, by drinking vodka and socializing with an American Peace Corps volunteer who came to his village near the border with Tajikistan. Eventually, he earned his Master’s degree in the United States, in Colorado. He speaks English very well, and travels the world representing the organization.

Almaz’s deputy, whom I’ll call Bakhtiyor, is a bit older. An expert in Muslim political movements, Bakhtiyor is believed by some of his collaborators to have a background in the security services. He certainly was employed during Soviet times to teach a required Atheism class at Bermet’s school, a post that would likely coincide with security work. His English skills are much worse than Almaz’s.
Another senior staff member at the organization I’ll call Bermet. A lawyer by training, she was very critical of the president’s authoritarian tactics, but not critical enough to join the very few activists working against his blatant constitutional violations. She and her cousin grew up, in part, in an Uzbek family because after the interethnic conflict in Osh in 1990, her grandfather was involved in the peace negotiations and offered to have his grandchildren live with Uzbeks as a sign of goodwill.

A man I’ll call Eldiyar was in charge of media for the organization. He had previously worked in advertising and television production, and during the year that I was there was working on a project to promote interethnic harmony through a television drama supervised by a Search executive in the United States.

Azamat was another young staffer of the organization, who did a lot of traveling and ran most of the meetings in the regions. The activities he facilitated included soccer games between police and imams in remote villages.

Maksat was a young man from southern Kyrgyzstan who worked with the organization, as well. He had a childhood friend who probably went to join jihadis in Syria, and, at times, may have thought about going himself.

Nasipah was one of the experts that the Search organization employed to write articles about extremism, in conjunction with security professionals. She was a lawyer, and taught law at one of the state universities in town.
MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a global development and aid organization, working in dozens of countries and based in Portland, Oregon. In Kyrgyzstan, the organization is mostly focused on agricultural support programs. It distributes US-grown food products to schools for lunch programs, and helps provide instruction on nutritional cooking for the local school staff. Another initiative is to promote fruit tree cultivation at remote schools, to supplement the children’s diet.

The two projects that I was most interested and involved in were a baseline survey study that addressed the connection, if any, between the economic situation, vulnerability to membership in organizations promoting extremist violence, and interethnic relations, and, secondly, a review of previously completed social cohesion projects that mostly centered on infrastructure development as a way to promote social dialogue across the borders between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Sultanbek was a contract worker for Mercy Corps, from Osh, who was half Uzbek and half Kyrgyz. He spoke both languages very well, as well as Russian and English, making him a very sought-after translator and fixer for international aid organizations operating in the region. He worked nearly full-time for a UN branch office in Osh, where his job was to monitor the news and liaison with government officials to gather an understanding of safety concerns and crises. He then wrote a safety briefing regularly for international organizations and embassies that consisted of a digest or roundup of local news and related concerns.
Josh, the country director for Kyrgyzstan, has experience working for the organization in Africa and mostly is focused on agricultural development programs. He is married to a woman from Tanzania, and now works in Tajikistan. He was one of my two supervisors during the period of my internship.

The other supervisor was Bruce, now a consultant who was then a senior project advisor with Mercy Corps. He was the State Department’s primary representative in the lengthy peace treaty negotiations that successfully ended – or at least delayed - the Tajikistan civil war in the late 1990s, and currently conducts CVE evaluations and studies around the world.

Mercy Corps has a full office in Osh, run by Ulughbek, an Uzbek who has been involved with the organization for many years. His title is Regional Program Manager. He is quite secular in his comportment and attitude.

Ibrahimjon is another, more outwardly religious Uzbek who works with Ulughbek in the Osh Mercy Corps office. His title is Procurement and Logistic Manager. He prays every Friday, and works mostly on the agriculture and food security projects, although has a deep interest in the religious community.

MUFTIATE STRUCTURE, AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS
Each of the seven districts (oblasts) in Kyrgyzstan has its own Kaziate, which is a local religious jurisdictional subsidiary of the Muftiate in Bishkek. The Kaziate is run by a Kazi, who generally has several assistants. It is a religious bureaucracy owing its organization to the Soviet times, when the local religious networks were as much about policing religious believers as it was about supervising independent imams. Now, the utility of the bureaucracy serves both of these competing and contradictory purposes, as we shall see. The district-level kaziates oversee and enfranchise regional, more localized religious authorities. Much of the work of Search for Common Ground revolved around these local religious bureaucrats, who ostensibly oversaw the work of the various imams in each district, and were in a position, theoretically, to identify and extinguish extremist elements before they spread. This was, however, rarely the case, despite innumerable trainings, workshops, and conferences meant to raise awareness about the issues at play. In fact, the work of Search was largely seen as a security-minded endeavor to unite police, military, and religious authorities and further demonize and criminalize religiously motivated political movements, violent or otherwise.

This unification process was no more clearly evident than through the work of Search’s Consultative Working Group, or CWG. This group brought together representatives of the 10th division of the ministry of the interior responsible for counter-terrorism police work, more clandestine security operatives from the KGB-successor organization, the GKNB (State Committee for National Security), Muftiate officials like the Vice Mufti, and religious educators like one I’ll call Khadija Nurselbek. The religious practitioners invariably complained about being maligned and disrespected by the state actors, and the muftiate officials served as intermediaries, acting out their role as both state figures and ostensibly religious people. Women
like Khadija Nurselbek would complain that they were not listened to, although the state security offices made use of her and her extensive network, nonetheless.

Search also worked in tandem with other organizations, like, notably, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. This organization is fundamentally about journalism enfranchisement, particularly in conflict regions, but, in actuality, does quite a bit more in the sphere of conflict prevention and promotion of civic engagement. For example, IWPR hosted a forum with Search at the Park Hotel in Bishkek in spring of 2016 that brought together members of the security state as well as the religious bureaucracy, providing all with copious roast meat along with pens, folders, and notepads during the two days of meetings.

The Joint Taskforce for Counterterrorism in Central Asia operated out of a building next door to Search’s office, and it was presumed by the senior staff at Search that this Russian-led institution had likely tapped the building, or, at the very least, was taking an engaged interest in the comings and goings of people who went into the office. Several times, I saw security officials in the Search building, and men loitering outside the Joint Taskforce office, which had a sign outside ostensibly advertising itself as a ticket agency for Aeroflot, the Russian national airline (which hasn’t changed its name since Soviet times, and still flies only in and out of Moscow).

MUTAKALLIM ORGANIZATION
This group educates women about Islam, with chapters throughout the South of Kyrgyzstan. I met with Zulfira Ezhe, in Osh, who convenes meetings between Uzbek and Kyrgyz women, and Aigul Ezhe, in Jalal-Abad, who does the same.

Zulfira Ezhe, who runs the organization in Osh, has an office in the back of a mosque on a street off one of the main thoroughfares in the biggest southern city, Osh. The mosque is mostly if not exclusively for women, although when I went there there was often a male administrator in the room with us. Her organization works primarily to educate women on the Koran and religious practice.

Aigul Ezhe, who runs the organization’s chapter in Jalal-Abad, has an office deep in a shopping complex on a backroad in Jalal-Abad. She is from a small town near the Uzbekistan border called Aksy, and works to educate both Uzbek and Kyrgyz Muslim women.

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA

Edil Ibrahimov is a professor of anthropology at this elite institution, and a practicing Muslim. He has participated in several missions with Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim outreach movement with roots in South Asia.

OSH STATE UNIVERSITY
Alisher Hajji is a professor of Islamic studies at Osh State University. He has a PhD in Theology from a university in Turkey, and has been teaching in Osh since 1994. He grew up in Nookat, very near the Uzbekistan border, which has recently been the location of violent interethnic riots.

HISTORY

The history of Central Asia has largely been one of turmoil since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and in the past 13 years especially. Tajikistan was wrapped up in a bloody religious civil war for more than the first decade of its independence. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have done well to capitalize on mineral wealth, although Turkmenistan has remained one of the most secretive and restrictive countries on Earth. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, meanwhile, have witnessed several large uprisings in recent years, some successful and others not. This history has run parallel to, and sometimes together with, an increased Islamic piety in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, although in the latter case this piety is generally not visible in public contexts. The recent history of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, I argue, must include mention of several key moments: the 2005 popular overthrow of Kyrgyzstan’s then-president Askar Akayev; the failed uprising three months later in the eastern Uzbekistani city of Andijon that ended in a bloody massacre; the 2010 overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who succeeded Akayev as Kyrgyzstan’s president; and the interethnic violence that this overthrow precipitated between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations in southern Kyrgyzstan. These four moments, paired into two sets of events that started in Bishkek and echoed in the Fergana Valley, as something of a call and response pairing, shed light on the condition of politics and religion in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan,
and especially the Fergana Valley that is split by these countries. The following section also highlights the importance of a banned Islamic political party with deep ties in the region: Hizb ut-Tahrir. Some history about this organization and the two sets of paired moments named previously will help lay the groundwork for further discussion of politics, religion, and peacebuilding/CVE efforts in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, and beyond.

The first pairing of events I’d like to consider happened in 2005. That year, the popular overthrow of the president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, was followed by an uprising in eastern Uzbekistan. While it is unclear to what extent the Bishkek uprising inspired the protests in Andijan, Uzbekistan, many informed observers believe that the Uzbekistan government’s violent response to the protests there were directly inspired by what they would have seen as a weak-willed, passive response Akayev took to the protests in Bishkek.

“The trouble was brewing for some time in the wake of the parliamentary elections held on 27 February and the run-off elections held on 13 March” 2005 (Bakshi 2006: 46), which Akayev was widely accused of rigging in order to put not one but two of his children in Parliament. International election observers from the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and their election-monitoring wing, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), led by Slovak Republic Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj, found that “The 27 February 2005 and 13 March parliamentary elections in the Kyrgyz Republic, while more competitive than previous elections, fell short of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections in a number of important areas. The conduct of the second round of elections demonstrated some technical improvements over the first round, but significant shortcomings remained (OSCE/ODIHR 2005: 1).
A local, Bishkek-based organization funded largely by the United States government – the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan – had also monitored the elections, and this NGO’s leader, Edil Baisalov, was very outspoken about significant irregularities in the election, calling for President Akayev’s ouster. "Everybody is tired [of the authoritarian president]," The Economist quoted him as saying the month before the so-called revolution (The Economist 2005).

Baisalov told me proudly years later that he was the first person, in fact, to publicly announce that Akayev had fled the country. The announcement, to the Russian wire service Interfax, virtually ensured that Akayev would no longer be considered president.

In addition to supporting Baisalov’s Coalition, the United States was actively, although perhaps a bit indirectly, financing a free press in Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. State Department even lent the NGO Freedom House, which received most of its funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a portable printing press, which churned out opposition newspapers. An American man named Mike Stone, whom I met while reporting in the country for CNN, ran it. The Wall Street Journal published a story about the press a month before the culmination of the popular uprising, pointing out how some papers that the press had printed inflamed oppositional sentiment in the country: “One recent morning, the main opposition paper MSN -- printed by Mr. Stone -- featured front-page photos of a palatial mansion purportedly owned by the president and of a boy in a decrepit alleyway. ‘Here's a house built by Akayev,' screamed the headline. ‘And here's a boy deprived of a roof over his head’” (Shishkin 2005).

Shishkin’s article also described how Baisalov’s group received $110,000 annually from the National Democratic Institute, based in Washington, DC. Baisalov was an election monitor in
Ukraine before the “Orange Revolution” there, and told me, Shishkin, and many others that it was a formative experience for him. In Kyrgyzstan, his organization branched out from election monitoring to promoting local self-rule and voter education, with chapters set up around the country.

Several days before Akayev’s overthrow, I was in Baisalov’s office in the capital, Bishkek. Protesters had already stormed a khokimiyat, or regional seat of government, in the divided southern portion of the country. The phone rang. On the other end of the line were protesters in northeast Kyrgyzstan, announcing with excitement that they had stormed another khokimiyat there. Cheers erupted in the office as Baisalov heaped praise on the soon-to-be revolutionaries.

To hear his American supporters, whom I also knew well, tell the story, Baisalov was recruited to lead the Coalition by Americans working for the National Democratic Institute, or NDI, one of whom said that he was “sort of tapped.” He was “smart, he can be strategic, he can give good soundbites, and he had attributes that were frankly rare,” said this informant, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity.

Having spent a year in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the mid-nineties on the US State Department-funded Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program, Baisalov had a firm grasp of English and how to communicate effectively to American media. He immediately became the go-to source for Western reporters, such as myself when I was reporting for The New York Times in the region. After graduating from the top-tier American University of Central Asia, which was established as a partnership by the US State Department and the billionaire philanthropist George Soros, and which I later worked for, Baisalov told me worked for a Swiss conglomerate while preparing for graduate studies in political science.
I do not mean to argue that the United States directly or cohesively sought to overthrow President Akayev, as policy. At the time, the United States had a good understanding with the administration over their top priority in the country – the maintenance of a NATO air base just outside the capital city, deemed essential for transportation in and out of Afghanistan and, more covertly, occasional bombing sorties into Iraq and probably Afghanistan. American policymakers, therefore, would seem to have had no pragmatic interest in rocking the boat by covertly removing the president.

Baisalov said that the National Democratic Institute did not care if Akayev was overthrown or not. That said, democratization workers and UN staff, like reporters, seemed quite excited when watching the protests and what came to be called a revolution. At the time, I observed expatriate circles in Bishkek buzzing with excitement following so-called “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine.

Some academics, as early as 2007, have noted that the hype and excitement Western reporters experienced, and transmitted, about the so-called “color revolutions” overstated the actual impact of the transitions, thereby wrongly framing them altogether. For example, Andres Schipani-Adúriz wrote, starting his article with a reference to Traynor, of The Guardian:

In June 2005, Ian Traynor, a foreign correspondent of the Manchester-based newspaper The Guardian, wrote a story claiming that “from the Chinese frontier to the borders of the European Union, the vast post-Soviet space has been in the grip of revolutionary fervour over the past few years—a second wave of democratization after the 1989–91 revolutions symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall (2007: 87).

Schipani-Adúriz goes on to point out how other Western reporters called these transitions of power, purportedly inspired by the October 2000 popular overthrow of Slobodan Melosevic in Serbia, “‘bloodless,’ ‘peaceful,’ ‘electoral,’ ‘democratic,’ or ‘color revolutions’ that occurred in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, respectively” (Ibid.), citing Antelava (2003), Chivers (2005),
Quinn-Judge and Zarakhovich (2004), Diehl (2005), and Peel (2005), for their choice of descriptors. Full disclosure: I know and worked with three of the reporters cited here, so may be a bit biased myself about the excitement around a so-called revolution.

Schipani-Adúriz goes on to make the argument that Western reporters distorted the events that they were writing about, as a “revolution” in the Western tradition means something more than a simple overthrow of a leader:

Hitherto, for many, these color revolutions have proved to be more a sort of colorful media events than successful and long-lasting political projects and that may lead us to criticize the professionalism of the reporting in the sense that it should have not been framed inside a particular framework (2007: 106).

While this criticism is, in some senses, fair, the changes that seemed to be happening in Bishkek at the time of the overthrow of Akayev were significant. I personally saw the largest, fanciest grocery and department store, which was Turkish owned, completely looted, to the point that the shelves were literally barren. For the next day or two, a tiny percentage of the police showed up at work, and those that did pasted sheets of paper on their car windows, as did stores who did not wish to be looted, that read “We’re with the people” in Kyrgyz or sometimes Russian. Instead of police, I saw groups of druzhники (Literally, a diminutive plural of “friends”) walking the streets with clubs and other makeshift weapons, patrolling the streets in a voluntary manner, ready to dole out what might be interpreted as vigilante or mob justice, had it not been something that was understood in Kyrgyz society as something far more civilized than that---necessary, perhaps previously practiced. I bring this up just to say that the transition of power in Kyrgyzstan following the overthrow of Akayev, at least to a relative outsider like me, felt like it mattered for the region, and could be a harbinger of things to come. Whether or not the protesters had been paid, as many in Bishkek told me at the time, and whether or not the uprising represented a
democratically inspired movement, the ouster of Akayev was the first time a leader in the five former Soviet Central Asian republics had been deposed since independence. That said, Schipani-Adúriz’s prediction in 2007 that the political changes from the overthrow of Akayev would prove somewhat overstated in the height of the excitement – excitement by Westerners and many locals alike – in the long run was, in the end, prescient.

Askar Akayev officially stepped down as president from within the Kyrgyz embassy in Moscow in a “low-key ceremony before eight members of the Kyrgyz parliament” shortly after giving a televised speech addressed to his country’s citizens in which he apologized for any wrong-doing he may have committed as president (Buckley and Dombley 2005).

Early in his tenure as leader of Kyrgyzstan, one of the first acts Kurmanbek Bakiyev did while still an acting president was to contradict his security chief, Feliks Kulov, who had said he was ready to guarantee Askar Akayev’s personal safety if he returned from Russia to stand trial in Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev said “I would advise him [Askar Akayev] not to come because his return is not expedient at the moment. Passions have not yet died down. If he decided to return in the short term, then it could spark unrest not only in [the capital] Bishkek, but throughout the republic” (Financial Times 2005).

Three months later, in May 2005, thousands of protesters assembled on the central square in Uzbekistan’s fourth largest city, Andijon. They called for democracy and freedom in a country with total state control. A prolonged court case against 23 observant Muslim businessmen who were persecuted for praying on their own, in circles outside of state-approved mosques, served to catalyze the uprising, according to reporting done by myself and others (Chivers and Wilensky-Lanford 2005, Denber and Levine 2005, Aizenman 2005).
The businessmen had been accused of belonging to an offshoot of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a transnational political movement that seeks to restore the Caliphate. They had been arrested and tried in a show trial in Andijon, Uzbekistan. The Uzbekistan government dubbed the offshoot Akromiya, after the reputed leader of the prayer and lending circle, Akrom Yuldashev, although Sarah Kendzior has convincingly outlined how the organization was likely a myth created by Uzbek government propagandists (Kendzior 2006).¹

The 23 businessmen were in jail, and, for months, hundreds of supporters protested in the central Bobur Square. Protests, of course, are extremely rare in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Many of the businessmen were apparently quite successful. One was a shoe salesmen, another a baker, another a candy manufacturer, another a furniture maker. They told me that they had prayed together, and even set up a tithing circle to lend money to each other, because the local government-run banks had blacklisted them during the course of their harassment.

On the night of May 12, 2005, somebody stormed the jail they were in, letting out over a hundred common criminals in the process of freeing the businessmen. En route to the city, a mob overran a police armory and stole about two dozen weapons, but, according to video footage later made available, they did not have much ammunition.

In the central square, a large crowd gathered, as it had every morning for weeks. But today was different. Men with guns overran a local administrative building, called a khokimiyat. When a traffic policeman tried to drive through the amassed crowd of thousands in the morning, he was taken hostage. It was a mess. The leaders of the movement, such as they were, were

¹ In her analysis, Kendzior notes the utter paucity of reporting on the group before May 2005, the time of the uprising, and lack of a web presence, as quite suspect. She writes: “Nearly every piece of information about Akromiya prior to May 2005 has its origin in books written by Uzbek officials or in documents presented in Uzbek courts.” (Kendzior 2006: 546).
incredibly disorganized. They had some contact with BBC in Tashkent, so at one point called the reporters and asked them what they should do.

They originally hoped that President Islam Karimov would meet with them and hear their concerns, the refugees told me. The group of armed men were dwarfed by a crowd of maybe 5,000 men, women, and children, many calling for democratic reforms. I have seen video of one after another of the protesters standing on a podium of sorts and crying out about the level of poverty that they lived under, and accusing government officials of corruption and nepotism. Any initial understanding that the protesters may have had with local officials during the course of the trial was no longer in place by the time the men were broken out of jail.

Surprisingly, the protesters may have had a precedent for believing that the president would meet with them. Karimov had met with angry Muslim protesters before, in nearby Namangan in 1991, as one of his first acts as president of an independent Uzbekistan (Karagiannis 2010: 25). There he was forced to supplicate himself and pray with the crowd that was gathered, led by a young pious and charismatic man, Tohir Yuldashev, not to be confused with the supposed leader of Akromiya more than a decade leader, who shared the same surname. The group insulted Karimov openly, and issued demands ranging from the redesignation of a building used for Communist Party meetings as an Islamic Center, the legalization of Islamic parties in Uzbekistan, and the designation of Uzbekistan as a Muslim state. After being insulted and having his faith openly questioned by the crowd, Karimov flew back to Tashkent and immediately called in the army to destroy the Namangan uprising and Yuldashev’s Salafist group. In the words of historian Adeeb Khalib, Karimov found the experience “personally humiliating,” and it “hardened his attitude toward opposition couched in Islamic terms” (2014: 151). Yuldashev and his supporters fled into the mountains of Tajikistan, organizing themselves
into a group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and as a group is accused of setting off six bombs in Tashkent in 1999 that killed 16 people (Karagiannis 2010: 26). From then on, Karimov associated religious piety with opposition forces and separatism. He was eventually able to lobby the United States State Department to add the group that came together in Namangan, dubbed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, to its list of terrorist organizations in 2000.

Back in Andijon, on May 13, 2005, Karimov did not speak to the crowd, those who were there told me. He did, however, fly to the airport in Andijon. Even as the leaders of the uprising were on the phone with state officials, trying to negotiate safe passage out of the city, Karimov ordered special forces to surround the protesters. From there, he is reported to have personally overseen a military campaign against the protesters that left an estimated 800-1000 people dead. Eyewitness reports described “bullets falling like rain” (Denber and Levine 2005: 2) and classic military tactics where crowds were herded into narrow streets and mowed down by gunmen blocking their exit from the chaotic square. The official number of people killed was 187; Karimov blamed the incident on “terrorists.” Weeks would pass before President Bush questioned this depiction.

About 500 people were able to escape the massacre by walking 30 kilometers north to safety in Kyrgyzstan, where I was the first reporter to reach them three days later. Amidst growing international pressure, and refugee camp infiltration by Uzbek security officers, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees eventually airlifted 460 people to third countries. Some people also seem to have fled to the south, toward the then-ethnic Uzbek dominated city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Two days after the crackdown, there I saw a fully abandoned
border crossing, which under normal circumstances would have been heavily militarized. There was also a burned-out Niva police truck, and a destroyed customs building. I was able to cross the border twice without any contact with Uzbek officials, and travel across a strip of the country, past Andijon, to the area where the refugees had fled (Chivers and Wilensky-Lanford 2005).

Over the course of the next two weeks, I reported in both the first refugee camp, which was in a poorly protected notch in a hill above the Karadariya River, which creates the border, and a second camp that the UNHCR created that was in a slightly safer location, a bit farther from the watchful eyes of the Uzbek military and security forces, who were regularly luring refugees back to certain detention and torture by infiltrating the camp disguised as would-be refugees and threatening real refugees’ family members residing back in Uzbekistan.

Karimov claimed that the leaders of the protest in Andijon were associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir (Tisdall 2005), although the people I met in the camps in Kyrgyzstan near the border denied this vehemently. Such a claim was, I argue, part of an intentional obfuscation of facts. Even three years later in 2008, according to an expert from Human Rights Watch testifying before the Helsinki Commission, formerly called the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, a U.S. Government agency focused on human rights, the Uzbekistan government had still not acknowledged its culpability in the massacre (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2011: 2). The Human Rights Watch expert, Masha Lisitsyna, testified: “I think everybody in the room knows that hundreds of people there were killed by Uzbek governmental forces. And still to this day, the Uzbek government has not recognized its responsibility for this massacre and has not allowed an independent international investigation into the events.”
Indeed, Lisitsyna went on to describe how the Uzbekistan government was at that time still taking active efforts to suppress the facts about the events in Andijon, in part by pressuring families of refugees who had fled the country then to encourage their loved ones to return. “Some refugees, some of our interviewees, reported the whole scheme, how it should work, that some of the main defendants at Andijon trial, like important family, would get a deal from the security forces that if one of the refugees from the family would return, someone else from this family would be released from prison or would stop being tortured,” she said (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2011: 3).

Further in the Commission’s event, the question of U.S. engagement with the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan came up, with an Uzbek journalist, Shahida Tulaganova, urging the Congressional representatives present to maintain sanctions against the Uzbekistani government. A notable American political scientist who has deep ties to the U.S. Government, however, Eric McGlinchey, was more open to official engagement at the time. Noting that political engagement with members of the Uzbekistani government and its critics had more benefits than risks, he testified: “I know this is incredibly messy. Conditionality and sanctions don’t always work. But I think if you look at past political engagement, particularly of the political activist community, the human rights community, U.S. engagement in essence served as a lifeline to these people. And I would urge that we maintain this engagement even at the cost of perhaps lessening sanctions” (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2011: 9-10).

Part of McGlinchey’s argument for engagement – and possibly loosening sanctions – was based on an interpretation of President Karimov’s positioning vis-à-vis what was at the time still called The War on Terror. At the time of the massacre in Andijon in 2005, the US and NATO were using a former Soviet military base in Uzbekistan to fly sorties and otherwise support the
war in Afghanistan (Weisman and Shanker 2005). The base was called Karshi-Khanabad, or K2 for short. Perhaps because of the presence of American soldiers and airmen in the country at the time, the US government was slow to call for an international investigation. On June 8, 2005, a full month after the events in Andijon, the State Department spokesman under President George W. Bush, Sean McCormack, finally began to acknowledge what the human rights advocates and reporters had long been saying, that “hundreds of innocent civilians were killed” (Tully 2005).

At the same time, Russian officials were still siding with Karimov’s line about terrorists being responsible, although through innuendo. The same article quoted Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov as saying at the time, “The situation in a number of regions in Asia and Middle East, where we can see an increase in radicalism and a further escalation of terrorism, is a cause of much concern. Indicative in this aspect are the recent events in Uzbekistan...According to the information we have, the events were inspired from the territory of Afghanistan” (Tully 2005).

At the Commission’s hearing in 2008, McGlinchey said that Karimov’s standing as an ally in the War on Terrorism was undermined by his refusal to let the United States extend its lease on K2. He said:

And in the case of Uzbekistan, I think what we’ve seen is a very intelligent coupling of the international war against terrorism with Karimov’s attempt to portray himself as a partner in this war against terrorism. The trick here, though, is that while the United States and NATO are fighting real terrorist groups like Al Qaida (sic.) and the Taliban, Islam Karimov is fighting people like domestic political reformers, human rights activists and business men whom he is portraying as militant Islamists. The departure of the United States from K2, from Karchi-Khanabad, I think has fundamentally undermined the Karimov government’s ability to portray itself as a partner in this war against terror (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 2011: 8).
Here, combined with the comment I quoted above, McGlinchey is making an argument that because President Karimov misidentifies his enemies as “militant Islamists” and because he expelled the United States military from an air base on his country’s land, he may be weakened enough that political engagement with dissidents in the country – even, importantly, if it requires a loosening of official sanctions against Uzbekistan – could help position the United States in such a way that it could have more influence in the country of Uzbekistan under a future president of that country. Indeed, by 2012, the United States would lift its ban on providing direct military aid to Uzbekistan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2012). President Karimov would remain in power, apparently undeterred, until his death in September 2016 (Tharoor 2016).

According to Vitaly Naumkin and others, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the group that President Karimov blamed for the violence (Tisdall 2005), was founded in 1953 in Jordan by a Palestinian judge named Taqi al-Din Nabhani, who had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (Naumkin 2005). The group, which until recently has been based in London, seeks to establish a Muslim Caliphate across Central Asia, the Middle East, and other areas of Muslim majority. Since the 1990s, the group has developed a significant presence in Central Asia, although massive suppression in Uzbekistan and less active persecution in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and, to an even lesser degree, Kazakhstan, has diminished the group’s influence. In Kyrgyzstan, the group has historically been more popular among the ethnic Uzbeks in the south than among ethnic Kyrgyz, although there are recent indications that the group is also active in the north, including several arrests in the past year of supposed members of the group in Kyrgyz-dominated towns near Bishkek in the Chui Valley.
During this fluid time back in late spring of 2005, I reported from the area around Osh. It is there that I encountered Abdullah Abdullahove, age 28, who said during the course of a group interview: "Life on television is heaven. Reality here is hell." Then, after I was done taking down similar comments from a crowd that had gathered to speak with me on the Kyrgyzstan side of the border, he took me aside, and asked to sit and talk in my car. I obliged, and he asked if I could write in Russian. He wanted to dictate a statement for publication in the New York Times:

Islam Karimov is like a Roman Caesar, a dictator. He has twenty-eight million people, ninety-percent of whom are Muslims, who want to live under the Koran, and according to the Sunnah. Today's Muslims of Uzbekistan are tired of poverty. Their average monthly wage is $5-6. More than 8 million people are without work. But government workers' (chinovniki) wages are a minimum of $500 and up to $1200 per month. I want the whole world to know about the dictatorship of Karimov, (and) how he torments the people so. Today's situation is not produced from Islamists, not from radical Islamists, but only from the people, sufferers, who are tormented, and so for this reason they want to rise up, to receive normal wages, and furthermore work. This is not radical Islam, simply people who want to live like others in the rest of the world. Why is it that state workers each eat kilograms of meat, and where within the borders of Uzbekistan do the people have even a scrap of meat in a year? They are people also. For Karimov, these 5 million don't matter. He would kill them all, even the old people, the women, the children.

I take Abdullahove's statement as a starting point for my understanding of what causes pious forms of Islam to emerge in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. He is angry. He is angry at the income inequality, which is, of course, widespread in the former Soviet context (Humphrey 2002; Ledenova 1998; Ries 1997, 2009). He is speaking with jealous rage, although defensively. He obviously is aware of the discourse that demonizes extremists or Islamists in the

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2 The Sunnah is the “right path” that Muhammed is thought of as leading the way on, through example recorded by his contemporaries in the hadiths.

It is unclear to me whether Abdullahove was associated with any broad political religious movement, like Hizb ut-Tahrir. I would not be surprised if he was, although I did not ask and he did not volunteer any such information. I was struck by his poise, confidence, and calm articulate style. He was definitely well-educated, which is consistent with my understanding of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s membership, outside of Central Asia, anyway. There has been no published ethnographic work that I am aware of on the group’s activities in the former Soviet Union. All religious groups as well as political groups are forced to register in Kyrgyzstan, and Hizb ut-Tahrir has refused to do this because the government often accuses them of distributing extremist literature - a crime punishable by years in jail – and other criminal acts. The group officially forswears violence (Hizb ut-Tahrir 2012), but many people on the street in Bishkek, say, would easily conflate the group with a group like al-Qaeda, thanks to government propaganda. In the fall of 2010, there were even two suspicious explosions in the capital of Kyrgyzstan that the government blamed on Hizb ut-Tahrir, although well-respected local NGO leaders told me that they were convinced the government staged the explosions to scare the population and secure funding from outside powers for an anti-terrorism military training site. There were no casualties in these attacks, nor were there ever any claims of responsibility for the acts.

I met Abdullahove near a mosque in Kara-Suu, outside of Osh, that had been run by an imam who was allied with Hizb ut-Tahrir. He was killed in a run-in with security forces. Unfortunately, I don’t know the details of his death, but I believe it occurred a year or so after Abdullahove and I spoke. In either case, Abdullah’s speech alone signifies a discord with the
powers that be. The fact that he took me into an isolated place (a car) is recognition that he did not want to be overheard saying what he said, and could in fact signify that he was suspicious that somebody from the government was around us when we were in a crowd. Most mosques in Central Asia are monitored by members of the government, just as they have been in places like Egypt (Mahmood 2005).

And yet, Abdullahove apparently gave me his real name, and was not afraid to speak to a Western reporter. I believe he was emboldened by the acts of the crowd across the border in Andijan, and perhaps by the overthrow of the president of Kyrgyzstan just three months before our conversation. He certainly was brave to speak to me on the record.

The most important take-away I took from my conversation with him was that, for him, economic conditions and feelings of living under a dictatorship were connected to feelings of religiosity. He complained that the chinovniki had great wealth compared to the common people who wanted to live under the right path (Sunnah) set out by Muhammed. It is important to remember that many forms of pious Islam have a communal element, similar to socialism. In Arabic, the term for the community is Ummah, and observant Muslims, like those in Hizb ut-Tahrir, often talk about a need to work toward the strengthening and preservation of the Ummah (Muslim community).

In fact, Hizb ut-Tahrir’s official declaration of intent on the group’s web site speaks extensively about the Ummah and its political interests. Here is an example:

With regard to Hizb ut-Tahrir being a political party, this is because politics in Islam is looking after the affairs of the Ummah domestically and externally and Allah (swt) has commanded the governing of the Ummah’s affairs by Islam and nothing else. This command is discharged by looking after the Ummah’s domestic and foreign interests and by conducting them exclusively according to Islam; this is performed by the State and by the Ummah who accounts the State. In order for this
to be achieved practically, Hizb ut-Tahrir must be a political party that undertakes within the Ummah this task and works towards seizing the reins of power through her; thus Hizb ut-Tahrir is not a spiritual bloc, nor is it a moralistic or a scientific bloc, but rather a political bloc that works towards the management of the Ummah’s affairs as a whole according to Islam. (Hizb ut-Tahrir 2012: 2)

As is made clear in this quote, Hizb ut-Tahrir sees as its goals the political governance of the Ummah, “who accounts the State.” According to analysis (Karagiannis 2010: 44-47), the group is “like the Bolshevik party” in its degree of antipathy toward democracy. The group claims that Allah has created all laws, and that it is the role of an appointed Caliph to in turn appoint judges to oversee their interpretation.

In Hizb ut-Tahrir’s effort to protect and govern the Ummah, it claims to be sympathetic to the Ummah’s worldly problems:

Hizb ut-Tahrir has been throughout all these events working as a political party, in touch with the world, aware of its conditions, perceptive of its problems, acquainted with the motives of its states and peoples, pursuing the political actions that occur in the world and monitoring the political plans of the various states with regard to the styles of execution, the nature of the relationships between them and the political manoeuvres which these states perform. (Hizb ut-Tahrir 2012: 5)

Here we have an indication that the group portrays itself publicly as aware of the world’s conditions and problems. The implication here is that the group is more aware of the suffering of the world than are local leaders. It is not a stretch to propose that Abdullahove’s general sentiment is in line with that of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s expressed organizing principles.

2010

Five years later, the second pairing of events happened. Again, the president of Kyrgyzstan was overthrown by a crowd of protesters. Like in the run-up to the overthrow of then-President Askar
Akayev in 2005, there were widespread accusations of vote-rigging in favor of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in July 2009 (Schwirtz 2009). Some experts also noted that economic and other issues, over elections fraud, played a role in motivating the uprising. Supporting this view was the argument of Jim Nichol, of the Congressional Research Service, who wrote: “The April 2010 coup appears to have been triggered by popular discontent over rising utility prices and government repression” (Nichol 2005).

Also notable was the onslaught of bad press on President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Russian television and print media, which dominates the market in Kyrgyzstan to this day. On April 1, 2010, Jamestown Foundation analyst Erica Marat wrote that “In the past two weeks, the Russian media has fiercely criticized the Kyrgyz President, Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s, regime. Newspapers and TV programs have sought to reveal the president’s corruption and nepotism…” (Marat 2010). Moscow’s turn away from the president of Kyrgyzstan may have intensified after the announcement of a plan for the United States to build an anti-terrorism training camp in Kyrgyzstan’s southwestern Batken region, Marat writes. Indeed, in the perpetual “great game” of Central Asian geopolitics (Hopkirk 1990, Cooley 2012), some observers speculated that Bakiyev was ousted in 2010 with the support of Russian interests, because he did not shut down the Manas Air Base outside Bishkek that he had apparently promised Vladimir Putin, who was then Russian Prime Minister. A reporter at the time pointed out that “Less than a month before the violent protests that toppled the government of Kyrgyzstan last week, Russian television stations broadcast scathing reports portraying President Kurmanbek Bakiyev as a repugnant dictator whose family was stealing billions of dollars from this impoverished nation” (Pan 2010). In addition to the Russian media campaign against President Bakiyev, Russia raised tariffs on oil products for those countries not in its free-trading bloc with Belarus and Kazakhstan, effective
on April 1, 2010. The imposition of these tariffs spelled not only sharp pressure at the pump for consumers in Kyrgyzstan, but also tremendous trouble at the Manas Air Base, where Bakiyev’s son Maksim allegedly controlled the highly lucrative fueling contracts for the US government, just as President Akayev’s son Aidar had under his father’s rule (Kramer 2010).

Without Russian support during his final days in office, Bakiyev sought to retain power by using police and military force. When all was said and done, according to the interim government, more than 80 people were killed in the uprising, and hundreds were injured (Schwirtz 2010). That violence, however, was just a portent for things to come, as the ousted leader fled to his ancestral home town in southern Kyrgyzstan.

A month after President Bakiyev was forced out of the country and his office, a group of his supporters took over three city administrative buildings in the south of the country, an airport in Jalal-Abad, and forcibly installed a new regional governor, before issuing calls for Bakiyev’s reinstatement as the nation’s president (Kramer 2010a). Struggling to maintain power in the south of the country, Interim President Roza Otunbaeva, who had fired the entire Parliament in April (Weir 2010), faced a power vacuum in the region. A detailed Human Rights Watch report on the ensuing violence put it this way:

In need of political support, the interim government appealed to the traditionally apolitical Uzbek community, which became emboldened by playing the role of power broker and put forward demands for greater political power. The prospect of increased Uzbek participation in politics angered many Kyrgyz, and in late April and May the two groups locked into a spiral of increasing tensions. (2010)

By June 2010, the tension had devolved into interethnic violence. On the night of June 10, according to the Human Rights Watch report, a fight broke out in a casino in Osh between a few ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz men. Initially, Uzbeks were apparently doing much of the attacking,
and, quickly, rumors spread of their atrocities (Human Rights Watch 2010). Then, crowds of ethnic Kyrgyz from surrounding villages came into the city of Osh and, “From early morning on June 11 through June 14, the attackers looted and torched Uzbek shops and homes, killing people who remained in the neighborhoods. In some neighborhoods ethnic Uzbeks fought back from behind makeshift barricades” (Human Rights Watch 2010).

By the time the fighting subsided, “about 111,000 people were displaced to Uzbekistan and a further 300,000 were internally displaced,” according to the official Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission report by a group compiled under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and led by Kimmo Kiljunun, Special Representative for Central Asia of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011). There have been widespread accusations of Kyrgyzstani police and military units using military vehicles in attacks on residents of majority Uzbek neighborhoods, and seemed to selectively defend ethnic Kyrgyz populations over ethnic Uzbek populations (Human Rights Watch 2010). This pattern of one-sided state preference continued in the aftermath of the violence, according to the official KIC report, which cited allegations of indiscriminate arrests, torture, and “selective prosecution targeting the Uzbek minority” (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011: iii).

During the violence, Hizb ut-Tahrir was nowhere to be seen. The Muslim political group that had promised to unite Central Asia kept a low profile. When an ethnic Uzbek I’ll call Ulughbek – before the violence and exacerbated ethnic divisions he was a university professor, who told me he had been the target of Hizb ut-Tahrir recruitment efforts for years – asked Hizb ut-Tahrir where they had been, his would-be recruiter from Hizb ut-Tahrir replied that there had not been orders from London to intervene in the violence and protect Uzbek citizens from the violence. In
Ulughbek’s mahalla, or Uzbek neighborhood, there is evidence from Human Rights Watch that the violence against civilians had been perpetrated by the police (2010). By abstaining from the violence, and not even playing a defensive role, Hizb ut-Tahrir lost legitimacy in the eyes of Uzbeks in the south, particularly among the youth, Ulughbek told me.

In the coming years, as certain aspects of political Islam took on a more violent tone than Hizb ut-Tahrir ever represented, with the rise of the so-called Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq and elsewhere, a relatively few young, angry, and marginalized people from Central Asia responded to calls heard online or elsewhere to join the global jihad. These people, mostly young men, who would leave Central Asia and try to make their way most often to Syria, would generally travel through Moscow and Turkey first. There’s much more to say about them in the coming chapters, as well as about the official responses from Kyrgyzstan’s government and internationally funded nongovernmental organizations, particularly Search for Common Ground and Mercy Corps. The backdrop of the twin “successful” uprisings in Bishkek, and precipitated violence in the nearby Fergana Valley---be it in Andijon, Uzbekistan, or Osh, Kyrgyzstan---is highly relevant to our story, just as is the waxing and waning appeal of Hizb ut-Tahrir in southern Kyrgyzstan. From a purely political standpoint, it is interesting to imagine what might have happened if Hizb ut-Tahrir was allowed to operate openly in Kyrgyzstan. Might the party then have attracted those young people with strong religious ideas who were interested in changing the political reality of the region? If Hizb ut-Tahrir had actively protected ethnic Uzbeks in Ulughbek’s neighborhood in 2010, might Ulughbek and others have lent their support to the party? We will, of course, never know the answers to these and other hypothetical questions, but thinking about them yields important insights into the religious and political
topography of Kyrgyzstan, particularly for ethnic Uzbeks, after 2010. That topography will be an important context for the remainder of this dissertation, where I will analyze some official responses to the perceived problem of and around what has come to be known as religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan.
Chapter 2 – Sectarian Divisions

Before the Soviet Union was created, there were no nation-states in Central Asia, per se. There were, instead, lands inhabited by nomads, and two khanates, based in Bukhara and Kokand, all paying tribute, more or less, to the Ottoman Empire before falling to the Tsarist Russia. “The idea of associating a territory with an ethnic group defined by language was alien to the political ideas of the Muslims of Central Asia,” wrote French political scientist and historian Olivier Roy (2007: 3). What is more, he wrote, is that the borders that emerged after the break-up of the Soviet Union were designed in the early Soviet period to conduct what Roy called a “national division” of titular groups in the five republics that would become Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. “It was then left to the anthropologists, linguistics experts and historians to explain how this virtual people had been waiting for centuries for its political incarnation to be achieved” (Roy 2007: xv). Arguably, this creation of national identity and narrative is still ongoing today, with ethnic contestations persisting, as we shall see directly. Perceived religiosity, too, can and does cleave society in Kyrgyzstan. This perception that Uzbeks in the southern part of the country are more likely to be conservative orthodox Muslims, or even what might be called fundamentalists, is reflected in the analysis of Ferideh Heyat:

In Kyrgyzstan, with its diversity of ethnic groups and religious traditions, re-Islamisation, that is the rise in Islamic beliefs and practices, has ethnic as well as social and economic dimensions. In the south with its substantial Uzbek population and higher rates of unemployment and poverty, there has been a greater spread of orthodox Islam, in particular the radical Islamist movements (2004: 286).

These two cleavage categories – perceived ethnicity and perceived religiosity – can and do produce sectarian division in Kyrgyzstan. This sectarian division is, of course, interconnected and entwined, as sectarian status within a certain identified group “is relational: it is a node in a relational field” (Nucho 2016: 5). The legacy of Soviet ethnic policy after transition to the
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is complex. Past researchers have found that people in post-Soviet countries often talk about ethnic or national identities in nostalgic or aspirational ways (Abramson 2000). National Soviet policy operated on clichés, stereotypes, and stifled competition between different national leaders who were prevented from attaining national independence (Slezkine 1994). What may look like a celebration of kinship, in and around the national symbols coaxed along by the Soviet state can, in independence, actually be nothing more than a “mélange of custom and the assimilation of neoliberal rhetoric that was widely disseminated across the former Soviet Union during this period” (Provis 2015: 371). In other words, the ethnic categories “Kyrgyz” and “Uzbek” are contested and dynamic, relational and perspective-based. Yet they are also very real, I maintain, particularly in and through the concept of sectarian divide.

It is possible to trace the perceived difference in religiosity to explanations that revolve around perceived historical vocation and ethnogenesis, and, quickly, these explanations also begin to look sectarian. This chapter will examine and explore how ethnic identity and religion interact in the country of Kyrgyzstan; the cleavages are many. But this is also a story of religion increasingly bridging the gap between ethnic groups that are otherwise often increasingly divided. Finally, in some cases, religious sectarianism informs a narrative of division and alienation within particular ethnic groups. These two potential criteria for division – perceived religiosity and identified ethnicity – present two axes in Kyrgyzstan that inform the social fabric of the country.

OFFICIAL ETHNIC HISTORIES
Many people who identify as Kyrgyz will tell you that their ancestors took part in a migration southwest from the Yenisei River Valley in Siberia to the Tien Shan mountains in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. This idea can be traced back to a Russian Tsarist-era regional official and scholar, who wrote:

The presence of people with the same name, language, appearance, and customs as the Tien Shan Kyrgyz at the Yenisei River from ancient times until the 18th century proves the theory that the Yenisei and Tien Shan Kyrgyz formerly were one people. (Aristov 1893 (2001): 24)

A recent history textbook produced under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic cites the work of a Russian archeologist who excavated sites in Kyrgyzstan in the mid-1970s, to prove that Osh, in the south of the country, was the center of a civilization in the Bronze Age that stretched throughout the region.

After the Dalversin Tepe collection in southern Uzbekistan, the dishes from the Osh settlement constitute the richest collection of archaeological artifacts from Central Asia. Naturally, this is clear indication of the wide reach of Chust culture in the region, which includes the vast territory of present-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016: 30)

Osh, in recent decades, has been the site of significant contestation between the ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz populations in the region, and is, itself, just a few miles from the international border (Megoran 2007, Liu 2012, Tishkov 1999).

The textbook’s ethnic Kyrgyz authors were careful not to stoke the flames of sectarianism, just as the Soviet scholars before them (Abramzon 1990). The contemporary authors seem to be walking a fine line between celebrating Kyrgyz history and identity, and acknowledging that to trace the history back thousands of years is difficult and contentious. For example, the textbook authors seem to be aware that the context of ethnic origin stories is fraught, writing:
Most scholars do not deny the Yenisei origins of the modern Kyrgyz people….It is important, however, not to simplify this complex process. It is important to keep in mind that the original homeland of the Kyrgyz people was Tenir Too, not Yenisei. This was a very long and complex process; accordingly, the review and study of it is possible only with the collaboration of scholars from multiple disciplines, such as archaeology, history, oriental studies, anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, and folklore. (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016: 144)

However, in the context of this contestation over who should control Osh, it is what the authors left out that is perhaps most important to highlight. Notably absent in the textbook is any account whatsoever of the conflict in 2010 between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations that left up to 2,000 Uzbeks dead and 400,000 displaced (Leonard 2010). This omission of events that happened six years before the book was published leaves what otherwise is a sensitive and mostly balanced portrayal of history a bit lopsided and insufficient.

Some anthropologists cite cultural differences between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz as having led to, or at least underpinned, the conflicts in the eastern Fergana Valley in both 1990 and 2010. “Uzbeks belong to the Turco-Iranian cultural realm, while the Kyrgyz belong to the Turco-Mongol cultural realm” (Rezvani 2013: 72). This depiction, I argue, is essentialist and rooted in an oversimplified set of codified cultural associations. That said, stereotypes in the region abound. Historic nomads – Kyrgyz, in this dichotomy – are said to think of themselves as the rightful claimants to the land, and look down on city dwellers, who are typically Uzbek (Tishkov 1995, Liu 2012). The Turco-Iranian versus Turco-Mongolian classification of Rezvani seems to actually be code for a split in religious practice between the Kyrgyz nomads and the landed Uzbeks. This split does exist, in my observation, between a population that has practiced a

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3 A mountainous region in present-day Kyrgyzstan.
syncretic form of Islam steeped in animist and Shamanist beliefs – the Kyrgyz - and a population that prides itself on adherence to and reverence for a more orthodox, even scholarly interpretation of Islam – the Uzbeks. While there surely are exceptions to this classification, Kyrgyz are more likely to venerate animals, springs, mountains, and trees than Uzbeks, as well as to practice ancestor worship and construct elaborate tombs (Mazars) for their venerated dead.

The university textbook of history discussed above puts it this way:

Upon the arrival of Islam in Central Asia, pre-Islamic religious beliefs coexisted with Islam in the life of the Kyrgyz. Prior to Islam; however, religious consciousness was fairly developed amongst the Kyrgyz. The custom of worshiping animals, totemism, was the earliest form of religious consciousness…The Kyrgyz veneration of animals comes from the religious beliefs of Zoroastrianism…(Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016: 205).

Shamanism, too, is today taught to be a part of distinctly Kyrgyz tradition:

Shamanism is still part of the spiritual lives of the Kyrgyz people and often associated with the practice of folk healing... Kyrgyz shamanism resembles shamanism practiced in to that of southern Siberia (sic.), not to mention the mystical form of Islam, Sufism. (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016: 206).

None of these spiritual features coincide well with a resurgent doctrinaire interpretation of Islam that is increasingly popular in the country, particularly the south, where many Uzbeks live. There is some tension and competition between those Kyrgyz who seek to preserve and celebrate their hybrid, open brand of Islam – as well as on the part of those relative few Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Tatars calling themselves Tengrists, who would opt to drop Islam altogether as a foreign influence and are happy instead to build on their animist traditions sometimes claimed as pan-Turkic (Laruelle 2007) – versus those who celebrate a more scripturalist interpretation of Islam, influenced greatly by financial support for particular mosques and movements coming into the country from the Persian Gulf region.
Incidentally, faith healers are not only to be found in Kyrgyzstan or among the Kyrgyz, of course. Rasanayagam observed how Sufi healing practices have been changing in Uzbekistan amidst the increasing interest in a more scholarly form of Islam. Of the faith-healing sessions, he writes:

Through these encounters individuals creatively combine multiple, often contradictory, ideas of correct Muslim practice. They construct themselves as ‘proper’ Muslims according to the orthodoxies authorized by official imams while maintaining their own, often highly individual, interpretations and practices. (2006: 391).

Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations are themselves distinctly self-identified along religious lines. The Uzbek origin story is not discussed in the same terms in Kyrgyzstan as the Kyrgyz origin story, with its heroic nomadicism. Even in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the mythicized national hero riding a stone horse in the central city park is Tamerlane, who reportedly spoke classic Persian like the Tajiks, not Uzbek (Shterenshis 2002: 131). But, suffice it to say, many Uzbeks believe that they historically were landed farmers before the Kyrgyz arrived, and more urban then their historically nomadic Kyrgyz interlocutors. The dominant narrative in the region, again informed by Soviet scholarly and popular literature, describes Uzbeks coming into contact with Arabic-speaking Muslim traders about 900 years ago, and, hence, adopting Islam through a result of this contact – way before, notably, the Kyrgyz nomads are said to have incorporated Islam into their daily practice and celebrated traditions. The official 2016 textbook mentioned above puts it this way:

…The Kyrgyz took on the tenets of Islam without sacrificing their previously held notions developed in their pre-Islamic history. It is telling that the 17th century
Islamic historian Mahmud ibn Vali contended that ‘the Kyrgyz accepted Islam only with the advent of the Uzbeks.’ (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016: 208)

While I agree that most people in Kyrgyzstan credit the ancestors of the present-day Uzbeks with bringing Islam to the present-day Kyrgyz, and I have seen this trend between the two ethnic groups continue to this day, with Uzbeks often acknowledged or accused of being “better” Muslims than the Kyrgyz, I would claim that there is currently a contested space in Islamic practice throughout Central Asia. Sufism, syncretic Zoroastrian- or Shamanist-hybrid heterodox forms of the faith are the object of derision from self-declared “true” Muslims. This tense space is negotiated daily by many in the country, and occasionally propelled people to have real conflicts with one another.

CONTESTED ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN ARAVAN

Take the story of an ethnic Uzbek man I will identify as Izak. Izak had worked for Search for Common Ground for some time, but no longer. We met several times in Bishkek and Osh before I spoke with him at length about his work in late April of 2016, in his hometown of Aravan. Aravan is nestled between the international border toward the southern flank of the Ferghana Valley, most of which is in Uzbekistan, and dramatic mountains just to the south of that. There is one road out to Osh, and the town feels isolated yet crowded. It has been the site of a few interethnic flashpoints in recent years.

Several years before Izak and I met, in 2013, he had established a mini-soccer league. Mini-soccer is similar to indoor soccer, although it is played outdoors, typically on a field with Astroturf and rubber chips rather than real grass. Although he called it “mini soccer,” leagues in the United States call the increasingly popular sport futsal. For the first year that Izak started the program, sixteen teams participated in the league – 3 ethnic Kyrgyz, 2 mixed ethnicity, and 11
ethnic Uzbek. Government officials and religious leaders were among the players who participated. Izak said that the youngest player was 14 and oldest around 40.

The program was designed to meet several distinct goals, in terms of promoting civil society. Izak told me that he was excited to start the league for several reasons, primary of which was to give youth in the community where he lived a positive social outlet. He also intended to conduct trainings of the sort that he had done for Search for Common Ground within the soccer league, at least for the team leaders. Also, he was happy to see that a significant fan network developed. By posting updates and standings on Facebook, Twitter, and the Russian social media platform Odnoklassniki, migrant workers in Russia were able to keep tabs on the favorite players as well as in contact and connected with their home community.

“Football gave the guys something to do,” Izak said. “In a place where there were no organized activities in the evening.”

Aravan has a reputation as being a very socially conservative community. It is largely surrounded by Uzbekistan, and, according to my conversations with Izak and others, conservative Salafi Muslims have become deeply established in the city in the past several years. Within months of the start of the mini-soccer program, fighting at games became so severe that Izak had to end the season about halfway through. Rather than give oxygen to the interethnic fire, he cited Ramadan as a reason for stopping the games, he told me. But then he went further, and canceled the 2014 season entirely out of concern for increased violence, he said.

“There was a real hunger to play sports,” he said, “but some people brought conflict with them onto the field.” The tension was not just on the field, but in the stands, and there was a potential for it to spill out into the larger community. It was not rare for 400 fans to show up for games, Izak told me, and the fighting spectators would go onto the field during games. Some of the
fighting began within one ethnic group, between people living in different neighborhoods, but it quickly devolved into interethnic fighting, he told me.

“The 18th game became violent, along ethnic lines,” he said. “A Kyrgyz team and an Uzbek team began to fight. And they had mafia supporters in the crowds. One of the teams apparently included some GKNB guys. The leader of the local GKNB was playing on the field at the time.”

The GKNB is an abbreviation in Russian for the State Committee for National Security, one of the main successor groups of the KGB, which is responsible for investigating and policing extremism cases. The GKNB leader, Izak told me, was ethnic Kyrgyz.

He told me that he was very disappointed that the fighting erupted, and that he had to put a stop to the play, which he thought had a lot of potential to promote civic engagement and build peace in his community.

“I was disappointed,” he said, “because I was never able to conduct the civic training that I wanted to hold.”

He planned to restart the league two months hence.

RELIGION AS A UNIFYING FORCE

Increasingly, I have observed that the more outwardly pious and observant Muslim Kyrgyz see no problem associating with outwardly pious and observant Muslim Uzbeks. Religion can, in some cases, unite members of these different and often otherwise competing ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. Although it is gendered, because the strictures of the resurgent Hanafi and, more pointedly, Hanbali interpretations of Islam that call for a separation of men and women, there is a similar sisterhood emerging among pious Muslim Kyrgyz and Uzbek women in places like Jalal-Abad and Osh.
One group in Osh whose director, whom I will call Zulfira, I met with centered its trainings on religion, she told me, for women of all ethnicities. When I asked her about any residual tension from the 2010 conflict, she said that such tension was because of individuals, not ethnic groups. “The ethnic groups,” she told me, using the Russian word Natsiya, which literally means “nation” but effectively ethnic group, “are fine, but in each ethnic group there are bad people.” She acknowledged that many people still held strong views based on ethnicity, or nation, born of stereotypes and potentially leading to violent hatred. “There are people in different ethnic groups, like Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, that, when they see each other, they just want to kill each other.”

Zulfira-Ezhe told me that ethnic identity was not a marker of one’s humanity for her. She refuted the notion she said that some espoused, about Uzbeks being inferior, instead speaking of the equal worth and potential of each individual as God-given: “Here we usually have around 80% Uzbek girls who come to learn,” she said. “I go to their homes, or they come here. Everyone is equal, because Allah has created everyone equally.”

Both Izak and Zulfira-Ezhe acknowledge pervasive negative feelings around ethnic difference in their communities. In her words, Zulfira spoke about religion as bridging the gap between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, and god’s endowment of humanity in each person shining through to her.

For many I spoke with, though, the kind of religion that a person practiced was a marker of their morality, or, more pointedly, their potential predilection for “extremism” of the kind that could, if left unchecked, lead toward the adoption of views in line with militant groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Most observant Muslims in Kyrgyzstan that I spoke with made a point of stipulating that these groups did not at all represent Islam, or, in fact, had nothing at all to do
with Islam, and were, instead, havens of people with the wrong ideas about Islam. This line of argument corresponds with an assumption that the right kind of Islam, often called “traditional” Islam, by which people mean an often-syncretic Hanafi strain of Sunni Islam, is safe, morally praiseworthy, and the province of security.

A “RELIGION OF PEACE”

Alisher Haji is a professor of Islam in the theology department at the Osh State University. He is 39, and has been working closely with Search for Common Ground on dialogues and as an expert on Salafism, and other topics. When I spoke with him, he said that he did not personally know of anybody who has traveled from Kyrgyzstan to the Middle East to join jihadist organizations, but he also said that it was a fact that people have gone because they are not educated enough about religion. “There are many reasons for people to become engaged in radicalism or extremism,” he said. “And the main reason why people are engaged in radicalism or extremism is lack of knowledge. For example, understanding the Koran is very difficult. And it’s not so easy to understand the Hadith of our Prophet, and to follow it. And those who are engaged in radicalism or extremism, they think differently. They think in a short-sighted way.”

He went on to describe a hierarchy or progression from radicalism to extremism to terrorism, which can likely be traced back to the law enforcement trainings that Search for Common Ground have facilitated, which he has participated in. He said that a sign of radicalism, for example, is when somebody forces another to read namaz (Muslim “prayer” in Uzbek and Kyrgyz, from Turkish). Extremism is going one step further, he said, and declaring those who do not read namaz or follow the rules of Islam a kafir (“nonbeliever” or “infidel,” from Arabic). “In Islam,” he said, “no one can tell you that if you are not reading namaz, you are not a Muslim.
Nobody can tell you this.” He said that terrorism, to kill somebody or use force against supposed nonbelievers, is a step beyond extremism. “Terrorism says that we have to fight with the nonbelievers, with the *kafirs*, saying ‘that is a *kafir*,’ so we need to fight with and kill him. These are the elements of terrorism.”

He went on and described a hadith saying that “a Muslim person is the person who never hurts with his words, and never hurts with his actions.” He cited a verse of the Koran, in Surah Maidah, Ayat 32. He said, “It is written that if a person kills another person, it means that he has killed the whole world, and if a person saves the life of one person, it means that he has saved the life of the whole world.”

I cite Alisher Haji’s words to describe a typical encounter I had with religious leaders in southern Kyrgyzstan this past spring, of both Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnicity. Alisher Haji assumes that if people learn the “true” Islam – the Sunni Hanafi school which he follows and teaches – they would learn that Islam is a religion of freedom and of peace, that one cannot pass judgement on another’s religious practice, and that, of course, to kill is a violation of the rules set forth in the Koran and the Hadith. But embedded in this statement of his, which assumes that religion and religious understanding is the antidote to what he terms radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, is a belief in a particular version of Islam. Although he said that it is forbidden in Islam to force another person to read *namaz*, his is not a statement about accepting other religious beliefs that might run counter to Islam. Furthermore, he is turning to a set of religious rules – from the Hadith and the Koran – against violence, without mentioning secular state-based laws. In so doing, he is relying on a religious code over a secular one, and this religious code is predicated on a particular interpretation, based on a particular translation of the Koran, for example, acceptance of particular Hadiths, and so on. He is relying on religious rules rather than more
secular morals to condemn radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. These religious rules would be most effective if conveyed to a believer who respects the words of a religious authority, such as, presumably, the students in his classes. But those people who are already marginalized or rebellious against authority figures such as himself – with his PhD in theology from a foreign university, and professorship at the most well-regarded university in the city – would likely not find his interpretation of Islam and its corollary rules convincing. In a country like Kyrgyzstan, where clandestine prayer circles kept religion alive during the highly repressive Soviet period, and unregistered medressahs persist to this day, and while popular imams are arrested by the state, gauging who speaks for Islam is a problematic venture, to say the least. Therefore, using religion to defeat or counter radicalism within Islam is likely to be a somewhat fraught undertaking.

Nonetheless, some groups, like Search for Common Ground, are taking on the project. This group has had some real successes convening conversations between religious leaders, law enforcement authorities, politicians, and other varied stakeholders. The group works closely with the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan, although this quasi-state body garners limited respect and recognition among the most pious of the population. Search for Common Ground has attempted to empower the Muftiate, by facilitating trainings for imams about extremism and other subjects, including public speaking and presentation skills. Meanwhile, the Muftiate has recently completed a formal attestation process for the country’s imams, which a large number failed. That said, the staff of the Muftiate either lack the authority or the desire to dismiss these imams whose knowledge was found to be lacking, perhaps out of fear of enfranchising even more so-called “underground” or unregistered mosques and medressahs.
One perceived push factor toward radical religious extremism – that of poor religious understanding or education – assumes that there is a version of Islam that is tolerant, accessible, and rule-bound. In order to deter individuals from being recruited to radical Islamic-inspired groups, we must assume that the individuals at risk of being recruited are receptive to the religious teachings of particular people and institutions that have cosmopolitan values. Earlier I mentioned that some of my interlocutors in Kyrgyzstan spoke of a supposedly “traditional” brand of Islam. Labels such as this are highly contentious, of course, and, in my observation, become more popular for some the more contentious they are for others. In other words, you only need to call a particular version of a religion “traditional” when you deem that it is threatened by competing interpretations.

RELIGION AND SECURITY
The practice of peacebuilding in Central Asia, paid for by Western interests, deploys the notion of “security” in various ways. Security means very different, nearly opposite, things to religious leaders and law enforcement authorities in Kyrgyzstan. Religious leaders see security in religion and acts of piety, whereas many law enforcement officials see security’s role as stamping out religious-inflected terrorist threats. My project has been to investigate notions of security in the context of a young democracy struggling with what it means for an individual to be free, what authority the state has over religion, and what sort of opposition to the state’s ruling party will be condoned. Search for Common Ground, as an organization that convenes authorities from the religious and law enforcement spheres, and Mercy Corps, a nominally faith-based US-based nonprofit that conducts aid interventions that often also bring different groups together for the purposes of peacebuilding, stand at the crux of these questions. This dissertation will describe
some of the work of these groups that I observed and discuss related theoretical themes, but, first, must account for the perceived challenges this work is meant to prevent: the migration to Syria and Iraq to join and presumably fight for Daesh, or the so-called Islamic State. What follows is an account the disappearance of a young man from Kyrgyzstan who was presumed to have gone to fight with the Islamic State.

A RECRUITMENT STORY

Andijon Mahalla is a small settlement, at times both verdant near the irrigation canals and dusty on its dirt roads. It is in southern Kyrgyzstan and straddles the border with Uzbekistan. Nearly all the people who live there are ethnic Uzbeks. This is an agricultural community. Most families have horses and sheep, and a few have cows. There is a small mosque in the center of town, yet on a visit during the hot summer of 2016, a visibly drunk man nearly cornered me inside the small kiosk at a crossroads nearby, at around noon. As in many towns in Kyrgyzstan, Islam and alcohol exist in the same space.

On this particular trip to Andijon Mahalla, I visited with a young man named Nematullah and his father. We met at their house, which, like many Uzbek homes, had a large mixed-use outdoor area adjacent to the living quarters, but enclosed by a masonry wall. Several women in the family were cooking an elaborate meal for me and a colleague Sultanbek, from Mercy Corps, who was translating from Uzbek to English for me.

Nematullah’s friend, whom he had known since childhood and traveled to Moscow with to work, had recently fled the former Soviet Union altogether, and set off for Syria to fight. Nematullah said his friend, whom I’ll call Said, grew up in what might be considered a wealthy family, by
local standards. “Some people said he went there for money,” said Nematullah, as I tried to be polite by eating chocolates the family placed next to tea the women had made for me.

Nematullah’s sister brought the small kettle of concentrated green tea in to the room we were meeting in without saying a word or making eye contact with me or Sultanbek; a second, electric kettle that was much larger only held water that was used to dilute the tea concentrate to suit the taste of whomever was drinking it, as was customary in the region.

It was the month of Ramadan, and neither Sultanbek nor our hosts were eating and drinking. We sat with Nematullah’s father in a room apportioned to receive guests, called a mehmonkhana (“guest room”), described to me as fundamental to all Uzbek homes. The word has become synonymous with “hotel” in towns and cities big enough to have hotels, creating some confusion on my part when I first heard the word used to refer to what is essentially a living room, although generally not used by a home’s residents unless guests are visiting.

“Some people said [he left] because of the frustration,” he continued, “Frustration in the family, or in the community where he was living. But I know him very well, and I know that he was from a rich family, and he was the only son, and his parents were young. He had a car. He had a nice house, big house. He was not short of money. He was a capable person. He used to work as a cook. He was a good cook, as well. It wasn’t because of money. It wasn’t because of frustration, or any anger that he was feeling in the house or in the family.”

In listing these items and perceived precursors of Said’s apparent contentment, Nematullah was responding to the implicit, unsaid claim that Said became radicalized, for lack of a better word, and left to fight out of poverty or some kind of disenfranchisement that he might have suffered.

For Nematullah, his friend Said had it good. Nematullah did not, however, list other conditions that one might attribute to those considered well off elsewhere. He did not say that his friend had
the opportunity to pursue higher education, for example, or work in a context that afforded him a possibility for advancement, or even work in a context that was legal. Said was said to be a “capable person.” His environments that he lived in before his departure for Syria, however, were not said to enable his capabilities to shine and reach fruition, be they the environment of small-town rural life on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, or unauthorized, under-the-table employment in Russia. In both environments, in fact, Said’s options were highly limited.

Nematullah described his friend further. “He liked sports and driving cars,” he said. “These were the only hobbies he used to have. He wasn’t a business person who always tried to make money.”

The two young men had gone to Moscow together three years earlier. There, Nematullah said, their paths split. Said fell in with some young religious men from Dagestan, just over the border from war-torn Chechnya, Nematullah said. Since Lermontov’s time, the Caucasus Mountains have been home to people who have resisted Russian rule violently, often on religious grounds. In Central Asia, Chechens, Dagenstanis, Ingush, and Avars generally have reputations as rebels at best and criminals at worst, but, in either case, people who have been wronged by the Russian state.

Nematullah said that in Moscow Said went to the big mosque on Prospekt Mira where migrant workers from Central Asia and the Caucasus prayed on Fridays. Nematullah said that young men from his village sometimes got together for plov---a pilaf with lamb and carrots that is beloved by nearly all Central Asians, it seems, and is always cooked and eaten socially---and occasionally Said would join them.
Then, after Nematullah hadn’t seen him for about a year, Said came to his work place to say goodbye. After that, Said came back to Andijon Mahalla, told his friends and family he was returning to Moscow, but then disappeared, Nematullah said. Although Nematullah said that his friend Said had come from a religious family --- two of his uncles had made the Hajj, which is very expensive and a sign of prestige and piety in Kyrgyzstan --- he also directly criticized and made a distinction between his own and Said’s religious understanding. When he was back home in Kyrgyzstan after he had said goodbye to Nematullah, some of the young men’s friends observed that Said was praying in a different way, more in line with the Wahabbist Hanbali mashab than the more commonly practiced Hanafi school of thought. There in his home, Nematullah mimed the style of prayer that Said was embodying at the time that the two friends last saw each other. Nematullah leaned forward as if to start to genuflect, in a style very similar to that which I had often seen in Central Asia as an indicator of Muslim prayer. This time, however, there was a key difference in how Nematullah presented the action, compared to the typical, orthodox form. Male Hanafi Muslims in Kyrgyzstan – the vast majority of those in the country – pray by bending their knees and bowing their heads to the ground, generally in unison with other men in a mosque, holding their hands on either side of their heads, with their thumbs touching their ears. Hanbali Muslims, however, do not touch their thumbs to their ears, but instead place their hands on either side of their heads, farther away from their heads than the hands and arms of Hanafi Muslims. The distinction marks a significant variation in practice and belief, and does so in a manner that is immediately visible to any observant Muslim or educated bystander. There are other differences between Hanafi and Hanbali Muslims, of course, but Nematullah did not directly address these in our conversation, and I did not ask about them. An Uzbek friend
who grew up less than 10 km from Andijon Mahalla later told me that Hanbali Muslims also take
a significant “shortcut” in their prayers. Namaz, or prayer, for Hanafi Muslims in Kyrgyzstan
involves two sets of recitations: farz and sunnat. The required prayer is comprised in farz, while
the sunnat is considered by Hanafi Muslims to be essential because the Prophet Muhammad
supposedly did them, also. Hanbalis do not believe this, my friend said, and only recite the
required farz prayers. Hanafi Muslims can similarly skip the sunnat prayers in the case of
emergencies, or when they are traveling. Other special accommodations are sometimes allowed
in these special circumstances, my friend told me. For example, it is considered acceptable to
consolidate all five prayers typically required in a day to the evening prayer for Hanafi Muslims
if they are traveling.
Nematullah also identified an abnormality in the manner that Said spoke. He said that Said was
reportedly talking in a different way during this time, saying things like “We all belong to
Allah,” “Everything is up to Allah,” and “Everything will stay, we will go,” and other apparently
pious and at least rhetorically fatalist statements.
I asked Nematullah if Said had had a good religious understanding. He said no. “I never saw him
reading the Koran,” he said. “I never say him studying at the medressahs, or learning from an
imam, or anything like that.”
Nematullah did say that Said used to carry around a small book he would use for religious
practice. “He didn’t really know the religious aspects,” he told me. “He wasn’t very religious, in
terms of knowing the religion well.”
He told me that Said could not even pronounce verses of the Koran in the manner of a well-
practiced orator.
I asked Nematullah how he thought Said learned about Islam if not at a medressah or by reading the Koran frequently.

He said “When you interpret the Koran, or explain the Koran directly to a person, he will not understand it. If you translate it and explain it, he will not understand. Any person. Why? Because in some parts of the Koran, it is also said that you have to kill people, in terms of jihad. Some people understand it directly. Some people, they don’t even understand it. There are some misunderstandings that could happen. So, what is better, is to understand the Koran, you have to understand the Hadiths of our prophet. If you don’t understand the Hadiths of our prophet, then you have to ask some religious person who would explain them to you, who would guide you.”

He continued: “When he was in Russia, there was nobody who would guide him in the right way of traditional Islam. At that point, maybe he was misguided, maybe he studied himself privately.”

I asked Nematullah if he ever talked with Said about jihad, or Syria, or what was in the news, what was happening in America.

“No, there was nothing from outside, like news,” he said. When Said came to him for the last time, he explained, he said goodbye, then returned to Kyrgyzstan.

“When he came here, he kind of made some propaganda,” he said. “Saying we have to pray, in the name of Allah, and that’s it. He became more religious.”

Nematullah’s father, Rustam, then shared his thoughts on the matter. He said “This is a misinterpretation of the Koran, and especially those parts where it is written about jihad. Those recruiters with whom he met in Russia, they target young people, young religious persons, and then they try to tell more about this jihad part of the Koran, that jihad means killing. In this sense, more intervention on religious studies regarding this part of the Koran is being like kind of
submitted or given to the young people there. Of course it changes the minds of the people. He became more religious, more strict, and then it leads them to go fight overseas, or to another country.”

Then, he continued: “Of course, there was jihad with fighting, with blood and everything, but it was before…in the beginning, during our prophet’s time, when there was a lot of killing.

Why? Because they wanted more men or more people to become Muslim. In the beginning. Nowadays, we don’t need any jihad. If you want other people to be more religious, or to convert to Islam - this jihad needs proper explanation, with words, to talk with the person, explain to them that the true religion is Islam, because of this this and that, and that this is the differences with other religions, because of this this and that. So this is the real jihad now. This difference, some young people who are going there, they don’t understand.”

Nematullah and Rustam explained to me the importance of what I would call the embodiment of Islam, imparting on me the importance not only of, say, reading namaz, or praying, but also reading it the correct way, and cleaning yourself carefully beforehand. Nematullah said that it was important to “cross-check” any source of religious information – something that he thought Said did not do. “If you receive any information, any religious information, from the book, from a person, from any source, any information, you have to cross-check it,” he said. “People here, sometimes they don’t cross-check. So you have to cross-check with other books, other imams, as much as possible. With other religious persons. Then you will find if this is right or not. Sometimes when people hear something, about religion, they will say that religion is like this, because somebody told you this. No, but before that, you have to cross-check this!”
As we spoke, it was Ramadan, and, as the only non-Muslim\(^4\) in the room, the tea and sweets were just for me. It was July 1. Three days earlier, militants associated with the Islamic State had attacked the Ataturk Airport in Istanbul, killing 44 people and injuring more than 240 with assault rifles and explosive belts. Turkish authorities blamed a Chechen and two Uzbeks for the attack – one from Uzbekistan and the other from Kyrgyzstan – although Kyrgyzstani authorities denied that either were from that country (Yeginsu and Callimachi 2016).

I mentioned these facts to the men, and asked if they had heard the news. They had not.

Rustam explained “We don’t have time to watch television,” he said. “Usually at Ramadan we don’t watch it, because at nighttime, you open your mouth.” Here, he was using the vernacular expression for breaking the fast---that long-awaited for time after sundown when observant Muslims can finally eat during the month of Ramadan.

“And then you go to the mosque,” he continued, “and then you come here, because you’re very tired, and you sleep. After you close your mouth, at 3 or 4 in the morning, after that you sleep a bit, and then go to the field to work. There’s no information coming to us.”

Nematullah compared the civil war in Syria to the only conflict he knew---the interethnic fighting that had happened in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. “The situation in Syria is almost the same,” he said. “People there are fighting each other.”

Nematullah said that just as the Syrians did not have any influence in that conflict, Central Asians do not have any influence in the Syrian conflict. “It is separate,” he said.

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\(^4\) According to Jewish tradition, which traces the designation through maternal lines, I am Jewish. During my fieldwork, if asked I told my interlocutors this, although I did not generally bring it up on my own. I did not mention it to Nematullah and his father, Rustam, as our conversations did not directly touch on my personal religious feelings. When I did mention it, as I did dozens of times during the course of my research, the conversation would often transition into the topic of Israel’s policies, where it was often easy to find some common ground.
I asked him if he thought that religion might be playing a role in the fighting in Syria.

“I can’t tell,” he said. “I haven’t been there. I can’t say anything about it. It’s better to see once for yourself than to hear something many times. I cannot say it is happening because of religion.”

A RELIGIOUS “MISUNDERSTANDING”

This conversation and the statements Nematullah and Rustam made about Said, themselves, and their community reveal a great deal, particularly around a practical religious difference among some in the community. Nematullah clearly believes that religious misunderstanding explains his friend’s move to Syria. This is a common refrain many religiously observant people told me about people they had known who went to fight. Nematullah said that Said began speaking and praying differently before he went to Syria. When Said returned to Kyrgyzstan to say goodbye, as Nematullah put it, he showed marked changes in behavior. It is noteworthy that although Nematullah volunteered that there was a performative shift in the manner that Said prayed during this visit, he also says that Said did not read from the Koran or recite it well. We are left to believe that Nematullah believes that Said’s new way of praying is also misunderstood.

Said’s new way of praying, in the terms Pierre Bourdieu described, was heterodox (Bourdieu 2006 (1977)). This shift in religious embodiment also marks a shift from adherence of Hanafi to Hanbali schools of jurisprudence. The doctrine that Muslims in Kyrgyzstan subscribe to Hanafi traditions was, in the early years of Kyrgyzstan’s independence, doxic, or taken for granted. The distinction between prayer styles observant Muslims in Kyrgyzstan described to me as Hanafi and Hanbali is marked by a few features: Hanafi Muslims pray and genuflect with their hands on either side of their heads, thumbs just touching their ears. When they pray, or “read namaz,” they repeat a certain phrases attributed to the Prophet Muhammad’s actions, called sunnats, in full,
making for a lengthier prayer than Hanbalis, who do not repeat these sunnats. Hanbalis,
Kyrgyzstani Muslims told me, genuflect with their arms up, thumbs not touching their heads or
their ears.

As Bourdieu wrote: “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees
and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness…This experience we
shall call doxa, so as to distinguish it from an orthodox or heterodox belief implying awareness
and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs.” (Bourdieu 2006 (1977):
164). As observant Muslims in Kyrgyzstan told me, even five years ago it would have been
unthinkable for people in Kyrgyzstan or Kyrgyzstanis in exile to pray in the Hanbali style,
although Kyrgyzstani interlocutors told me that people from the Caucasus region regularly pray
in the Hanbali fashion.

This emerging distinction between prayer doctrine and gesture in Kyrgyzstan is an
example of a shift from a doxic practice – Hanafi prayer – to a distinction between heterodox and
orthodox practice, according to Bourdieu. In the context of class societies, he wrote: “The
dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of doxa and exposing the
arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the
integrity of doxa or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute,
orthodoxy” (Bourdieu 2006 (1977): 169). In other words, in societies defined by a class struggle,
it behooves the dominant class to maintain a sense of normalcy around doxic practice, which is
taken for granted. In the Kyrgyzstani context, class is surely important, and warrants further
inquiry. Nematullah, however, reported that Said was from a relatively wealthier family, and had
been a skilled a relatively successful restaurant worker in Moscow before his departure. Said did
not represent a marginalized or dominated economic social class, at least compared to that of his
friend Nematullah. That said, Said’s adoption the heterodoxic prayer gestures, prescribed by a set of religious doctrines interlocutors told me had been foreign to his home region, places him firmly in a social grouping critical of the orthodoxic style of prayer. As such, although class was not the most salient identification in this context, by adopting a heterodoxic style of prayer, Said distinguished himself from the dominant group.

In describing and mimicking Said’s new prayer style, Nematullah told me and my translator that Said had become different – different from the way he was raised, different from the other observant Muslims in the community, different from Nematullah himself. This act of defining difference is an example of Nematullah advocating for the orthodoxic. He is neither condemning Said outright, nor excusing his behavior. He is, instead, identifying a marker of difference, a distinction.

Incidentally, Adeeb Khalid traced the use of the term “Wahhabi” in Central Asia as an insult to an esteemed member of the region’s unofficial ulama (“scholars”) as early as the 1970s, Muhammadjon Hindustoniy, so named because he had spent time in India. “When certain unofficial ulama began advocating purism in ritual and observance, Muhammadjon Hindustoniy angrily declared that they had foresworn accepted Hanafi dogma, and drawing on the vocabulary of the South Asian sectarian milieu denounced them as ‘Wahhabis’” (Khalid 2003: 581). This term, Khalid wrote, has been overused to the point of distortion and even “abuse” in Central Asia through contemporary times.

In terms of Nematullah’s telling of Said’s story, just as he describes his one-time friend as undergoing a religious shift from Hanafi to Hanbali traditions, a contradiction emerges. Nematullah also expressed skepticism that the conflict in Syria had anything to do with religion.
He said that he needed to see it himself in order to decide whether the conflict was about religion. That sentiment and statement marks an attempt to defend his religion. In his reluctance to classify the violence in Syria’s then-brewing civil war as being related to religion, Nematullah was creating distance between Muslim identity and conflict. In so doing, he was taking a departure from the previous part of his statement, about Said’s shift in prayer embodiment. In describing Said’s shift from Hanafi to Hanbali prayer style, Nematullah is attributing importance to that shift. He chose to describe that shift because he thought, at some level, that is was important and relevant in the context of the discussion we were having, about Said’s journey to the Middle East, presumably Syria. Yet, his disavowal of the belief that the conflict in Syria was about religion and religious sectarianism more specifically marks a turn away from that idea. This duality represents an inner conflict in Nematullah’s thinking: if Said’s journey was about religion, then the conflict he joined should be, also. Yet, Nematullah both relates Said’s journey to Syria to his shift in religious embodiment, while also rejecting the view that religious contention is a part of Syria’s conflict. Said’s religious transition, according to his friend, is both a factor in his journey to the front lines of purported jihad, and irrelevant to the conflict there. Nematullah’s father Rustam’s comments are helpful here. He said that young people like Said do not understand the Koran, especially jihad. Rustam attributes this misunderstanding to poor religious training, in a comment that was echoed time and time ahead by religious people I spoke with in Kyrgyzstan. Rustam, in his seniority, brings a level of critical thinking to the discussion of jihad, violence, and historical Muslim proselytization. This critical thinking, he says in short, is often lacking among the younger generation, represented by his son and Said. His stance then becomes one in which Islam is evolving and dynamic. The religion and its tenets are not
rationales for violence. In fact, in this line of thinking, Islam is often spoken of as a or the religion of peace.

Rustam’s description of violent jihad as being appropriate in the past, where Islam was a much younger religion, is worth thinking about for a moment. In this framing, Muslims are no longer in a position where they need to spread the faith that they subscribe to new populations with violence, he says. Nonetheless, he still speaks as though jihad, which is traditionally translated from the Arabic as “fight” or “struggle,” for him relates to the spread of Islam, or proselytization. This idea runs counter to scholarship that demonstrates that jihad has long meant “holy war” and, hence, literal warfare (Cook 2015). Yet, while rejecting violence, Rustam instead calls for and embraces a rational argument for conversion to Islam. He does not question the motivation of violent jihadists per se, only their methods. As Rustam said, in Uzbek, which a translator simultaneously translated into Russian for my benefit, “If you want other people to be more religious, or to convert to Islam - this jihad needs proper explanation, with words, to talk with the person, explain to them that the true religion is Islam, because of this this and that, and that this is the differences with other religions, because of this this and that. So this is the real jihad now.” The statement Rustam makes about the “real jihad” being work to convince others to become more religious within Islam, or to convert to Islam from another faith, suggests an interpretation of Islam parallel to some, say, Evangelical traditions in Christianity. In both cases, inherent to believers’ faith is the motivation to convince others to take up or strengthen the religious belief that they themselves hold.

TWO STRAINS OF SECTARIANISM
In this chapter, I have traced two strains of sectarianism: 1.) ethnic, marked by differing conceptions of ethnogenesis and related differing conceptions of religiosity vis-à-vis one another across and between ethnic groups, and 2.) religious, marked by differing conceptions of types of religious practice. These two strains are interrelated and often intertwined. The ethnic sectarianism that exists in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the southern part of the country, is imbued with the commonly-held belief that Uzbeks are more religious than Kyrgyz. This belief, or prejudice, is founded on Soviet-era ethnography, which reached the mainstream through history textbooks, and can be seen in full display in contemporary versions of the genre. The belief that Uzbeks are more religious – or, relatedly, “better Muslims” – than Kyrgyz has become part of Uzbek and Kyrgyz identities. I have also tried to demonstrate that religious devotion can and often does bridge the gap between Uzbek and Kyrgyz believers. Yet, intra-religious sectarianism – the identification of a particular type of religious praxis with a threat, for example, or the myriad variegation of Sunni Muslim *jamaat* (“group,” from Arabic) movements or groupings active in the country, which we’ll see more of later – presents another set of dimensions that can and do cut across the population.

**Chapter 3 – Islamic Secularism**

A commonly held perception states that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world (Hanegraaff 2017). In the United States, particularly under President Trump, this perception is often met with fear and demonization of the practitioners of the religion. During his campaign, Donald Trump promised to restrict Muslim immigration to the United States, and, after being elected, early in his presidency imposed what was commonly referred to as a “Muslim ban,” restricting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries. Then, in the start of 2020, he issued
another executive order severely restricting travel from additional countries, including Kyrgyzstan.

Where does this fear and demonization of Muslims, including Muslims from Kyrgyzstan, come from? How did rejection of Muslim immigration and travel to the United States become such a key part of the president’s foreign policy?

Inasmuch as fear of Muslims may relate to a perception that the religion is growing, especially in a side-by-side comparison to Christianity in the West, it is worth considering the so-called “secularization theory” that posits a decline in religiosity in recent years. In an article written at the end of a grand socialist experiment, Ernest Gellner (1991) examined the differences between life in worlds with predominant Marxist and Muslim faiths. This article included an inquiry into the applicability of the secularization thesis in an Islamic context, attributing the increase in apparent Islamic piety the world over to a few key considerations. Gellner wrote of “faith” in the Marxist project in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which, had, by the time he wrote, he said, “totally disappeared.”

This total collapse is a unique situation twice over, because this was the first secular ideocracy in the world’s history. A society was built on a belief-system that claimed the monopoly of truth, but on one that was built entirely from what were, officially, *this-worldly* elements. There was no appeal to any other world. Though of course there were similarities between Marxism and other religions, at the doctrinal and intellectual level the proud boast of Marxism was that it had exiled the supernatural from social life. It claimed to be scientific, and it interpreted science in a strictly secular way. (Gellner 1991: 1)

Here, in the “proud boast of Marxism” being its expulsion of the supernatural from social life, Gellner is, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, referring to a pride, so to speak, in disenchantment. Gellner has a lot more to say about this concept that Weber made famous (see, especially, Gellner 1987), but for now it should suffice to say that Gellner is here making a link between the
officially this-worldly elements of Marxist faith during the Soviet period and disenchantment, which results from adopting a scientific worldview. Weber wrote of disenchantment in Science As A Vocation that “Increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge as to the conditions under which one lives…it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disencharnted” (Weber, from Gerth and Mills (eds.) 1970: 139).

That said, the disenchantment that Gellner identifies as coming from the “secular” way that Marxists conceived of science in the former Soviet Union did not transfer over into these Marxists’ form of rational action. Marxism, he writes repeatedly, is a faith. As such, its practitioners act in value-rational ways.

The extent to which this prideful boast about having removed the supernatural from social life was accurate in the Kyrgyzstani context, therefore, is an unresolved ethnographic question. Many members of the population there never fully adopted the Marxist “faith,” so to speak, and faith in Kyrgyzstan today, for many observant Muslims, is as much about a particular kind of trust in Allah as it is about a particular kind of trust in (secular) scientific thinking, of the sort that was used in a value-rational way to purportedly move the society toward achieving Marxist values and ideals during the Soviet period.

This chapter describes several ways that individuals in Kyrgyzstan make meaning out of the apparent – and sometimes very real – tension between value-rational action motivated by faith in Islam and goal-oriented rationality part and parcel to their contemporary capitalist existence. Prior to that discussion, it is useful to review some brief historical context about the tension...
between religious practice and the then-emergent Marxist state – tension between what was entailed at that time between Muslim and Marxist types of faith, in Gellner’s terminology.

BOLSHEVIKS AND BASMACHIS

The Bolshevik uprising in European Russia grew out of violence, and evolved into a bloody civil war that stretched throughout the formerly Tsarist lands, including into the far southern fringes of the empire. Muslims in Central Asia opposed the arrival of Marxist-inspired socialism, at least as it was manifest for them, in the quasi-colonies that they inhabited. “The opposition which the Bolsheviks encountered in Turkestan was possibly the most pervasive challenge to Soviet rule; widespread armed conflict between Red forces and the Basmachi lasted for six years and had the support of virtually all sectors of Turkestani society” (Olcott 1981: 352). Islam was important to these early empire resistors, particularly after the fighters joined forces with adherents to a reformist, “modernizing” Muslim movement called Jadidism (Khalid 1998). Toward the end of this period of active Basmachi resistance, early Soviet strategies to conquer parts of Central Asia that were controlled by the Basmachis included targeting local social, economic, and political networks, often by enlisting residents into the Soviet army. “Civil and joint civil–military commissions for struggle against the Basmachi offered an initial Soviet socialization for the local population” (Penati 2007: 521). In this way, the very struggle against Muslims opposed to the grand socialist experiment was often the first way that members of the general population encountered the nascent state. The struggle manifested the state.

5 In this usage, Turkestan is a region that includes areas in Central Asia where Turkic languages are spoken, and that were formerly at least tacitly in the Ottoman Empire. The Tajik SSR is often lumped into the category, although there a Persian-derived language is spoken. 6 The terms Basmachi is derived from Turkish, and means something akin to “rebel” or “opponent.”
Although the Basmachi were largely trounced by the mid-1920s (Khalid 2007), the scene had already been set. Violence toward believers of all varieties in the Soviet Union continued. During Stalin’s reign, especially, religious leaders were at times maligned or oppressed, and at times killed or otherwise disappeared (Fitzpatrick 2000).

Gellner wrote, however, how faith in this-worldly Marxism, where science was interpreted in a purely secular way, survived the Stalinist Terror to collapse only after Gorbachev’s openness and reform policies following blatant Brezhnev-era corruption. “What really undermined faith was thus not the recollection of the horrors of Stalinism, but the inescapable evidence of lower economic performance, plus the belief – correct or otherwise – that by liberalizing the Soviets would also buy themselves economic growth…If the economy is the vehicle of salvation, then a squalid and ineffectual economy must corrode the faith” (Gellner 1991: 3).

While it is true that the Soviet Union’s leaders fostered a society ostensibly based on this-worldly elements, relatively more recent scholarship and archival work describes how religious believers were, nonetheless, very much part of Soviet society (e.g., Luehrmann 2015, Tasar 2017), despite the institutionalization of atheism.

The hybrid faith that has emerged in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, where elements of religious authority are still controlled by the post-Marxist state, and the identities of some religious Muslims are divided between a public self linked to goal-oriented rational, this-worldly concerns and a private self linked to value-rational, next-worldly concerns, exemplifies a contested space best thought of as Islamic secularism.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGION
The end of faith in Marxism that Gellner described dovetailed, he wrote, with a burgeoning civil society:

Combined with this collapse of faith---and this is the second phenomenon that concerns me---there has recently been in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union a passionate yearning for civil society, a resurgence of the idea that what really matters in society is not the state, but that complex of institutions and associations that can act as countervailing forces to the state. (Gellner 1991: 2)

These factors, for him, were essential to the (soon-to-be) post-socialist world. He writes: “It is the combination of this yearning for civil society and the collapse of faith that constitutes the central characteristic of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the moment” (Gellner 1991: 2).

That said, Gellner characterized the “Muslim world” as devoid of a desire to increase the civil society institutions that he mentions:

The situation in the Muslim world is almost a mirror-image of this. The theory widely held by sociologists that modern industrial and scientific society erodes religious belief---the secularization thesis---is by and large valid…I think it is fair to say that no secularization has taken place in the world of Islam: that the hold of Islam over its believers is as strong, and in some ways stronger, now than it was 100 years ago. Somehow or other Islam is secularization-resistant, and the striking thing is that this remains true under a whole range of political regimes. (Gellner 1991: 2)

Leaving aside the question of whether a secularization thesis is anywhere considered valid today, Gellner’s prescience about the strength of Islam and transnational Muslim identities still rings true. In Central Asia alone, many authors have pointed to the importance of Islam in social identity (Bayram 2015, McBrien 2013, Naumkin 2005). Transnational religious networks like Hizb-ut Tahrir, although banned by all five post-Soviet Central Asian nations, have been relevant since independence (Karagiannis 2010).
Civil society organizations in Muslim contexts are diverse, although rarely serve as what Gellner calls “countervailing forces to the state” (Gellner 1991: 2). Recent scholarship has described how contemporary Islamic practice exists and relates to political states and objectives (Rudnyckyj 2010, Mittermaier 2011, Hirschkind 2006, Eickelman and Piscatori 2018). In terms of civil society, Walton, in a case particularly relevant to that of Kyrgyzstan, lays out an account of how Muslim organizations in Turkey, identifying with the broader Alevi and Sunni Hizmet groups, carve out jurisdictions and purviews that may look political but are distinct from state power (2013). Yet, contrary to Gellner’s claims about the broader Muslim context, Kyrgyzstan stands out as home to a once-rich array of NGOs and other civil society groups that took root after independence. As the Asia Development Bank wrote about Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s: “The large number of NGOs in the country was recognized by the international community as a sign of democratization and development of one of the most important institutions of civil society” (ADB 2011). Reading Gellner’s 1991 article one might wonder: would Kyrgyzstan go the way of Eastern Europe in Gellner’s secularization model, or would it remain true to what he represents as the ideals of Islam, resisting the pull of secularism?

One problem with the manner in which Gellner’s essay sets up Kyrgyzstan as a land caught in between a secularization process and accompanying increase in civil society organizations, and home to a growing interest in Islam and dearth of civil society organizations, is that the “secularization thesis” he uses is, arguably, based on Christian concepts. Calling for an anthropology of secularism, Talal Asad reminds us that “the secular… is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a
simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)” (Asad 2003: 25).

Gellner, however, is less interested in the distinction between secular and religious that Asad and others have critiqued. For Gellner, the distinction of interest is between two different types of rational action: value-rationality and goal-oriented rationality. Marxism, which in his essay Gellner refers to as a “faith,” is, as such, a value-rational enterprise for Gellner. The pursuit of Muslim ideals, also, is a value-rational pursuit. His discussion in the essay on Marxism and Islam is, therefore, between two competing forms of value-rationality.

CONTEMPORARY FAITH AND ETHNICITY IN KYRGYZSTAN

The vast majority of people in Central Asia would consider themselves Muslims. Many of these would also consider themselves atheists (McBrien and Pelkmans 2011). During the Soviet era, people identified as Muslim by virtue of identifying or being identified as belonging to a particular Soviet-codified ethnic nation, such as Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Tatar. Many believed that their Muslim identity was a given fact, corresponding to their ethnic identity. Just as an individual’s national/ethnic identity was printed in their Soviet passports, religious identity became an ingrained characteristic of an individual, rather than a matter of judgment, choice, and performance. National ethnic identity became objectified and even fetishized during the Soviet interpretation of Marxist philosophy (Slezkine 1994), particularly under Stalin, celebrated, as it was, with an assigned prototypical national dish, costume, symbol, as well as origin story. “The point is not that such cultural forms were invented – they were largely based on existing material – but that these materials were systematized, standardized, displayed and taught to the ‘titular groups’ involved as well as to other nationalities” (McBrien and Pelkmans 2011). It was at least
partially in this way, through state-led signification, that Kyrgyz men came to wear the felt kalpak hats that have now become ubiquitous among shepherds in the countryside as well as gift shops in the city. Among the Uzbeks, another hat prevails, called a tiboteke. Identities are performed based, in large part, on these celebrated national characteristics. The state-directed marking of non-European ethnic groups in the then Soviet Union as distinctly other led to a kind of internal Soviet Orientalizing exotification (Said 1978). One of the known attributes of the Uzbek nation, according to Soviet ethnography and subsequent education, was that its population was traditionally Muslim, at least, as the lesson went, before the liberating Bolsheviks arrived in Central Asia. Muslim identity itself – or the vestiges of it – took on an ethno-national characteristic (Khalid 2007) itself, as Islamic faith was associated with certain regions in the Soviet realm, which were, correspondingly, associated with certain nations who were deemed prominent there.

SECULARIZATION WITHIN ISLAM

Writing specifically about Muslims in Central Asia, Wiktor-March (2011) argues that Gellner asks the wrong question---Why is Islam defying the drive to secularization?---and calls for more ethnography of Muslims to help understand what secularization looks like within Islam. She writes that instead we should be interested in the following questions:

What is the real role of Islamic beliefs and practices in their societies? How is Islam reinterpreted in the context of deep social and political changes? What kind of resources and strategies [do] Muslims use to make Islam more consonant with modernity? And finally, what does [sic] ‘modernity’ and ‘secularization’ mean to Muslims? (409)

One way to answer some of these questions is through considering the story of an observant Muslim in Bishkek who spoke to me about the stark differences between his religious and
secular lives. Edil Ibrahimov is a name I’ve given to a professor in the anthropology department at the American University of Central Asia, which teaches some of the more elite students in the country and region. In one conversation we had on campus, Edil was particularly interested in and a vocal supporter of a religious movement that was founded in India, called Tablighi Jamaat, which came up some in our conversation.

I began our conversation by mentioning the Mufti ate, which itself is an institution stuck between the mosque and the state. It grew out of a directorate that was established during the Soviet period to control religion, and “remains today the key institution through which Central Asian governments attempt to control Islam and the Islamic elite” (McGlinchey 2005: 337). Edil had some strong contacts there. He said that the Mufti ate had worked with two international organizations lately, Search for Common Ground and the UNFPA – the United Nations Population Fund. There were two very different outcomes to these efforts, he said. The collaboration with Search for Common Ground had been ongoing for several years, he said, and UNFPA was just then wrapping up a 3-year project with the Mufti ate on peacebuilding and the role of religious leaders. Edil classified the UNFPA project as much more successful.

At that point, I was doing some volunteer work for Search for Common Ground involving making significant edits to reports the organization had hired local security experts to write. I explained this to Edil, and also that a religious scholar we both knew in the country had told me that Search for Common Ground, in its efforts to bring religious leaders and security officials together in dialogue, was responsible for the “securitization” of religion in the country. Edil said that Almazbek, the Country Director for Search for Common Ground, was a “complicated figure.”
He said that Search for Common Ground did, indeed, emphasize securitization and exaggerated security risks, and that this approach was “not always productive.” He described to me an incident the previous year, in the winter or early spring, where Search for Common Ground was conducting a symposium with the Muftiate and Central Asian Ulema – a network of religious leaders. The Muftiate wanted to invite Russian religious scholars, because of what Edil called efforts to please the Kyrgyzstan state, which he said “supports” the Muftiate. Search for Common Ground said no, that Russians would not be invited, only American imams and Central Asians.

Edil said that this was a very bad decision, as was evidenced by the Muftiate’s virtual boycott of the symposium. The Mufti did not attend, and issued a directive to the Muftiate staff ordering them not to interact with foreigners. In the end, he said, just a low-ranking staff member had come the end of the forum.

It is interesting to note here that the Muftiate was, at least according to Edil’s very well-informed perspective, very close to the religious scholar community in Russia. When Edil said that there had been a directive from the Mufti for his staff not to interact with foreigners, it can be assumed that Russians were not considered foreigners. This closeness that most Kyrgyzstani citizens, and particularly state and quasi-state bodies, feel with Russia, Russian citizens, and Russian institutions, then 25 years after independence, is apparent throughout the country, and important to convey here. Russian media pervades the airwaves. Some newspapers in Kyrgyzstan are actually local editions of Russian newspapers, such as Komsomolskaya Pravda. There are at least two possible reasons for the Muftiate to protest the apparent exclusion of Russian religious scholars from this symposium that Edil described. One is that the Mufti truly wanted the Russian religious scholars there, most likely in order to maintain close relations with the Russian
academy and Russian state whose support he depends on. Another possible reason for this protest could be that the Mufti did not want to meet with American imams, probably because he saw American imams as representative of or supported by a government that was waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and used the exclusion of Russian religious scholars as a pretense. It is worth noting that even the religious bureaucracy in Kyrgyzstan is not removed from Realpolitik considerations, and geopolitical concerns.

For some, the idea of political involvement - indeed, a modern perspective that allows for hopes and fears and even an orientation toward a causal future – and progress is rooted in a secularization thesis. For Karl Lowith, the concept of progress is based on an inauthentic version of Christian end-times (Lowith 1949). As Wallace writes, for Lowith: “the modern idea of progress is a transformation into worldly form of Christian eschatology, that is, of the Christian preoccupation with the future as the dimension of the 'last things,' the end of the world, the Last Judgement, salvation, damnation, etc." (Wallace 1981: 64).

Hans Blumenberg presents an alternative vision of human progress in the modern age distinct from secularization. He links the idea of progress to what he calls human self-assertion, writing that human self-assertion is “an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him” (Blumenberg 1983: 138). This “existential program” is distinct from a more un- Enlightened conception of “self-empowerment,” as Dickey describes:

“Blumenberg associated the logic of self-empowerment with the presumptuous 'modern' doctrine of 'inevitable progress' in history. By contrast, he linked his own notion of self-assertion with the more modest idea of 'possible progress' in history" (Dickey 1987: 158).
Although Blumenberg wrote specifically about the Western, (post-)Christian tradition, his description of the concept of human self-assertion, which he identifies with modernity, represents a common Muslim post-Marxist experience in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. One does not need to be secular to inhabit a world where progress is possible. Indeed, all inhabitants of modernity, it would seem, are capable of human self-assertion, and non-Christians surely into this category, be they secular or not. The engagement of the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan with Realpolitik geopolitical concerns demonstrates an awareness of historical considerations between the United States and Russia, and a self-assertive, strategic inclination toward the possibility of political progress.

THE MUFTIATE’S STRATEGIES

Continuing our conversation, Edil then described the work of the UNFPA with the Muftiate. He said that this organization worked more collaboratively with the Muftiate than Search for Common Ground. He personally worked on the three-year project, which included the assembling of an expert team, including three representatives from the Muftiate, as well as members of such local nonprofits as the Foundation for Tolerance International, plus gender experts, representatives from the State Committee for Religious Affairs (which has a long-standing dispute with the Muftiate, I had learned elsewhere, over control of religious affairs in the country, particularly around the annual Haj), and others. Edil referred me to a manual that he developed out of this project, which he said included both classical and religious-based peacebuilding components.

Edil had also worked with the Muftiate on a peacebuilding curriculum for use in medressahs. He and another religion scholar went to more than 16 medressahs in the country, he said, and piloted
the project in three of them. It has not yet been introduced in the others, and he expressed frustration about that.

Edil described the history of past Muftis and their involvement with American-led international organizations. Under one Mufti (Jalilov), he said the office was “very suspicious of America and very closed-off to international organizations.” Under the next Mufti, Akman, the office began by being more open, he said, but nothing came of it. The third Mufti, Maksat, who was then current, wanted to open up more, Edil said, and has expressed interest in engagement with roundtable discussions, in order to improve their image. He said that trust in and perception of the Muftiate by the local religious population was low, because of perceptions of corruption around facilitation of the Hajj. The Vice Mufti, Ravshan, had been most involved with Search for Common Ground, but Edil highlighted some level of difficulty there.

Edil has been working on reports, some in collaboration with Ravshan, including one he was currently working on around the concept of “traditional Islam.”

Maksat, the current Mufti, studied at a medressah in Pakistan in 1998. He is one of the few Russian-speaking religious scholars in Kyrgyzstan, he said.

Edil has had an extended relationship with Maksat, since before he became Kazi of the central, Soviet-era mosque in Bishkek, and then rose in authority to the position of Mufti.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN KYRGYZSTAN

Edil was at the time starting a new project involving the Muftiate and UN Women, around the perception of gender in Kyrgyzstani society. One of five “dimensions” of the project, he said, involved religion.
This project, after the limited work between the Muftiate and Search for Common Ground, as well as the UNFPA collaboration, would be the third between the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan and an international organization. The research had been designed, Edil said, but not yet started. Initially, Edil believed that the project with UN Women would involve a consideration of securitization, because IOM was involved and wanted to look at processes of radicalization through and after migration to Russia, and other places. Then the group wanted to look specifically at radicalization and trips to Syria, Edil said. At this early stage, there was just a handful of people closely involved in the project, around seven or eight, so Edil was not sure who was most involved in the research design. He said that some of these people were also at the American University of Central Asia, as he was. The project was “all about securitization and radicalization,” he said, which disappointed him tremendously. The organizers of the project “wanted to look at 30 women who had returned from Syria,” he said, which was something he said was not possible. Edil had been invited on as a Quality Control supervisor, he said. He said that he told the organizers that he would only participate if he could write the final report, because “I don’t want to contribute to the securitization of religious practice here.” He also wanted to change the methodology significantly. He said that he told the organizers of the project that they could interview only three to four women Hizbut-Tahrir members and three to four women who had returned from Syria, all of whom were at that point jailed by one of the state intelligence offices, the SNB. He said that he wanted the project to not be about securitization, but about how to truly benefit the majority of the population, “who are experiencing real discrimination.”

“Why focus on a tiny minority?” he asked. “Such a project, as is designed, would waste money, and do damage to society.”
As a practicing Muslim, Edil was most concerned with what he saw as discrimination against observant Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, by the state authorities and other secular actors. His concern was not preventing religion-based radicalization, which he seemed to see as a minor problem compared to discrimination against certain religious actors.

For the UN Women project, he envisioned two groups of people as research subjects: practicing Muslim women wearing hijabs or other types of religious covering, and Protestant converts (who are often single mothers, economically disadvantaged, and experience discrimination from the government, and their families, he said).

Edil’s own research interest, he said, was “how religion expands or limits opportunities.” He expressed concern that, without his involvement, the UN Women project could cause harm to the religious communities.

“If you work with the community, you can’t use time and resources to damage them,” he said, pointedly.

The Protestants were very scared of working with outsiders, he said. He had identified a man from the Alliance of Kyrgyz Churchs to serve as a research intermediary, after telling this man that he was “trying to help the community.”

He noted to me that there were a lot of stereotypes about the Protestant converts, including that they were “brainwashed for money.”

“What is unique in Kyrgyzstan today,” he said, “is that religiosity is always a personal choice, whether the person is Muslim or Christian. It always goes against the mainstream.” Clearly, he still saw the state and its institutions as secular, and individual Muslims as making a personal choice to go against the norm.
He described Muslim “faithfuls,” as he called them, as typically having to “reconvert,” often through personal crisis, family breakdown, or even time in jail. The implications of socioeconomic class of those among “the faithful” who might “reconvert” to a pious Hanafi faith or shift their religious practice from the orthodoxic Hanafi Islamic interpretations in Kyrgyzstan to the heterodoxic Hanbali interpretation, as discussed in Chapter 2, warrant additional investigation.

A PERSONAL STORY OF FAITH

At this point, I asked him about his own personal history. He had been educated as an architect. He received a Masters degree in urban and regional planning, and then a PhD in urban planning. Edil applied for an urban planning job at AUCA in 2007, he told me, and was, at that time, told that he was overqualified. He was offered a job in the anthropology department, and spent the time before he started teaching anthropology, which until then he had very little knowledge of. He said that he had had a religious reconversion or awakening in 2002, while in Australia. His wife was still in the United States at the time, and he was studying in graduate school. His grandmother had died in Kyrgyzstan, and he said he was feeling very lonely. He found the Muslim community in a time of great personal crisis, he said. He was invited to the mosque by a “brother from Pakistan” in October 2002. Before that, we had been a strong atheist, he said. Then, from 2007 to 2012 he said he was a very active Muslim, traveling often with Tablighi Jamaat, which encourages members to travel outside their home communities to help spread the word of God, somewhat like a mission.
But he said that he had “a tension between his mosque life and outside life, and was even thinking of divorce.” His wife was not happy being left alone with their kids every time he went away with Tablighi Jamaat, he said.

While on a Tablighi Jamaat trip to India, two separate Indian Muslim scholars suggested that he should reduce his Tablighi Jamaat practice to save his marriage, although they also said that he could easily find a young obedient woman in a hijab to marry him. In his narration, it was clear that this idea, to marry a “young obedient” Muslim woman, appealed to him. But, continuing his story, he said that the religious scholars said that if he left his wife and remarried, he would have to think about what his son would think about Islam when he grew up.

It is interesting to me that his adherence to Islam was so strong that his son’s potential views on the religion seemed to outweigh his concern for the health of his own marriage.

He ended up reducing his activity with Tablighi Jamaat, he said, and his relationship with his wife improved. But his psychological experience worsened, he said. He told me that he began to get very depressed, even skipping classes and not showing up for work at the university.

In a Durkheimian moment, he said that social life was very important, and that religion was about social life for him. In contrast, he said that he felt very lonely at this time in his life, when he purposely limited his religiosity and, hence, social life.

“I became like a vegetable: work, home, tv, work, home, tv, work, home, tv…” he said.

In narrating his personal and religious history, Edil then said that there were very clear rules and responsibilities for men and women in Islam. “A wife should never refuse intimacy,” he said, marking a very clear and substantial difference between gender expectations, and how women’s rights and agency are treated, at least by law, in the liberal Western societies versus his world, “and should practice Islam at home.”
He told me that he had conducted what he called “an Islamic divorce” with his wife twice, as allowed by the faith. This was a temporary divorce, it seemed. He threatened to divorce his wife for real or in full, he said, but agreed to stay with her on three conditions: that she never refuse intimacy with him, that he makes the decisions after they consult, and that she pray. He told me that he realized this final point was particularly important. In closing his story, he said that so far, in the past few weeks, he had been confident that this new plan would work well for his marriage.

His personal history told me a few things, beyond my concern and utter distaste for his adherence to a patriarchy undergirded by men seemingly having full control over the religiosity and sexuality of their wives, including the disturbing idea that the good Muslim wives never “refuse intimacy.” This idea played so neatly into a cliché around conservative Muslim familial relations that coincided with the prevalent liberal perception that Muslim men oppress Muslim women that it gave me some pause. Was he serious? Where did these ideas come from?

Some say that male oppression of women within Islam is a central dogma or tenet of the religion (Hirsi Ali 2015). Others take a more nuanced view, describing how the Bolshevik “emancipation” of Muslim women in the southern fringes of the then-Soviet space looked a lot like the modernizing efforts of Iran and Turkey, and precipitated a late 20th-Century reaction where women’s autonomy and state nationalism seemed completely antithetical (Edgar 2006). In the Kyrgyzstani context, Edil’s story and perspective on family relations seem to me to be a bit extreme, although perhaps I am being a bit naïve in writing this. While it is clear that the state-led drive to bring women into the Soviet workforce had a pronounced effect on family life and women’s agency, in Kyrgyzstan women were expected not only to work outside the home during
the Soviet period, as well as to contribute to the glory of the state by bearing and raising children as part of a state fertility campaign.

INTERNAL TENSIONS

Edil said that he was very interested in the tension between “mosque life” and “secular life,” and he said that he thought that this tension was very prevalent in Kyrgyzstani society. He also said that there was a difference in the religiosity between men and women, because of religious infrastructure. Women were generally not going to mosques, he said, so men had become more religious faster. Among his generation (he was, at the time, 41), he said, there was an especially pronounced difference between the religiosity of men and women.

At this point in our conversation, I thought that perhaps many women in Kyrgyzstan, who had been expected to work outside the home during the Soviet period just as much as men, and had a higher college graduation rate than men in the country since independence, might simply not want to be as subservient to men as much as he said Islam required, regardless of whether there were places for women to pray in mosques, but I did not say this to him.

Edil then added that there were also significant differentials in piety between often more secular parents and more religious children – this intergenerational conflict that others had mentioned to me.

We then spoke a bit more about divorce. Tablighi Jamaat was “very much against divorce,” he said, which might have been part of the reason why he had opted for a temporary “Islamic divorce” with his wife.

“Salafis make it much easier to divorce,” he said. “They say, simply, that if she doesn’t pray, you should divorce her.”
He said that this religiosity differential is greatly affecting courtship and marriage. Women wearing hijabs were more likely to marry Muslim men, and vice versa, and members of religious movements or organizations were more likely to marry within their movement, he said. He listed which movements select spouses in the same movement: Tablighi Jamaat, Salafis, Hizmet, Nurjular, and others.

This affiliation, he said, makes marriages more secure. He described a Muslim matchmaking service in Bishkek, which had matched more than a thousand couples in four years. He told me about a friend of his who had went there that, upon completing his profile, was offered four folders that each contained 50 or so women’s profiles. This friend was then asked if he prayed five times a day or not, Edil said. The friend said that no, he did not quite do this, and three of the folders were taken away. As an explanation, Edil said that the organization believed that “a man should always be slightly ahead of his wife in religious practice. He should pull her along.” I had heard elsewhere about religiosity being fashionable among young people in Kyrgyzstan who wanted to get married, and that religious observance had become a marriage prerequisite for a number of young people in the country, but this story illustrated the phenomenon in a new way.

He talked a bit more about how differences in religiosity could create strife between men and women, across generations, and among siblings. But for him, at least, faith was a religious concept (“din”). Edil talked about religious practice as something that would bring with it security, and “the good” in his life. He sought to overcome the conflict between what he called interchangeably his “private” or “secular” and “mosque” lives by becoming a better Muslim, he said.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN MUSLIM KYRGYZSTAN
When Gellner wrote, in 1991, that Muslims were, by and large, growing more faithful, in contrast to those living in post-socialist contexts who longed for stronger civil society, he did not predict how Muslim religious faith might affect the growth of civil society in a post-socialist Muslim context. Kyrgyzstan offers grounds to consider such a scenario. Although President Askar Akayev liked to brag about how many NGOs there were in Kyrgyzstan, in the 1990s, many were coopted by government actors, such as Kel-Kel (Saidazimova 2005a), which translates from Kyrgyz as “Come! Join us!” The interesting thing to watch in the past 20 years has been the rise of Islamic civil society organizations, like Mutakallim, established an influx of money, reputedly from Qatari, Saudi, or other Gulf sources, to support Muslim women of any ethnicity, had offices throughout the country. The leader was visible in Bishkek public life, and a regular, if apparently reluctant, participant in round tables organized by the Search for Common Ground, which received most of its funding from European and American governments. The organization organized and taught women about Sunni Islamic teachings. The leader of the chapter in Osh emphasized that she worked with both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, without prejudice. Search for Common Ground’s leadership often cited as an indicator of their organization’s work the fact that the various security and intelligence organizations in the country, notably the 10th Division of the Ministry of the Interior, which was publicly known as being in charge of policing religious extremism and terrorism, had invited the leader, whom I will call Khadija Nurselbek, to attend some of their trainings and conferences on combatting extremism.

In this case, also, the civil society actors are, as ever, in complex and interrelated correspondence with the state. Gellner characterized the civil society post-socialist citizens longed for as inhering in “a resurgence of the idea that what really matters in society is not the state, but that complex of institutions and associations that can act as countervailing forces to the state" (Gellner 1991:103)
2). Civil society in Kyrgyzstan does exist, and is strong, but has not reached the point where it can act as such a complex. In fact, with limited exceptions, few civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan today meaningfully counter to the state; many complement it. Even 25 years after the break down of the Soviet Union, in this Muslim-majority country, civil society is a powerful part of the lives of the citizens, but many of these organizations today work at the pleasure of the president and the rest of the Kyrgyz state. Strongly countervailing forces to the state, in this country that has had two tumultuous transfers of power since independence, are typically banned. This is particularly true in terms of religious organizations that might take a political tack, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. There are very real limits on what sorts of civil society organization are allowed to operate in Kyrgyzstan, and, although the cut-off line is much more permissive than in neighboring Uzbekistan, or any other surrounding countries, for that matter, the complex of these organizations cannot reasonably be said to be a countervailing force to the state.

ISLAMIC SECULARISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

It is known, or has been argued (Bowen 2010), that, in the French context, where civil society has been and is stronger---more of a countervailing force, as Gellner wrote---as compared to the state than it ever has been in the context of a post-socialist state like Kyrgyzstan, religious Muslims have created a new way to live in response to how the French state governs religion. This mode of living, according to Bowen, means that Muslims in France have “invoked socially pragmatic forms of Islamic reasoning to address practical problems, and also…could provide resources to bridge from Islam toward French legal norms” (2010: 179).

Secularism – or, in the French case, laïcité – certainly looks different in each country and context. In Kyrgyzstan, most Muslim citizens are deemed to be indigenous, not immigrants or
relatively recent arrivals from areas colonized by the country, as is the case in France. Perhaps more importantly, contemporary Kyrgyzstan was not founded on ideals of the Enlightenment. Its relationship to liberalism and individual human rights is very different. Edil’s statements about proper Muslim women never “refusing” sex would almost certainly be criticized in France as a claim by avowed secularists that falls neatly into Bowen’s typology that “some Muslims have failed to embrace the requirements of laïcité (secularism) [sic], because they substitute religious norms and values (or cultural values derived from religion) for secular ones, which keeps them from fully embracing norms of gender equality and religious freedom” (2010: 179). In Kyrgyzstan, the form of secularism that prevails carries with it a distrust of the state, as it does not guarantee the population’s safety or security, and has often limited individual religious freedom under the guise of preventing terrorism or extremism. For many, Islamic secularism often involves a separation of one’s private life from their religious life – what Edil called his “mosque life.” There is often tension here. People are conflicted in terms of what ethics and norms they adopt and adapt from religious teachings, as opposed to other domains. Many Muslims in Kyrgyzstan apply religious teachings selectively; this, too, is a characteristic of their inhabited Islamic inflection of secularism. They may not eat pork, for example, saying that it is *haram* (forbidden/unclean), yet they will often drink alcohol. More than one observant Muslim in Kyrgyzstan told me that they negotiated this apparent tension and contradiction by citing religious teaching they said forbid only the first drop of “wine” from a bottle; therefore, it wasn’t uncommon to see Muslims expunge a drop or two of alcohol – whatever its form – from a bottle before pouring portions of the drink to those with whom they wished to make a toast. This melding of the cultural norms put forth by interpretation of religion and other spheres of cultural practice underlies the embodiment of what might be called Islamic secularism. Other authors
have used the term “Islamic secularism” previously to describe how concepts like democracy, freedom, and liberalism are “handled” in contemporary Iran and deployed there in protests (Adib-Moghaddam 2016: 72), or, similarly, to represent strategies of democratic-leaning opposition parties in Algeria (Zoubir 2002).

In a Central Asian scenario of Islamic secularism, religious identity is nationalized, as it is for Adeeb Khalid in his analysis of Islam and secularism in Uzbekistan over the past 100 years. He wrote: “Islam as it evolved in Uzbekistan in the 20th century was largely a secular phenomenon…Nor is Uzbekistan unique. If we see 'secularism' as a facet of political life, rather than as a civilizational attribute, then much of the experience of the modern Muslim world---from the Muslim nationalism of the early 20th century to Islam as an attribute of the nation---is secular” (Khalid 2003: 592).

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, citizens live in a nation where to be Kyrgyz or Uzbek is to be Muslim, to be Kyrgyzstani is to be Muslim, thanks to the Soviet nationalizing projects in the region, including present-day Uzbekistan. Taking Gellner’s vision as a model, inhabitants of the Muslim-majority post-socialist space in Central Asia are caught between a yearning for Muslim identity and a strong civil society that is countervailing to the state. This tension is realized in Islamic secularism, as, for individuals like Edil, is the tension between what he called his “mosque life” and a “secular life.” Another quality of Islamic secularism is the role that religious authorities like the Mufti play in Kyrgyzstan, strategizing politically while regulating official religion in the purportedly secular Kyrgyzstani state. Islamic secularism holds a place for all of this complexity and more, and, as such, is a useful concept for balancing the tensions between Muslim and national identities in Kyrgyzstan today.
Chapter 4 – Multinational Mediation

International nongovernmental organizations in Central Asia work to build peace and prevent violent extremism in a few key ways. They organize and facilitate roundtable discussions between different groups, typically religious leaders and police officers or other security forces. They conduct infrastructure development projects around contested borders that may otherwise prove to be flashpoints for interethnic or international conflict that could be exacerbated by resource shortages. They produce white papers purporting to study terms like “extremism” and groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir. Some international NGOs also attempt to build peace and prevent conflict by producing a television series designed to instill positive morals in viewers through entertainment, by providing positive role models and encouraging self-improvement and actualization. In this chapter, I will focus on this final avenue of attempted cultural, behavioral, and individual conditioning, the effort by Search for Common Ground, which would lay the groundwork for Kyrgyzstan’s first (mostly) domestically produced serial television drama, called The Game.

To tell the story of The Game’s production, I will focus on the biography of an individual leading the effort to produce the show. By viewing the story of the show from this particular vantage point, I set out to examine a process of mediation more than a cultural form of media itself (Boyer 2012). In so doing, I describe some perspectives and considerations of a friend and interlocutor I’ll call Eldiyar, in order to describe what might contribute to his own cultural agency, as this agency is manifest in his work overseeing the production of a scripted television drama intended to build peace and counter extremism in the nation. Unlike the case of
burgeoning television production in Syria (Salamandra 2008), the industry in Kyrgyzstan has not had an influx of funding from Gulf Arab-owned satellite tv networks. Prior to the efforts of Eldiyar and others at Search for Common Ground, there was no dramatic television industry to speak of in Kyrgyzstan, where so much of the television consumed by the population is originally produced either in Russia, Turkey, Mexico, or the United States, and typically dubbed into Russian or occasionally Kyrgyz. This new series, then, promised to share some component attributes of what Brian Larkin identified as the “infrastructure” of colonial-era film in northern Nigeria (2008), although, in the Kyrgyzstan case, the “signal” put forth by the series was designed with intention by a multinational group of development workers, whose efforts were mediated through an individual ethnic Kyrgyz individual working an NGO, rather than a colonial power. Still, the impetus remains the same, as “media systems are sponsored and built to effect social action, to create specific sorts of social subjects” (Larkin 2008: 3).

Indeed, the role that mass media communication, and television drama in particular, can and does play in informing and embodying morality and “national pedagogy” efforts, to borrow a term from Abu-Lughod (2005), has been discussed in many contexts (Mandel 2002, Mankekar 1993, Hirschkind 2006, etc.).

Similar to the work of Skuse (2005), this inquiry is based around the production of media – limited in the scope of its portrayals due to political and safety concerns - rather than media consumption. Unlike in Skuse’s work, though, which documented the decision around how a radio soap opera’s production staff avoided raising the ire of the Taliban in Afghanistan by choosing to portray an idyllic “traditional” Afghanistan without the Taliban, the writers Eldiyar was hiring at the time of my research to work on “The Game” storyboards made political
decisions to sidestep direct discussions of Kyrgyz and Uzbek hostilities. One major reason for the Kyrgyz team led by Eldiyar making this decision to exclude direct mention of the ethnic groups that were in conflict, I argue, was out of allegiance to the Kyrgyz state and national project, which was, in Eldiyar’s his own case and those of his top writers, quite proximate, through kinship and patronage links, if not expressed ideology.

Given the media and international inquiry reports that described an overwhelming status disparity between ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz victims of the 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, not unlike interreligious sectarianism between Muslims and Copts found in post-Arab Spring Egypt (Mahmood 2012), it is easy for an outside observer to focus on interethnic sectarianism. That said, to do so without acknowledging other cleavages of conflict in the country would be folly and, no doubt, short-sighted. Early on in my most recent year of fieldwork, an employee of Search for Common Ground told me as much. Yet, in so doing, and by virtue of his other focus points, priorities, and perspectives, it became clear that this employee was, in turn, undervaluing the importance of the interethnic conflict in his country. This chapter follows some of his descriptions of the problems and cleavage points in the country, and, in so doing, describes how these visions are reflected in his narrative he gave about the television serial that he created under the auspices of Search for Common Ground, for the purposes of promoting peace in the country and, in theory, broader region. His perspective is important, because it shines a light on the priorities and concerns of someone tasked with improving the civil society of the country. His work was a fundamental component of the peacebuilding work of the broader organization while I was there, and was proudly introduced to me by Eldiyar’s boss, Almazbek, the regional director of the organization.
ELDIYAR’S ALLEGIANCES

An ethnic Kyrgyz, Eldiyar had an impressive resumé, particularly for his relatively young age. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the context of Kyrgyzstan, he also had an impressive set of connections. Without wanting to understate his talent and other merits, in the context of the closely related worlds of Kyrgyz politics and business – as in so very many other, parallel realms today - it seems likely that the former was dependent on the latter.

As I think back on meeting Eldiyar and speaking with him, my bias was that he had an allegiance to the Kyrgyzstani state, as well as the Kyrgyz national or ethnic tradition. By this, I mean that I suspect that he was, if anything, less than likely to want to highlight the violence Kyrgyz police and citizenry committed against the marginalized Uzbek minority in and around Osh. Perhaps that’s why I suspicious of him when he told me that there were other major points of contention in the country. State actors clearly had a disincentive to acknowledge either the scope or lopsided nature of the violence, if for no other reason than to do so would call attention to their inability to have stopped it. Such an acknowledgement would surely draw comparison to an earlier conflict in the southern city of Uzgen that had been stamped out in a matter of days when Soviet paratroopers were dispatched to the scene to squelch the interethnic conflagration. Even more, for the contemporary Kyrgyzstani state to acknowledge that its own police officers had handed weaponry from their stockpiles out to untrained ethnic Kyrgyz members of the public, ostensibly so that these individuals could defend themselves from mobs of Uzbeks supposedly roving the streets, it would be not only inviting comparison to the strength and might of the former Soviet state, but shatter any hope that the state could preserve a shred of legitimacy in the eyes of the Uzbeks, whom I believe were still so vital to the national project.

UNDERSTANDING “THE REGIONS”
The first time I met Eldiyar, before I told him anything about my research, I told him that I had just written a literature review about the concept of development as it related to Central Asia. He launched into a bit of a monologue about how it is impossible to know anything about Kyrgyzstan without spending time there, and how many researchers think they know everything about the country but do not even visit. This was especially true, he said, of the areas outside of Bishkek, which he described shorthand as “the regions.” As a point of comparison, he said something like “even we [at Search for Common Ground] think we know everything about the problems faced by our country.” He then told me a story, about how he and his partners at Search for Common Ground had some time ago conducted a series of what he called “summits” around the country – in Osh, ground zero for the conflict in 2010, but also in the ethnic-Kyrgyz dominated cities of Talas, Bishkek, and somewhere in the Issyk-Kul region, probably Cholpon-Ata or Karakol. He said that through the process of conducting these so-called summits, they realized that they knew “nothing.” He said that the people in the summit groups told him that “we have so many conflicts besides the ethnic one.” His statement strongly implied that international organizations are ignoring these other conflicts and issues, at the detriment of civil society.

His dismissal of the “ethnic one,” however, came too quickly. The conflict in 2010 alone – a single flare up among several – left, according to press reports, up to 400,000 Uzbeks displaced from their homes (Leonard 2010). This was not a minor skirmish, or a simple disagreement, and its wake continues to be felt in the country. Perhaps Eldiyar was dismissive of the severity and priority of the interethnic conflict because he was not aware of its intensity. As an ethnic Kyrgyz man living in the northern city of Bishkek, a world away from the southern part of the country that was divided from the north by a spine of mountains bridged only by a single treacherous
north-south road through austere, sublime landscapes, over a pass, made navigable in winter by a lengthy mountaintop tunnel constructed in the twilight years of the Soviet period, it did not affect him. Uzbeks in the north, in Bishkek, are extremely few and far between, and it would be highly unlikely that Eldiyar would have much interaction with any. “I think that, for now, we have lost,” explained an ethnic Uzbek graduate student in the United States, when I asked him to describe his nationality’s position in Kyrgyzstani society after the 2010 conflict. One ethnic Kyrgyz man who had also studied in the West, since moved overseas, and, in his case, worked for years at the United States Embassy in Bishkek, compared the dispute between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in his native country to that between whites and African-Americans in the United States, saying that it would take a long time and a lot of collective work to resolve.

The humility that Eldiyar expressed seemed a little short-lived, insomuch as I immediately felt as though I was being criticized for taking the side of these nefarious sounding “international organizations” that he was referring to. His description of his own organization’s lack of knowledge about what was going on in the regions during reflection on the listening sessions seemed intended to get me to accept that I, too, must know nothing about the country, or at least the regions. Given that I had, at this point, been to the country on close to a dozen trips totaling nearly four years, I probably felt a bit miffed that he was apparently comparing me unfavorably to the nameless researchers he presumed knew nothing about the country. I can speculate, with a high degree of certainty, that these listening sessions would have contained mostly ethnic Kyrgyz informants. I can also speculate, with an equally high degree of certainty, that any ethnic Uzbeks, or ethnic Kyrgyz citizens sympathetic to the plight of ethnic Uzbeks, would likely have felt unable to speak to the challenges of ethnic Uzbeks in contemporary Kyrgyzstani society, out of
fear of official or extrajudicial retribution. It was common knowledge among expatriate researchers at Mercy Corps, for example, that ethnic Uzbeks at the time were so scared of being attacked for speaking out that even in facilitated dialogue sessions in southern Kyrgyzstan they would not give honest voice to their concerns. Even if what Eldiyar described was accurate, that many of his organization’s informants relayed at listening sessions there are a number of conflicts in Kyrgyzstan distinct from the “ethnic one,” that does not change the fact that interethnic conflict is a real phenomenon in the country.

Regardless of what I know, knew, think, or thought about the country and its challenges, it is worth noting here that Eldiyar was pointedly criticizing not only his own lack of knowledge of the priorities of the inhabitants of the rural areas of his native country, as different as they surely are, but also the knowledge of his colleagues at Search for Common Ground. He used plural pronouns while he spoke on this topic. In fact, his critique, such as it was, of the organization that he was employed by was twofold. He critiqued it by saying that he and his colleagues knew nothing before embarking on these summits. He also critiqued it, or at least gave voice to a separate critique without intending to do so, attributed to the rural people he heard from in these summits, insomuch as he failed to distinguish his own organization from the “international organizations” that were ignoring these other problems. In saying that his organization knew nothing of the situation in rural Kyrgyzstan – in “the regions” – he was positioning his organization as all other international organizations, which, in his mind, were too attached to the cities and urban life to understand the rest of the country.

YOUTH AND AUTHORITY
Top among the list of problems, Eldiyar said, were intergenerational concerns. He also spoke about conflicts around access to water, family or patronage conflicts, and conflicts between tribes or clans within the Kyrgyz ethnic umbrella. He said that a major issue was that there was no trust between the population and the government, no faith in government. There was no trust between the youth and police, he said. As an illustration of this, he said that many people, both old and young, would not call the police if something illegal happened to them, but, rather, criminal gang elements of society. This rang true with reports I had heard for years about the importance of protection rackets and gangs in the country. He said that every region had one of these groups, and some are connected with Vor v Zakone, or, literally “lawful thieves.” This title is bestowed on the top echelon of incarcerated criminals in Kyrgyzstan, in a lineage and tradition that harkens back and indeed stretches decades into the Soviet past. These powerful inmates have been given special treatment by guards and wardens alike, in a mechanism of inequality designed to keep more pedestrian criminals in line. While reporting a story in 2005 for The New York Times, I had come across the name of a powerful ethnic Chechen Vor v Zakone named Aziz Batukaev, who was said by prison authorities to have had surprisingly open access to the outside world from a prison not far from Bishkek. He had free access to cell phones, weapons, and even live-in guests, all the while growing marijuana in his relatively comfortable accommodations (Saidazimova 2005). His accommodations were so comfortable, in fact, and his communication networks and authority throughout the country’s jails and prisons that when he was finally slated to be moved to a more secure holding facility in the capital, inmates around the country rioted (Saidazimova 2005). Batukaev, Eldiyar said, was in Russia at the time and was apparently collecting protection payments from every Kyrgyzstani who went to work in that country. One published account of his eventual release in 2013 was noteworthy in that it suggested, in a very
post-Soviet nod to conspiracy theories, that Aziz Batukaev may have had ties to another one-time Kyrgyzstani Chechen, Tamerlane Tsarnaev, the convicted perpetrator of the Boston Marathon bombing, while noting that the two families had lived next door to each other in the northern Kyrgyzstani city of Tokmok (Baktybaev and Sindelar 2013). By highlighting the criminal notoriety of Aziz Batukaev, Eldiyar was perpetuating this stereotypical image of ethnic Chechens as often involved in crime.

KINSHIP, AND REPUTATIONS OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Caspar ten Dam, a scholar of conflict studies at Leiden University, has coined a “brutalization theory,” which describes how particular kinds of violence lead to more violence. The Chechen community is one of his focal case studies. In introducing an article about what he calls “violence-values,” he writes of his theory:

The theory assumes armed nonstate---and state---actors to increasingly violate international and/or local norms, in a cycle of violence involving four main variables: values on “good” and “bad” violence (variable 1); grievances leading to armed conflict (variable 2); combat stress leading to atrocities (variable 3); and new conflict grievances emanating from such atrocities (variable 4), spawning counter-atrocities and eventually hardening or debasing the original violence-values (the cycle returns to the first variable). (ten Dam 2010: 332)

This line of thinking, that violence is cyclical, may seem a truism, but is certainly relevant when considering historical memory and experience, and how these factors can lead to certain types of outcomes in the future. Ten Dam is also the Secretary of the Association for the Study of EthnoGeoPolitics, where he made an appeal for “further research on the oft-neglected role of ethnic and kinship bonds in present-day societies—not just the self-professed traditional or tribal ones, but also and above all the so-called modern or developed ones” (ten Dam 2019: 1). Kinship and tribal networks are surely operative in perpetuating violence cycles in Central Asia.
both ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek interlocutors told me that ethnic Uzbek populations have the reputation of being more vulnerable to recruitment for violent religious organizations than ethnic Kyrgyz, likely for reasons of social marginalization and prejudice, as discussed in Chapter 6, particular subethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek clans and tribes surely have historical grievances informing their “violence-values” and relative standards of inflicting violence on other groups. Further careful research into these subethnic-level experiences, narratives, and potential patterns of network behavior is warranted, as ten Dam and others maintain, with the caveat that attempting to determine causality in social behavior due to perceptions of perceived affinal historical and historicized experiences and reputations is quite risky.

UNSETTLED CITIZENRY

Eldiyar went on to describe how young people around the country were ready to march on Bishkek to decry various grievances. This kind of rhetoric – both by Eldiyar himself and the people who told him they had plans to march – is a tried and true method of revolt in Kyrgyzstan. Both times that the man holding the office of the president was overthrown in the country since it became independent, the uprisings had involved the threat of lengthy marches to the capital. The same is true of a number of other instances when the president was not overthrown. Distaste for the government, or at least for certain presidential administrations, has spurred countless protests in the country, in the form not only of marches, but also land occupations, road blocks, and, as with Batukayev’s followers, prisoner hunger strikes and self-harm. Environmental and economic grievances have also spurred protest action (Wilensky-Lanford 2005: 1). These tactics have had mixed success, but should be seen for what they are: attempts to affect policy, in lieu of clean and fair elections. That said, by drawing attention to the
illegal tactics threatened by the young people who planned to march to the capital, Eldiyar may have been parroting the perspective of many state actors – namely, that a strong state is in order, because of the near-constant turmoil in the country. This perspective is very similar to a common perception and argument many middle- and upper-class interlocutors told me in Bishkek, that Kyrgyzstan needs a “strong hand” governing it, to enforce the rule of law.

In the Kyrgyz case, however, it is difficult to say whether Eldiyar was intentionally conveying an argument for a strong state to me when he described what the youth he had spoken to at the summits had threatened a few months prior to our conversation. That said, he was surely aware of the context and the implications that masses of protesters marching through the mountains to the capital would imply. It would and does not imply peace and civility, given the context of recent history. Instead, the implication would be turmoil and extra-democratic unease, if not violence. A strong state surely can seem like a logical response to disorder and chaos; curtailments on democracy thrive with perceived disorder.

THE GAME

The approach of Eldiyar and his colleagues at Search for Common Ground then included the development of a dramatic series of television episodes, which he personally oversaw. When I met him, Eldiyar was in the process of supervising first the selection of three scriptwriters, each of whom had written a pilot script. The selection of these final scripts and their writers was being done in concert with an American woman, whom he said had worked in Hollywood for a major production company. He told me that he had approached or read the scripts of 19 scriptwriters, selecting 10. Then these individuals’ ten scripts were shown to the American woman, who seems to have not spoken a local language, judging by the fact that he said that first he translated the
scripts for her. She chose the final three scriptwriters, he said, who included the younger sister of the Ambassador to the United States and former presidential chief of staff, as well as Wall Street Journal reporter, Kadyr Toktogulov. Just after he told me proudly that the project was done entirely with and by local staff, he also shared that the American woman provided feedback and comments on every script, in addition to selecting the final scriptwriters.

Might the Hollywood veteran have known that one of the scriptwriters had close ties to the president? Might Eldiyar have hinted at the fact that this particular young lady was extremely well-connected? Perhaps. Either way, it stands to reason that the scripts that emerged from this process would very likely tell a story that the president and those around him would like to hear and, in fact, probably be happy to tell themselves. It does not stand to reason that the presidential chief of staff’s younger sister would write a script for a story that painted her brother’s boss in a bad light, or the state that he runs as in any way divided.

The storyline of the drama series that Search for Common Ground was producing, supervised by Eldiyar, seemed, in his telling, to revolve around an intergenerational conflict between the main character and his father. I will go into some detail about the setup and basic plot of the story, as it represents some of the efforts of Search for Common Ground to promote peace in Kyrgyzstan. In introducing the storyline, Eldiyar told me that the young male main character had gone to Europe to play soccer professionally, which is surely a dream shared by many boys in the country.

There, however, this particular young man badly hurt his leg. His injury was so severe that he could no longer pay soccer. “Because of his ego,” Eldiyar explained, “he could not tell his father that he was no longer playing, so he lied and told him that he was playing well.”

The character’s mother dies while this subterfuge is proceeding, Eldiyar explains. The character’s mother dies at some point while he is away, and he is so depressed and upset, Eldiyar
tells me, that he does not come back to the funeral. This is a big deal, and a significant shame, in Kyrgyz society. In the story, when he does come back, the main character’s father is very angry with him for lying about his injury, not going to his mother’s funeral, and not becoming educated in the first place. At some point, Eldiyar says, the father becomes an alcoholic, which is a quite prevalent and often untreated problem in Kyrgyzstan, particularly with older men. The main character’s younger sister, meanwhile, is left doing all the work around the house and farm, including caring for their often-drunken father. The main character almost gives up, Eldiyar says, and, in fact, does “give up” in one episode, but his little sister convinces him that he must improve himself and continue.

“That,” says Eldiyar, “is the main message of the entire project, to encourage people to improve themselves rather than getting involved in blaming the government, or engaging in other types of conflict. You don’t need a gun, you don’t need to [create] conflict. Just improve yourself!”

While this hopeful message may be positive and uplifting, it seems to me that this story really is not so much about promoting or modeling social cohesion or civil society development, or even peacebuilding, as it is a drama about a young man with a lot of trouble who presumably overcomes the challenges in his life. It is worth noting here that Eldiyar himself did not have a history of peacebuilding, but, rather, television production, advertising, and political messaging. He has worked for a number of parties in Parliament, and directly for the president, Almaz Atambayev. As he shared with me the basic storyline of the drama series, so much as it existed at that point, I could not help but think that his boss Almazbek hired him in no small part because of his strong government connections as well as his familiarity and skills with media production. When I spoke with him in the fall of 2015, he was a contractor for the organization, scheduled to either leave or have his contract extended in March of the following year. Eldiyar was a
personable and charismatic individual; his relationship to Almazbek and the rest of the ethnic Kyrgyz staff at the organization seemed strong, and he said that he hoped to stay with the organization in some fashion or another after his contract expired. In a signal that he may have been open to diverse opinions on the government, though, he happened to share with me the fact that he had seen some mysterious secret party documents that he “couldn’t believe” and that apparently showed the government or politicians in a very bad light. This kind of material could have been what in Russian is known as “compramat,” literally short for “compromising material.” To this day, I am not sure why Eldiyar told me this fact about what he had seen. Perhaps he wanted to communicate that he was somehow objective or removed from his government connections and former business associates. Perhaps he wanted to demonstrate to me that he had left the cozy government network for moral reasons. Most likely, I think, is that he simply wanted to boast about the kind of access that he had, and appeal to what he imagined to be my distaste for the Atambayev administration and/or the political apparatus more broadly. I have found that time and time again, many Kyrgyzstani nationals seem to be a bit ashamed about their government and their country’s place or stature in the world. Seen from a perspective that accepts the one-time stability and imagines a storied strength of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan, by comparison, seems like a flimsy house of cards. There are revolutions every few years, it seems, and near constant – or at least seasonal – uncertainty as protesters get active every spring and summer. People commonly talk about protest seasons, and how it isn’t spring in Bishkek if protesters have not yet taken to the streets. So maybe Eldiyar’s comments about these mysterious documents that he saw marked an effort to say the same message that I saw plastered on businesses and police cars in the immediate aftermath of the 2005 overthrow of then-president Askar Akayev: “I am with the people.”
FAMILIES

At one point in this discussion, Eldiyar mentioned that the family structure is collapsing in Kyrgyzstan. He noted that he knows many young women who say that they do not want to get married and start a family, but only want to get pregnant and have children on their own. He credits this not with the spousal abuse and widespread male chauvinism, manifesting even in pre-marital “bride kidnapping” (Wilensky-Lanford 2003); instead, he explains young women’s apparent interest in single parenting with the fact that many people in Kyrgyzstan were raised by single mothers after the break-up of the Soviet Union. At this point, he noted that even his own father was absent from his life while he was growing up. For these reasons, he said that he is very concerned about the collapse of traditional family structure in Kyrgyzstan, and views it as a destabilizing force and course of conflict in the country.

Seen through the lens of the television series for which he was laying the groundwork, Eldiyar’s apparent commitment to family stability manifested itself in his selection of and work on a script that highlighted intergenerational strife as a major point of friction. This decision – and the related decision to privilege self-improvement as an antidote to conflict – has consequences, one of which is that it takes precious resources away from the interethnic conflict that is so apparent to outside eyes. Perhaps self-improvement, defined more carefully and concretely than Eldiyar had defined it to me thus far, could yield a more prosperous and accepting, inclusive populace, but at this early point in my conversations with Eldiyar I was not yet convinced that his efforts would play out that way.

HUMAN RIGHTS
As our conversations continued, Eldiyar spoke to me a little bit about the concept of human rights, hugely divisive in the former Soviet Union. The concept is divisive, because Russian politicians and media sources point to a perceived hypocrisy in the foreign policy of the United States government – that (at times) famous espouser of the importance of human rights. A commonly-heard Russian line, which wavers at times between official and semi-official status, contends that the United States government does not care about so-called human rights in, say, Iraq and Libya. This claim, which interlocutors told me time and time again throughout Kyrgyzstan, was one of skepticism around the supposedly good intentions of US policymakers. Adherence to human rights became, in this line of thinking, supported by Russian state media, a rouse to support and empower political dissidents who were in fact plotting to overthrow the Russian (or Kyrgyzstani, Kazakhstani, Uzbekistani, etc.) state, often at the personal behest of President Obama, George Soros, or both.

The Soros Foundation, surely renamed the Open Society Institute for the very reason that human rights defenders are maligned in the formerly Soviet space, Mr. Soros most of all, is still quite active in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the area of education. That work is rarely seen by the bulk of the country’s population, and human rights as a concept have been so maligned that Eldiyar could say to me that the concept, in his mind, did not come up at all in the listening sessions that he conducted around the country. He said that people simply said “we had a woman president in Kyrgyzstan, the first in any former Soviet countries. There are no human rights problems here.” Whether or not this statement of his was an accurate portrayal of what people in the regions said to him is difficult to know, but it is worth noting that some of the problems he told me people did complain about could, in fact, by some be considered human rights issues.
In Talas, for example, Eldiyar said that the youth told him that they were going to march on Bishkek imminently if the government did not solve their problem with a goldmine that is in the mountains, near the source of a major river that they use for irrigation. He said that the residents were upset that the goldmine was polluting their fields, and that they blamed this pollution for an increase in children born with birth defects. He initially said that the people in Talas, youths, did not seem to want money. They wanted the goldmine to be shut down, he said. Recently, Eldiyar said that the residents of Talas were given a collective total of 500,000 soms (about $10,000) by the goldmine company, and he brought this up to the youth, but they were very angry because they had not received any of this. It all was filtered through the government, Eldiyar said, with a nod to the perception and reality of rampant government corruption. He said that there was a similar situation around Lake Issyk-Kul, with the massive Canadian-owned Komtur mine, the highest elevation open-pit gold mine in the world, which sits in an otherwise pristine mountain environment uphill and upstream from the beloved, even revered, body of water.

After he made his comment about the first woman president in the former Soviet space being in Kyrgyzstan, I asked Eldiyar how women’s rights related to the concept of human rights. He responded indirectly, by describing the state of issues around what I would call gender discrimination. He said that mostly gender relations in the country were “fine,” but then proceeded to list a number of problems, including bride kidnapping and domestic violence. In terms of domestic abuse, he then proceeded to tell me a story about a time when he was walking with his girlfriend and heard a woman being beaten, and screaming. He went over to her, and found her curled up on the ground as a man stood over her, kicking her. He said that he tried to intervene, and stop the man from beating the woman, but that then the woman attacked him, and said “Why are you attacking my husband?” Then their three kids came and also
attacked him. He credited the older generations’ Soviet upbringing for convincing women that they had to treat their husbands like they were “some kind of god,” but he did not particularly seem to think that this was a problem that needed rectifying. Instead, by presenting this story, Eldiyar was conveying, in essence, that it was fruitless to try and protect women being abused by men from that very same male violence. This notion, anathema to many people’s ways of thinking, including my own, are all the more troubling when coming from the mouth of somebody whose job is to prevent conflict, no matter what kind. Similar to the manner in which he made earlier statements blaming the demise of Soviet lifestyle for women wanting to raise children on their own, without partners, Eldiyar is again blaming the Soviet history for the male reverence he has identified. Oddly, these two explanations for what he at least tacitly thought of as problems in Kyrgyzstani society – that people being raised by single parents in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse led to a disintegration of the heteronormative family unit, and that Soviet upbringing led to female reverence for men, even those beating them – seem to hinge on a common theme. In Eldiyar’s view, it looks as though strong, intact family units coincided with female reverence for males. A dispassionate observer is left wondering if one condition precipitated or even necessitated the other. Neither causal connection aligns with a liberal view that celebrates women’s rights as human rights, or that allows for non-heteronormative family structures, or, even, apparently, divorce.

In addition, the Soviet legacy seems a bit confused in Eldiyar’s telling. In one case, this legacy is seen as a positive, at least for those like him who would advocate for strong heteronormative families. To extrapolate from this line of thinking is to presume that with the decline of what we might describe as “traditional” family values, in a notable parallel to the culture wars that have ravaged American society since at least the 1980s, Kyrgyzstani society has deteriorated. Now, in
Eldiyar’s narration, Kyrgyzstan is awash with intergenerational conflict, no doubt exacerbated by women wanting to have children alone. It is not too far a stretch to extend this line of his logic a bit further, and blame women for the society’s objective decline since the end of the Soviet period. In the narrative, supposed Western values of, at best, liberal self-determination and, at worse, unhinged promiscuity and hedonism, become intertwined villains.

In the second case, supposed female misogyny or at least reverence for men is traced back to Soviet upbringing. Here, presuming that one does not think that reverence for men is warranted, the mythical strong family unit that supposedly was prevalent during the Soviet period is put on its head, and becomes one not where women are considered equal to men, but one where the contrast in relative power is striking. This depiction, where women in Kyrgyzstan are seen as living up to something less that the liberal ideal respecting equal human rights, is very much in line with one version of gender relations that I have personally observed in the country since 2001. This is a scenario in which the prevalence of bride-kidnapping and domestic abuse seem to make sad sense. It is a scenario where one would say that human rights are not observed, presumably because they are not seen as important. That is the scenario that Eldiyar put forward in his description of the summits he organized and facilitated in the regions.

EDUCATION AND ISLAM

At another point in the conversation, Eldiyar told me that the Minister of Education in Kyrgyzstan had told him that the biggest problem facing the country was what Eldiyar terms “Islamicization.” He presented this observed opinion uncritically, apparently telling me this perspective not to disagree with it, but to provide evidence of the seriousness of the issue. Rather than refute it, he told me that in every town there is a mosque, and that, because some people say
that if you build a mosque it will erase all your sins, everybody builds mosques rather than schools or clinics.

I have observed this situation myself. Going back to 2001, I have noticed newly-constructed mosques in the tiniest of hamlets. Meanwhile, I am keenly aware that these same towns have extremely substandard healthcare facilities, and schools that are often unheated and without running water, let alone stocked with the latest and greatest educational resources. And so, while I can appreciate where Edliyar was coming from when he relayed this comment from the Minister of Education, I was a bit surprised that he did not refute the perspective with one of his own, given that he was working, again, for an organization whose mission and even name was premised on the goal of promoting better understanding between groups of people. Perhaps Eldiyar was testing me, to gauge my response to this claim. Perhaps he believed that I was, like many pious Muslims in the country no doubt believed, namely, opposed to all forms of Islam as an American. And yet, given the high regard Eldiyar seemed to hold the government in, and given that he had worked for the government and the president himself before coming to his current contractual position, I am not so sure that he was not anti-Islamization himself, whatever that means. Whatever his personal views about the spread of Islam, Eldiyar went on to tell me that the Minister of Education was a big fan of his own forthcoming television drama series. This fact, in and of itself, tells me that one should not expect ground-breaking change as a result of the drama series. Cabinet ministers in Kyrgyzstan, as in most places, typically do not rock the boat or stray too far away from party lines. In this specific case, the fact that the Minister of Education viewed the spread of Islam as the greatest problem in the country logically means that he cannot be a fair broker in the contested social space about secularism, religion, and security. Given how Eldiyar described this other man’s views of what challenges Kyrgyzstan as
a country faced, one might have good reason to think that Eldiyar, too, carried with him a strong bias against Muslims. In fact, his position may be what some of his colleagues at Search for Common Ground meant when they rather cryptically referred to “secular extremists.”

CONNECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVE

Eldiyar’s narrative described thus far presents a window into the thinking and actions of at least one senior employee at Search for Common Ground. Despite experiencing some limited foreign editorial input, as discussed, as the employee with relatively unfettered control of development of the scripts for the dramatic television series he was working on, Eldiyar was slated to personally have a direct and lasting impact on media intended to counter conflict that could lead to violence in Kyrgyzstan. He spoke about what channels might show the drama, and how they would distribute it. The outlets included First Channel, which is official and government-controlled, and a “society” channel. He said he, was thinking about an opposition channel but probably wouldn’t show it there because it could “upset” the government.

His hiring – just like the hiring he made of the US Ambassador Kadyr Toktogulov’s younger sister as a scriptwriter – speaks to the importance his boss Almazbek places on government connections and a robust social network for their objectives, if not the security of their operations overall. Here it is worth reiterating the physical location of the Search for Common Ground office, literally tucked between the Russian center for counterterrorism in Central Asia, disguised poorly as an ostensible Aeroflot booking office, and the sprawling, walled-in Kyrgyzstani state offices of the FSB (the successor organization to the KGB).

The nexus of Eldiyar’s social network, or at least a likely point of interest for many of his contacts, including those at Search for Common Ground, was his father. It is an understatement
to say in Kyrgyzstan that connections matter. Sometimes it seems that they are all that matter. In
the course of our conversation, it was becoming clear that Eldiyar’s connections were important
not only in that he once worked for members of Parliament and the president, but because he
came from a politically influential family. His surname likely made it possible for him to get
those coveted political messaging contracts. This seems likely because his father was the long-
time ambassador to Kyrgyzstan’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations. He revealed this to
me only in the context of our discussion about Kadyr Toktogulov, whom I had known at least
tangentially for over ten years, since the years we were both young reporters in Central Asia for
two leading competitive US daily newspapers.
Eldiyar said that he did not know Kadyr well, but that his father did. In our previous
conversations, which had been largely in the context of his own work and what he
identified as
the most significant points of conflict in the country, he had said only that his father was away
for much of his childhood. This come up in terms of his statements about what he identified as
something of a decay in the strength of what I would call traditional, heteronormative families in
Kyrgyzstan.
Now, Eldiyar gave a narrative about a time when he asked his father, the ambassador to the UN,
about Kadyr, who was at the time seen by many in media and NGO circles as someone lucky and
likely underqualified for his position, not to mention, in the eyes of those more democratically
minded individuals in the elite, as a sell-out. Eldiyar’s father told him that he too was skeptical of
Kadyr’s qualifications, but, in Eldiyar’s words, Kadyr had proven himself to his father to be very
smart and capable. And if his father thought that, Eldiyar said, then that was saying a lot. As if to
prove that his father’s words of praise held weight, Eldiyar then went on at great length about
how tough a critic and how smart and capable his father was. He said that his father never
approved of his own translations that he asked him to do, making Eldiyar redo them up to five times each. He said that his father’s staff hated but respected their boss, and that his father truly deserved a medal from President Atambayev for getting Kyrgyzstan elected to the Human Rights Committee at the UN very recently - a top priority for the president - and also to a Social and Economic Committee a bit earlier. As evidence of his father’s deservedness, Eldiyar said that even the Russian and Kazakhstani ambassadors told his father that he deserved a medal, and he complained that it wasn’t fair that three people who were sent to the UN to help corral votes a week before the vote, but just went shopping, got medals and his father did not. And so on.

There are a few noteworthy points here. First, it is surprising to hear Eldiyar describe a campaign for the country to join the Human Rights Commission, given that he had previously argued that human rights were not an issue in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, by some standards, Kyrgyzstani citizens experience frequent human rights violations. Bride kidnappings are common, and attacks on journalists (Wilensky-Lanford 2009) and pro-democracy activists (Wilensky-Lanford 2006) are not rare. This begs the question of why the nation’s president would make it a priority to secure a seat on this committee at the UN. Given this well-connected individual’s reluctance to acknowledge what human rights observers point to as serious human rights violations in his country, it would be odd for his father to go to the bat to convince international diplomats that Kyrgyzstan was a proponent of respecting human rights outlined in the Geneva Convention. It seems more likely, given the Russian ambassador’s professed support for Eldiyar’s father and his efforts, that the assent of the country’s representatives to the UN Human Rights Committee represented, in fact, the fulfillment of a goal established for another reason. Perhaps Kyrgyzstan’s president saw the country as one worthy of emulation for its protection of human rights, but Eldiyar’s statements point to another motivation for being on the committee. Given
the commonly voiced claims throughout much of the former Soviet Union, there is a good chance that the country sought the seat, with Russian support, no less, to stand as a bulwark against the liberal agenda to protect individual human rights. In this line of thinking, the assent to the committee has a cynical element; the Kyrgyzstani state would have been presenting itself as a model of a country that respected the liberal vision of human rights enough to win the votes of countries supporting the Geneva Convention, while, at the same time, supporting a “strong state” model so popular in the post-socialist space, which did not privilege individual freedoms at all. This second possibility is the most likely.

Eldiyar also made a point of telling me that everybody in Kyrgyzstan says that they want a leader like President Vladimir Putin, because he is a strong leader. “Nobody says they want somebody like Barack Obama or François Hollande,” he said.

The discussion of human rights is relevant to a broader discussion of the practice of preventing conflict and violent extremism, for several distinct reasons. First, ignoring human rights seems, at least intuitively, a good way to enable the violation of them. Second, violating human rights seems like a good way to foment opposition of the sort that may well coalesce into conflict or even what some might label extremism.

TERRORISM AND CONSPIRACY

On November 19, 2015, days after the streak of attacks in Paris on November 13, including at the Bataclan concert hall, which the Islamic State called the “first of the storm” (Callimachi 2015), Eldiyar presented an argument that in many cases, including this one: “something was faked” and the United States Government had planned the whole thing. He said that he thought the terrorism was real, but “controlled.” At one point he said that it is like the great nations were
“playing poker with the world.” Or, he said affably, refining his metaphor, that they are playing Monopoly, “so that if one person lands on Kyrgyzstan, they have to pay.”

This grasp at systematic reasoning was common to hear in Central Asia. Taxi drivers and other people around Bishkek who consumed Russian state media day in and day out were quick to present such a claim to American or European visitors. Any student of foreign affairs and history in the United States who has developed even a slightly critical lens would acknowledge the validity of a Realpolitik claim suggesting that the United States has tangible military and economic interests in Central Asia, and acts accordingly. This same somewhat critical thinker would also probably acknowledge that U.S. intelligence officers and others likely carry out morally questionable plans at the behest of the Great Powers. These ideas should not be disputed.

Although a large step has to be made to get from that to a notion that the United States is actually pulling the strings to manifest Islamic State bombings, this step is easier and easier for social actors in Kyrgyzstan to make.

Eldiyar’s ideas about the concepts of the Islamic State and terrorism may sound odd, but they express a skepticism that has only grown more prevalent globally in the 20 years since George E. Marcus edited a volume outlining how the “paranoid style” of explanation was flourishing in the aftermath of the Cold War (Marcus 1999). In introducing the book, Marcus described how paranoid thinking was at that point often approaching “reasonableness” due to two broad contexts or conditions. “The first derives from the fact that the cold-war era itself was defined throughout by a massive project of paranoid social thought and action that reached into every dimension of mainstream culture, politics, and policy” (Marcus 1999: 2). The Cold War, of course, had at least two sides, and the paranoid style has blossomed in the former Soviet space
just as in the West – in a direction with a trajectory and form similar but mirrored to that most familiar to Americans.

The second condition that Marcus identified as contributing to the “reasonableness” of paranoid thinking as explanation was a “crisis of representation” (Marcus 1999: 4). This “felt inadequacy of metanarratives and conceptual frames to explain the world” in all its complexity has only deepened with the rise of the Internet and the erosion of facts. At the close of the last century, Marcus wrote “Now, there remains a healthy respect for facts and evidence, but accompanied also by a high tolerance for speculative associations among them---an impulse to figure out systems, now of global scale, with strategic facts missing that might otherwise permit confident choices among competing conceptions” (Marcus 1999: 4). The “healthy respect for facts and evidence” that he identified has withered away, now that the U.S. president so often talks about “fake news” and the editorial oversight of news media has become dwarfed by the echo chamber of Facebook and other social media, in the West as much as in its post-Soviet counterpart. Factual determinacy is so often absent in contemporary social life that speculative associations proliferate.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND PATHE

Eldiyar’s statements speculating that the United States government might be controlling purported terrorists, including those people attacking civilian targets who have professed allegiance to the Islamic State, likely rely, at some level, on his emotional state. In Aristotelian terms, pathe can be understood as “feelings which influence human judgment or decision-making and which are accompanied by pleasure or pain” (Aristotle 1984: 1378a, cited in Brinton 1988: 208). Primary among these feelings in Aristotle’s account is anger, by which he means “a
longing, accompanied by pain, for revenge for unjustified slight against oneself or one's friend” (Ibid.)

As Brinton writes, “the state of mind which makes a hearer susceptible to anger is pain at being slighted” (Binton 1988: 208). In a context where America is seen as an enemy that elicits pain on several levels, including for claiming economic domination and even moral victory after the Cold War, as well as causing pain to fellow members of the ummah (Muslim “community”) by invading Iraq and Afghanistan, anger can and surely does result. Rhetorically speaking, in the post-Soviet Central Asian case, particularly for Muslims who identify as part of an imagined global community that includes innocent Iraqis and Afghans, the pain that America has wrought becomes anger through Russian media messaging, which focuses on this pain by underlining the “slights” of civilian deaths, bombings of hospitals, and so on. Paranoid stylings of conspiracy theories like that Eldiyar and even his boss Almazbek at times gave voice to likely represent a commonsensical interpretative association in the region, and one that policymakers interested in preventing violent extremism should consider.

Chapter 5 – Against the Essentialization of a Religion and Secular Divide

Jurgen Habermas is arguably the most influential secular political theorist active in recent decades. He maintains a stark split between the secular and the religious, claiming that lifeworlds predicated or reliant on a presumption of the existence of the divine cannot be rational. For Habermas, rationality developed during the Enlightenment, but only for some portion of the population. The remainder of the population is irrational or partially rational, and cannot participate in meaningful communicative action. In other words, for Habermas, the realm of legitimate politics is closed to people who seek to organize action with speech that posits the
existence of a god or gods, as he argues that such speech is irrational. In this chapter, I will use Alessandro Pizzorno's vision of politics and religion becoming distinguished to varying degrees in different historical contexts to illustrate a more useful way for ethnographers to think about these concepts than adopting Habermas's understanding of a political world based on restricted communicative action. In so doing, I will argue that speech predicated on the existence of a god shapes politics by leading to collective action quite often, whether or not we deem such speech to be rational or the resulting action legitimate, in Habermasian terms. Following Lyotard, I will argue that there are legitimate alternatives to Habermas's claim that action-oriented speech must be organized around the idea of consensus. I will take up the implications of Habermas's work not only through a close reading of Pizzorno, but also a brief survey of other relevant literature. I end with a discussion of Habermas's relatively recent and significant revisions.

**RESTRICTIONS ON COMMUNICATIVE ACTION**

Habermas generally restricts legitimate communicative action, which he defines as communication oriented toward the organization of action and directed toward consensus, to speech which does not posit the existence of a divine power. That said, in recent 21st-century writing, he has also written that secular citizens should listen to religious citizens through a process of becoming “epistemically attuned to the continued existence of religious communities” (Habermas 2008a: 139, original italics). In his broader critical theory of communicative action, though, in order for action to be legitimately organized, the communication that organizes it, Habermas maintains, must meet three validity claims. Habermas writes:

> It belongs to the communicative intent of the speaker (a) that he perform a speech act that is *right* in respect to the given normative context, so that between him and the hearer an intersubjective relation will come about which is recognized as legitimate; (b) that he make a *true* statement (or *correct* existential
presuppositions), so that the hearer will accept and share the knowledge of the speaker; and (c) that he express truthfully his beliefs, intentions, feelings, desires, and the like, so that the hearer will give credence to which is said (Habermas 1984 v.1, 307).

These three types of validity claims – rightness, truth, and truthfulness, in Habermas’s words, or appropriateness, correctness, and sincerity – are the central qualifiers of what he calls communicative action. Furthermore, he claims that these validity claims are the principal markers of communicated rational thought, in that it is only possible to make the distinctions between the social, the natural, and the subjective that these validity claims are based on to the extent that one has adopted Occidental rationality born out of the Enlightenment. When one has adopted Occidental rationality, and only then, are they able to make the distinctions that allow for the satisfaction of the three validity clauses. This rationality, and the rational communicative action that it allows, comprises the basis of Habermas's prescribed secular, “modern” society. Discussions predicated on the existence of the divine do not qualify as valid communicative action, Habermas would maintain, because such discussions do not satisfy all three types of prerequisite validity claims. In such company, one cannot legitimately say, for example, that the sky is blue because God willed it to be blue, so we should aim collectively not to pollute it and make it gray. In such a case, any listener could challenge the inherent claim that God exists, and the speaker is forced to justify her existential presuppositions. Her statement, which attempts to organize action based on the existence of God, would then fail to meet the second validity claim of “truth,” and be considered, in fact, both invalid and wrong. For Habermas, any faith in the divine must be considered subjective, and not based on anything natural or objectively real. Whether or not a group of people communicating agree that there is a god does not prevent them from engaging in valid communicative action; however, if members of that group justify or call
for collective action based on the existence of a divine power, any action that results is, according to most of Habermas’s writing, a result of an illegitimate insertion into the public sphere of conversation about the organization of action.

For Habermas, the “public sphere” is a realm where any and all citizens can gather to form “something approaching public opinion” (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974: 49). He writes: “Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it” (ibid.). The concepts of the “public sphere” and “public opinion” arose, according to Habermas, during a specific historical process in Europe, culminating during the eighteenth century. These concepts arose as the feudal powers relevant at the time grew apart, with religion becoming, in time, a private consideration. Habermas writes:

The feudal authorities (church, princes and nobility), to which the representative public sphere was first linked, disintegrated during a long process of polarization. By the end of the eighteenth century they had broken apart into private elements on the one hand, and into public on the other. The position of the church changed with the reformation: the link to divine authority which the church represented, that is, religion, became a private matter. So-called religious freedom came to insure what was historically the first area of private autonomy (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974: 51).

After this disintegration of feudal powers was complete, speech predicated on religion was relegated to the private realm, according to Habermas’s critical theory. Legitimate instances of communicative action, in the public sphere, for Habermas, must not be predicated on the concept of a divine power. In fact, Habermas's three particular validity claims for legitimate
communicative action create a strict dichotomy between rational, secular, legitimate, and potentially action-organizing speech he grants to some modern actors, and irrational, religious speech predicated on the existence of a god. This later form of speech cannot be used to legitimately organize action, and therefore those who predicate their statements on the existence of a divine spirit or spirits cannot, in so doing, legitimately organize action, for such speech is considered less than fully enlightened.

Habermas’s critical theory of communicative action, as it stood before his writing in the 21st century, when he acknowledged that postmetaphysical thinking must reflect on “an awareness of what is missing” (Habermas 2010) created a firm distinction between the legitimate, enlightened speech in the public sphere that met his three validity claims and less than fully enlightened speech predicated on the existence of a god, which could not meet his validity claims, and, hence, not be legitimate forms of speech in the public sphere. This theoretical framework is not useful for anthropologists, particularly working in the area of religion, due to the simple matter that among coreligionists, speech predicated on the existence of a god can be used to call for action, and often is. It feels like a truism to say that religious speech can be political. The type of legitimate communication that characterizes a “public sphere” where all can gather and voice their unrestricted opinion is, in fact, in short supply today, so much so that, ethnographically, it is much more interesting and useful to witness and describe what Habermas would call illegitimately organized speech, so often used to call for action, be it to reject abortion, argue for intelligent design, or even promote a particular violence-inflected interpretation of jihad. Habermas’s critical theory of communicative action is not particularly useful for anthropologists working in a world where these forms of religious speech are prevalent and effective.
RATIONALITY, MYTH, AND RELIGION

Habermas describes what is rational as follows:

When we use the expression “rational” we suppose that there is a close relation between rationality and knowledge. Our knowledge has a propositional structure; beliefs can be represented in the form of statements. I shall presuppose this concept of knowledge without further clarification, for rationality has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge... An expression satisfies the precondition for rationality if and insofar as it embodies fallible knowledge and therewith has a relation to the objective world (that is, a relation to the facts) and is open to objective judgement. A judgement can be objective if it is undertaken on the basis of a transsubjective validity claim that has the same meaning for observers and nonparticipants as it has for the acting subject himself (Habermas 1984 v.1: 8-9, emphasis in original).

Here, Habermas links rationality to objective, verifiable knowledge. Because speech predicated on the existence of the divine is not grounded in objectively verifiable facts, it cannot be rational according to Habermas's categorization. Habermas maintains that, insofar as legitimate speech is in conformity with his three validity criteria, it is fully rational.

Habermas's concept of secular, rational, modern thought is predicated on the resurrection of an Enlightenment-era ideal of universal rationalism. His argument for “universal pragmatism,” similarly, is based on an idea of some underlying shared experience. A full exploration of just what Habermas means by this term is beyond the scope of this dissertation. In short, universal pragmatism relies on a shared understanding or intersubjectivity, at least between a certain subset of humanity Habermas associates, at least partially, with modernity. Habermas begins his Theory of Communicative Action with a section where he “implicitly” connects a “claim to universality” with Occidental rationality. He writes:

Hitherto we have naively presupposed that, in this modern understanding of the world, structures of consciousness are expressed that belong to a rationalized lifeworld and make possible in principle a rational conduct of life. We are implicitly
connecting a claim to *universality* with our *Occidental understanding of the world*. In determining the significance of this claim, it would be well to draw a comparison with the mythical understanding of the world. In archaic societies myths fulfill the unifying function of worldviews in an exemplary way— they permeate life-practice. At the same time, within the cultural traditions accessible to us, they present the sharpest contrast to the understanding of the world dominant in modern societies (Habermas 1984 v.1: 44, emphasis in original).

Here, Habermas sets up a comparison between the “mythical understanding of the world” prevalent in “archaic societies” and what he understands as a modern Occidental rationality. Rational conduct of life is possible only when individuals are able to distinguish between the social, natural, and personal. In fact, he writes that “Myths do not permit a clear, basic, conceptual differentiation between things and persons, between objects that can be manipulated and agents— subjects capable of speaking and acting to whom we attribute linguistic utterances” (Habermas 1984 v.1: 48). In other words, understandings of the world that rely on myths cannot differentiate between objects, agents, and norms, and thus, cannot be the worldviews of those who engage in valid communicative action. Habermas has attempted to create a theoretical-critical point of reference, appeal to which allows us to assess the relative rationality of any speech in the public sphere, based on the conformity to his validity conditions. But, in so doing, he discounts the political involvement of anybody and everybody who uses religion to justify action in the public sphere, although he seems to move away from this position in some of recent writing. This critical theory, where only action based on speech removed from any underpinnings of religious faith is valid, is not particularly helpful for ethnographers. Because religious calls to action are effective, they need to be considered— “legitimate” or not. Designating certain speech acts more or less rational is not helpful for those who wish to endeavor to understand the ways of thinking of religious citizens. As difficult as it may be for a
person to understand another’s actions that may be motivated by their religious faith, it is useful to try.

For Habermas, rationality develops through the separation of the social (normative), natural (objective), and personal (subjective). In a Hegelian manner, the development of one category spurs on the development of another. Habermas writes:

Only to the extent that the formal concept of an external world develops – of an objective world of existing states of affairs and of a social world of norms – can the complementary concept of the internal world or of subjectivity arise, that is, a world to which the individual has privileged access and to which everything is attributed that cannot be incorporated in the external world. Only against the background of an objective world, and measured against the criticizable claims to truth and efficacy, can beliefs appear as systematically false, action intentions as systematically hopeless, and thoughts as fantasies, as mere imaginings. (Habermas 1984 v.1: 51)

In other words, Habermas maintains that making separations between subject and object and norm is fundamental to the validity of communicative action. We cannot rely on myths, Habermas writes, to inform our ontology, because to do so prevents us from seeing our own fantasies as just that. If we believe in myths, then we cannot draw the line between any truth and fiction. Religion, for Habermas, occupies a related space. Following from Kant, Habermas argues that there can be no objective proofs for the existence of a divine spirit, or god(s). Therefore, any religious faith that an individual has must be subjective rather than objective. It cannot be known whether a god exists, and any statement predicated on divine existence that seeks to organize action cannot be legitimate. Habermas maintains that the public sphere should be open to everyone, and that discourse is an exchange that all people should be able to participate in (Habermas 1979). Because so much speech does not meet the conditions of Habermas’s ideal speech act, his critical theory is not particularly useful in the less than fully secular modern world. Habermas would likely say that devout Muslims, for example, use
something akin to divine myth to understand their worlds. For Habermas, mythical understandings of the world are analogous to deeply religious understandings of the world. Similarly, devout religious understandings of the world would seem to have the same limitations on rationality that he places on worldviews that are predicated on any faith in myths.

CONSENSUS AS TELOS

Habermas maintains that communicative action has, as its telos, consensus. He writes:

Reaching an understanding functions as a mechanism for coordinating actions only through the participants in interaction coming to an agreement concerning the claimed validity of their utterances, that is, through intersubjectively recognizing the validity claims they reciprocally raise. A speaker puts forward a criticizable claim in relating with his utterance to at least one “world”; he thereby uses the fact that this relation between actor and world is in principle open to objective appraisal in order to call upon his opposite number to take a rationally motivated position. The concept of communicative action presupposes language as the medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested (Habermas 1984 v.1: 99, emphasis in original).

Hence, communicative action is about intersubjective recognition of the speech partner's worldview. Yet, ethnographers need to have a model of communication that allows for speech between people who do not inhabit what Habermas calls the same “world,” and therefore cannot objectively appraise each other's position in the world that they have each created. Such speech happens in what is commonly understood as “politics” all the time, whenever one speech partner makes an assumption about the world with which their partner disagrees. Now, one might say that Habermas allows for disagreement in his model of communicative action, by claiming that recognition of validity claims is not the same as overall agreement with the intent and goals of an individual. But, in fact, upon closer consideration, it becomes clear that if somebody with whom I am speaking disagrees with the substance of what I am saying, they will surely reject one or
more of the three validity claims that Habermas requires for valid communicative action. In this sense, valid communicative action is a very small set of communication, indeed. For this reason, Habermas’s critical theory is not particularly relevant to the work of ethnographers, especially those working in a religious context.

LYOTARD’S ALTERNATIVE VISION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Jean-Francois Lyotard has presented a very different account of political discourse than that of Habermas. For Lyotard, Habermas's understanding of politics ruled by consensus-making communicative action does not ring true. Politics – and all communication, arguably – is about presenting competing visions of the world. It is a constant struggle. In the words of Paul Fairfield, for Lyotard:

Political discourse is an unstable and unending series of gestures and utterance, 'the trumping of a communicational adversary, and essentially conflictual relationship between tricksters'... 'Progress' in political debate, if there can be said to be such a thing, consists not in producing 'valid' deductions or in generating consensus, but precisely in upsetting consensus and destabilizing our political practices. Indeed, rather than privileging consensus, Lyotard suggests that the more inventive our move, the less likely it is to generate agreement, 'precisely because it changes the rules of the game upon which consensus had been based' (1994: 60).

This adversarial view of communication is much more relevant and helpful for ethnographers than Habermas's consensus-building model. In Lyotard’s view, politics can be seen as more lively and dynamic, and, indeed, more true to form.

PIZZORNO’S POLITICS

Unlike Habermas, Alessandro Pizzorno engages in a historical accounting of how and when the religious (characterized by control over definition of the “ultimate” ends) and political (similarly characterized by control over definition of certain “proximate” ends) began to be
differentiated, and when they continue to overlap (1987). The emergence of this distinction, he writes, was during the so-called Gregorian moment of religious reform - “the spiritual drive to power,” in Pizzorno's words. This period, named after Pope Gregory VII (c. 1015--1085), was defined by a protracted struggle between the church and the Roman Empire, which, Pizzorno outlines, marked the emergence, or, more accurately, a dissociation, of two distinct categories: the religious and the political.

Pizzorno defines politics generally as “what projects human activity toward its future” (Pizzorno 1987: 28). This concept can include certain types of communication. When an individual speaks, whether or not their statement satisfies the three validity claims of Habermas's critical theory, their speech takes place after a motivation or thought about speaking, and therefore extends human activity into the future. Speech acts often affect or effect still future human activity.

Pizzorno's account is more useful for ethnographers than Habermas's, for several key reasons. They are related in that they both relate politics to action. They depart significantly, though, in that Pizzorno's historical account presents an interpretation more descriptive of the complexities of reality than Habermas's critical theory. Indeed, any speech that has an effect on the world, by Pizzorno's definition, can project human activity toward the future. This speech merely has to have an effect in order to be relevant, and the effect could be on discourse or concrete action. Politically relevant speech, therefore, is not limited to that which is legitimately or secularly organized, as it is for Habermas. Pizzorno's schema even allows for those like Lyotard, who maintain that speech partners are opposed to each other, playing language games and seeking to trick each other rather than reach consensus. Indeed, Pizzorno's accounting of communication includes all people capable of speech. Although he sets out to include and
enfranchise all, Habermas’s public sphere comes with a built-in limit on those who can truly participate, in that there he restricts legitimate communicative action to that which meets his validity claims.

Because political action is a human projection toward the near future, some have drawn a link between politics and secularism. There is a commonly held idea, Pizzorno writes, that “certain forms of politics are just secularized expressions of religious attitudes and feelings.” (Pizzorno 1987: 29). Pizzorno, however, rejects this notion.

This notion of politics as secularized religion is part and parcel to another commonly held idea, that the Western world has been, since Enlightenment, rejecting religion and becoming more “secular.” Habermas has, at times, expressed this idea, although in his more recent writing he has come to acknowledge that religion, in fact, remains a common feature of American politics (see, especially, Habermas 2008).

The “secularization theory” that Westerners are, by and large, rejecting religion and becoming more secular, relates to a theory that Pizzorno describes with a metaphor: “The theory is built on what we may call a 'hydraulic' model: The flow of the sacred runs through the duct of religious institutions, and when those are, for some reason, obstructed, part or the whole of that flow will find its way through another duct, specifically through the political one” (Pizzorno 1987: 29).

Pizzorno points out that in order to make the “hydraulic model” meaningful, more detail and specificity are needed: “The material that obstructs this or that duct should be specified in terms of categories generated by the same theory that defines ducts and flows. These requirements are not satisfied by the versions of this theory so far advanced. Either the 'sacred flow' is always the same - and in this case there is no way of distinguishing religious from
political institutions and movements - or it changes, and in this case nothing is learned about political phenomena by calling them 'religious'” (Pizzorno 1987: 30).

Pizzorno's first point is that the “hydraulic model” of secularization leaves out a key component, namely, description of the blockage(s). His also points out that confusion or even conflation between political and religious phenomena emerge from this model.

For Pizzorno, the shift from religious authority to state authority was about territorialization of a certain collectivity: "What some call 'modernization of politics' is this sort of change: a process not of secularization of values - or not as a prime motor - but of territorialization of binding ties, with all the consequences" (Pizzorno 1987: 32).

This is a significant differentiation from Habermas's conception. For Pizzorno, with the establishment of jurisdictional territories, which led to nation-states, a different kind of collectivity emerged – but it was still one motivated and which cohered by a vision of the future. The link between religion and politics can perhaps best be articulated by the following: "...Godly, or otherwise 'spiritual,' or 'ultimate,' ends can always be found, in varying degrees, in the pursuance of those activities to which it is today usual to assign the generic name of politics: They aim at bindingly committing the future of a certain collectivity" (Pizzorno 1987: 31).

With this perspective, Pizzorno presents a compelling alternative vision that is more useful for ethnographers than Habermas's critical theory. Instead of a communicative act in the public sphere only being legitimate when it is devoid of reference to a god, thereby meeting Habermas’s validity claims, Pizzorno’s vision outlines the historical distinction or dissociation made in the West between two “modes of power” reliant on control over proximate and ultimate reference points. In Pizzorno’s view, the spiritual or, more specifically, ecclesiastical authorities in the West have traditionally maintained control over questions relating to ultimate or long-term
ends, by controlling four components that comprise spiritual power: the control of (transcendental) knowledge, the control of rules, the control of devotion, and definition of the enemies (Pizzorno 1987). In his “extended, carefully reasoned argument for a social order based on a public sphere free from domination in all its forms” (McCarthy 1985 (1978): xii), Habermas presents a normative and prescriptive vision of how he would like the world to be. He does not provide a model accounting for how many ethnographers know the world to be, where control over narratives about means to reaching ultimate ends can be extremely powerful. Pizzorno’s work helps in this regard.

**ULTIMATE AND PROXIMATE ENDS**

Instead of classifying communication as valid or invalid (secular, devoid of “metaphysical baggage” or religiously justified), as Habermas does, Pizzorno describes two different categories of societal goals: ultimate and proximate: “Ultimate (i.e., long-term) ends are to be defined as implying uncertainty, while proximate (i.e., short-term) ends imply practical certainty” (Pizzorno 1987: 35). This distinction echoes Weber's distinction between value-rational action and instrumentally rational action. In Weberian terms, Pizzorno's “ultimate ends” are pursued through value-rational action, determined “by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success” (Weber 1978: 24-25). Value-rational action, based on what is also translated as “value-oriented” (wertrational) rationality, is “characterized by striving for a substantive goal, which in itself may not be rational---say, the attainment of salvation---but which is nonetheless pursued with rational means---for example, ascetic self-denial in the pursuit of holiness” (Coser 1977: 217). In this sense, Weber allows for a conception of rational behavior
in pursuit of irrational, value-oriented goals, to include action based on speech predicated on an account of the divine. Pizzorno presents a similar vision, accounting for spiritual power, including that based on the control of (transcendental) knowledge. He writes: “The control of knowledge represents the most typical and, generally, the most powerful of 'spiritual' resources, especially insofar as it rests on the basis of an all-encompassing vision of the long-term, ultimate ends of society and the individual” (Pizzorno 1987:35).

Proximate ends, on the other hand, are pursued through instrumentally rational, purposeful action, which Weber qualifies as action where “the end, the means, and the secondary results are rationally taken into account and weighed” (Weber 1978: 26). This “goal-oriented rational action (zweckrational)…in which both goal and means are rationally chosen, is exemplified by the engineer who builds a bridge by the most efficient technique of relating means to ends” (Coser 1977: 217). For Pizzorno, the traditional holders of “power spiritual” sometimes control proximate ends, too. For example, he writes: “When the spiritual-temporal levels began to separate, the ecclesiastical class organized itself to explicitly renew its control of the regulation of proximate ends” (Pizzorno 1987: 37). In this way, the dissociation of control of the ultimate and proximate ends that Pizzorno identifies as starting in the Gregorian period is not, for him, a complete separation; rather, there is an ongoing struggle for control over these two categories. Indeed, both types of power can be said to constitute political power in the West to this day. “The consequence of this analysis for our inquiry is to look at Western politics as composed, in various ways, of these two modes of power” (Pizzorno 1987: 44). How they interact in Kyrgyzstan, and, indeed, the remainder of the non-Western world, is largely an open question, which, in the Kyrgyzstan case, this dissertation intends to speak toward.
Although Weber and Habermas share the view that religiously motivated action is not fully rational, their views differ in an important way. Weber acknowledges that social action includes value-rational action. In so doing, Weber provides a vision that facilitates social scientists considering such action, which is helpful for ethnographers interested in comprehending and describing how the world works. Habermas, in turn, generally does not leave space in his critical theory for religiously motivated rational action, arguing that what Weber calls value-rational action (which includes action organized by speech acts predicated on the existence of a god or gods) may be at least partially invalid.

Weber wrote that the rationalization of the world shaped religion. He wrote: “The general result of the modern form of thoroughly rationalizing the conception of the world and of the way of life, theoretically and practically, in a purposive manner, has been that religion has been shifted into the realm of the irrational” (Weber 1970: 281). This means that the kind of rationalization of the world that is prevalent in modern times shifted religion to the irrational sphere.

That said, Weber did not causally link rationality to the Enlightenment, as Habermas did. “Against 19th-century French anthropology, Weber argued that man did not acquire his 'rationality' with the Enlightenment and that individuals in all previous epochs were not incapable of rational action. On the contrary, even everyday actions of 'primitive' man could be subjectively means-end rational, as, for example, when specific religious rituals were performed with the aim of receiving favors from a god.” (Kalberg 1980: 1146, emphasis in the original.) Thus, according to Kalberg's analysis of Weber's vision of rationality, individual action predicated on the existence of the divine can be subjectively rational. Subjectivity is key here, as,
with it, we can see how Weber and Habermas further depart in their view of rationality and rationalization. For Habermas, rationality is only possible when an individual is able to distinguish between the subjective, objective, and normative. Weber, meanwhile, accounted for the possibility of somebody holding subjective religious convictions motivating value-rational action.

Pizzorno does not share Habermas's requirement that only rational speech is relevant. For Pizzorno, order is made out of the world through territorialization and state authority. Although Pizzorno does not explicitly define rationality, an apparent qualification can be deduced from his writing. Rationality, or, better yet, relevance, is determined by the territorialized collectivity that is bound together. For Pizzorno, what is relevant is not limited to the objective, as in Habermas's view put forth in his critical theory of communicative action. Instead, effective speech is that which successfully propels humanity toward the future, and a collectivity as a whole is the judge of what is important or appropriate in speech.

Consider Pizzorno's discussion of “the control of knowledge” (Pizzorno 1987: 35–36), where Pizzorno describes how a “spiritual drive to power” in the Gregorian moment is operationalized and substantiated in fact. Control of knowledge about the distant future was “monopolistically” held by the church, and when it was shared, it was irrelevant whether the terms of that knowledge were subjectively or objectively rational. “The activity of providing knowledge about ultimate ends introduces into the horizon of individual and social choices a needed degree of certainty. The capacity to provide that type of knowledge constitutes a powerful resource in the hands of some groups of specialists. In our case, it was in the hands of the ecclesiastical apparatus” (1987: 35–36). This provision of knowledge had real effects – indeed, its transmission was a “powerful resource” – and ethnographers have an onus to attempt
to understand its effects and even its logic, whether or not one would call that knowledge of ultimate ends explicitly rational in a Habermasian sense.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONTEXT**

The implications of Pizzorno's model are vast. Writing shortly after the so-called Arab Spring, Hussein Ali Agrama described the state of politics in Egypt. He wrote:

Thus, the question of whether Egypt is or will be a secular or a religious state has been increasingly asked in various forms for a very long time, both because of the country’s growing geopolitical importance and because of the genuine religious–political ambiguities that it exhibits. It is therefore a question that experts and laypersons, secular and religious, both outside of and especially within Egypt, have found very difficult to avoid. Difficult as it has been to avoid, it has been more difficult to resolve in any satisfactory way. The question has a seemingly inexorable and continually confounding character. Such ambiguity, however, is not exclusive to Egypt. A wide variety of states exhibit sometimes profound secular–religious ambiguity, with which they continually grapple (Agrama 2012: 27).

This passage begins to speak to why Habermas's dichotomy between religious and secular speech is so limiting. The real world is complex, and profound “secular—religious ambiguity” abounds.

Although neither Habermas nor Pizzorno aim to classify entire states as either secular or religious, Agrama's words reflect the messy reality of political life as it is experienced. A state's classification as either religious or secular, although perhaps made by pundits rather than social scientists, reflects a perception of the dominant mode of politics to be found in that state. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, is a religious political party. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood make statements calling for action that are predicated on the existence of a god. Habermas’s critical theory has no place for these statements, as they would violate the second validity claim about objective truth, and reflect a conflation of the natural, subjective and social
Yet, these statements have import and are real, whether or not they meet a particular theorist's ideas about what is rational.

Other social scientists have critiqued components of Habermas’s critical theory in their own work. Craig Calhoun, for example, deployed Habermas's description of rationality when he wrote that religion might be a reason for people's political positions, but it was not the sort of reason that could be subjected to rational political debate. Therefore, liberal theorists have commonly suggested that religion should remain private or that religious arguments have a legitimate place in the public sphere only to the extent that they can be rendered in (ideally rational) terms that are not specifically religious. In short, much liberal theory conceptualizes citizenship as essentially secular, even where citizens happen to be religious (Calhoun 2011: 77).

Calhoun proceeded to criticize the idea that flows from liberal social theory like that of much of Habermas’s work, namely, that political citizenship is largely secular, and religion necessarily private. He wrote that such a view leads to a stark separation between religious and secular people, which limits public exchange.

The idea that religion does not belong in the public sphere or in politics has very real and problematic consequences. In his study of state-sponsored religious schools in Turkey, Soon-Yong Pak described the tricky situation students found themselves in. “This study suggests that, rather than the school defining and promoting a state-sanctioned religion through an integration of inconsistent cultural themes, the actual schooling experience simply magnifies the fragmented splits between the Islamist ideal and the secular reality” (2004: 342). The trickle-down effect of denying the validity of religion-predicated speech in political discourse is to perpetuate a divide between religious ideals and secular reality. In the long run, religious people will become separate from the more validated secular people. Such a division ignores the reality that
supposedly secular morals are informed by religious teachings, and religious discourse affects politics, whether it is considered valid or not.

It is arguable that there is a link between prevailing modern liberal theories like that of Habermas, and limited agency and rights of religious actors in the public sphere. Many social scientists have written about the disenfranchisement of members of religious minorities in modern times. “Despite their universalistic claims, contemporary secularist policies in the European Union commonly end up discriminating against religious minorities” (Ozyurek 2005: 510). Ozyurek goes on to describe such policies as the French law against wearing religious dress in public institutions, such as schools. “In this sense, the law---which ostensibly aims to promote equality among citizens by eliminating religion in public space---becomes blatantly assimilationist and limits the freedom of expression among observant Muslims and Jews” (Ibid.). When statements predicated on the existence of a god are ruled irrational and invalid in communication meant to organize action, it is not surprising that people who believe in a god will be cast aside and fall victim to institutionalized secularism.

Many social scientists are skeptical of Habermas's vision of a restricted public sphere. Jose Casanova, for example, writes: “Nor was the conception of a modern public sphere that I proposed reduced to a discursive communicative space restricted to rational debate... I envision the modern public sphere as a discursive or agonic space in principle open to all citizens and all issues, including issues of power and the power to set the terms of the debate” (Casanova 2006: 14). This marks a different theorization that is incompatible with Habermas's theory of communicative action. Casanova comes out on the side of allowing for a public political space unrestricted to rational debate, but rather open to and empowering all citizens.
Habermas's prescriptive critical theory of communicative action, by virtue of its requirement that only objectively true speech is valid, denies validity to the communication of religious actors who would like to predicate their speech on their religious convictions.

SECULARISM AS A USEFUL CATEGORY

Some social scientists believe that secularism is a useful category of analysis. When writing about the Soviet Union, for example, Sonja Luehrmann defines secularism as: “the body of political doctrines and moral sensibilities that make it seem necessary for religion to be detached from modern public life” (Luehrmann 2011: 108). In this sense, secularism is defined as an opposition, a denial of something else, something religious. One can infer from this definition that, at least in the Soviet sense, religion was actively removed from public life, and that this removal was justified by secularism. Although this definition leaves secularism as a more powerful analytic category than other definitions, it is a negatively charged category, made powerful by the absence of any content associated with religion.

This sentiment is further evidenced when Luehrmann continues her account, writing: “This book seeks to contribute to a more transnational view of attempts to banish gods and spirits from social life by bringing approaches to liberal and postcolonial secularisms into dialogue with the history of Soviet atheism, as it played itself out in the Middle Volga region” (Luehrmann 2011: 117). Notice that she is writing about attempts to remove divinities from social life. These attempts, clearly, are not successful or complete. In this account, one can read of an inherent rejection of the “hydraulic theory” of secularization that Pizzorno describes as prevalent in social thought. It should by now be clear that the idea of secularization occurring through the course of
the Enlightenment can be a problematic view, and that any limit to restrict religious speech from
the public sphere is unrealistic.

Habermas himself realized this in 2005. At a lecture in Kyoto, Japan, later adapted for
publication, he said: “By now, the significance of religions used for political ends has grown the
world over” (Habermas 2005: 100). This statement represented a significant departure from his
theory of communicative action, which excludes religiously-predicated speech from politics, and
therefore is a significant admission. He continued, assenting that religious people should be
allowed to speak using “religious language,” provided that it can be translated into
postmetaphysical speech. Finally, he stated that: “Postmetaphysical thought is prepared to learn
from religion while remaining strictly agnostic” (Habermas 2005: 107).

The evolution of Habermas's thought over the past thirty years, starting with an exclusion
of religious speech from legitimate political discussion and ending with an allowance for
religious language in the public sphere, with some major caveats, is remarkable. Accepting that
religiously motivated speech can and does organize action in real-life communication is useful
for ethnographers seeking to understand social actors in the world.
Chapter 6 – Secular Islam

For many self-avowed liberals, according to Mahmood, secularism is seen as a somewhat simple separation of church and state, which becomes a vital ingredient to achieving and perpetuating world peace. She writes that “secularism is upheld these days by American liberals and progressives alike on the assumption that this particular sociopolitical arrangement is the best way to ward off the dangers of religious strife” (2006: 325). In this understanding, a separation of an individual’s religious practice from their political ideas would allow for an acceptance of another person’s religious practice, which would also, in theory, be distinct from their political thoughts. But such a neat and tidy partitioning of one’s identity, of course, is not possible. We know now that religion and religious practice motivates political decisions, just as in the last chapter I described how Muslims and other religious people are, in fact, engaging in public communicative and political action. Real people have religious and political thoughts that lead to religious and political action, sometimes together, in concert, and sometimes, although far less often, I would argue, with some degree of distinction and exclusivity.

Mahmood, writing that religion is not absent from politics – what she calls “the public domain” – makes a corollary argument that secularism is not the absence of religion, but, in fact, the rearrangement of religious tenets in such a way as to more readily allow for what she calls imperial liberal governance. Put another way:

Thus, when viewed from the perspective of the current U.S. imperial adventure in the Muslim world, secularism reveals itself in its civilizing and disciplinary aspects rather than as a circumscription of religion or a prophylaxis that immunizes politics from religion within the context of the nation-state. (Mahmood 2006: 330)

Here, the method liberal Americans are said to want to adopt in order to promote and sustain peace with a Muslim world that it deems governable – secularism – takes on these
“civilizing and disciplinary aspects,” in the form of an us-versus-them label about what is modern and appropriate for a country in the twenty-first century.

Mahmood similarly argues against the assumption that secular liberal political rule is morally superior (Mahmood 2006). In her article, she described how a report by the neoliberal-aligned Rand Corporation that warned about the dangers of what it called “traditionalist” Muslims who literally believed that the Koran reflected the word of god closely tracked the launch of a United States government-led initiative to promote reformist Islam.

…The State Department has decided, at least for the time being, that what is required is secular theology—not power politics. This war of ideological reformation has therefore taken a secular cast, especially if we understand secularism to be not the dissolution of religion but its rearrangement so as to make it more congruent with a certain modality of liberal political rule. (Mahmood 2006: 335)

In closing her article, she issues a call for greater attention to the assumptions that are made under and about secularism, asserting that secularism often involves a form of violence, as evidenced by its association with the aims of US foreign policy during the so-called “War on Terror.” She writes:

My sense is that what is needed in the current moment of political chaos is not so much stringent and pious calls for the reassertion of secularism but a critical analysis of what has been assumed to be the truth of secularism, its normative claims, and its assumptions about what constitutes “the human” in this world. (Mahmood 2006: 347)

Moving toward a definition of secular religion, Mahmood says it would be marked by individual interpretations of religious edicts and texts, in line with a Geertzian definition of religion as comprised of symbols, in such a sense that the religion that results is no longer seen as a threat to
liberal empire. Taking this as a starting point, and heeding her call to critically analyze secularism in its various forms around the world, I will describe work being done by Muslims that often looks “secular” in the Kyrgyzstani context, and is always conflicted and contested.

PEACEBUILDING AND SECULARISM

Mahmood would likely say that the peacebuilding and CVE efforts of Mercy Corps and Search for Common Ground that I observed constituted efforts to secularize religious practice. Surely the postsocialist state of Kyrgyzstan is working to make religious practice in the country more palatable to governance by an ostensibly liberal political state, and the multinational organizations funded by USAID or the British counterpart department, DfID, to include Search for Common Ground and Mercy Corps, are working in the interests of that state. Mahmood would likely call the objectives of these interventions certain forms of secular Islamic theology. Yet, secularism in Kyrgyzstan at the time of my fieldwork was fraught and complicated. The state was comprised of security apparatuses that were often in conflict with religious leaders, and simultaneously had at least some control over the Muftiate, which was, in turn, responsible for regulating all the imams and medressahs in the country. The state banned certain types of political Islam, like Hizb ut-Tahrir, in favor of officially approved interpretations of the religion. In as much as the multinational NGOs I worked with during my fieldwork are promoting secularism, as Mahmood (2006) would suggest, their agenda should be justified by the language of development. The concepts of governance, development, and progress are often closely related, at least in the (neo)liberal conception of the world. But that is not always how development is seen in societies that are meant to benefit from it. Writing about a population in Indonesia and its marginality vis-a-vis a national government with a “development” agenda,
Anna Tsing described a local response to the agenda particular to the population's inhabited lifeworld; development was a ritual carried out by bureaucrats that should be appeased through shamanistic practices, rather than a campaign that should be unquestioningly appreciated as a harbinger of the modern era (1993). Other perspectives link postcolonial state control of a population and a country to technological “development,” in turn criticizing the idea that technologies imported from the West/North will have the intended effect in a different context (Mitchell 2002). Some anthropologists, geographers, and other social scientists have worked with development workers and still emerged very critical of development work as it exists today (Wainwright 2008), particularly when it involves intervention by large, for-profit corporations (Gardner 2012). Others who have closely researched development projects have found that subaltern people can often extract side benefits from projects in ways often unintended by the development workers (Rossi 2004, Mosse 2005, Pigg 1992). Meanwhile, Anand Pandian complicates the concept of virtue in the context of development initiatives, by tracing out the pre-colonial Tamil ideas of the good, in contrast and conjunction with the colonial-era concept of moral improvement being linked with economic development (2009). In all of these important contributions, we see that “development” projects often take on dramatically different effects or interpretations somewhere between the implementors and would-be beneficiaries of the interventions.

Interventions that pursue secular (or governable) Islam as an end are all the more fraught, because the implementors can rarely make such an agenda clear.

PROMOTING SECULAR ISLAMIC PRACTICE
In Kyrgyzstan, one of the people that controlled the Western purse strings for projects that Mahmood would say were promoting a secular Islamic practice was a young Evangelical Christian I will call John. John attended a highly prestigious university in his native country, where he earned a degree in geography, and came to Kyrgyzstan from an earlier diplomatic post in Nigeria. When I asked him what countering violent extremism – CVE – methods worked, in his experience, he was very careful to point out what may seem like an obvious point, but is in fact an important one: there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach that can work to prevent terrorism.

He said:

“I think it’s really important that this work is context-specific, and you’ve got to take, you’ve got to sort of go from global to local, and there are a number of global trends, particularly in ideology, for example. But those will be, this is in terms of understanding the problem, but those will be fused with that local dimension. So I think to more specifically answer your question, I think CVE programming work first needs to be informed by a good understanding of the nature of the problem, and what is currently being done, before programming can then think about what you can improve upon.”

John himself was relatively new to Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, having only been there a few months at this point. As such, he was still trying to wrap his head around what the programming he funded did, and what the problems were “on the ground.” This is likely part of what had brought us together that night, meeting at a restaurant in downtown Bishkek. I can’t ignore the fact that, as he was interested in hearing my thoughts and perspectives on the situation at hand, I was, however slightly, affecting what I was researching by talking with him. That is the nature of anthropology, though, where participation and observation go hand-in-hand.

His description of the only appropriate approach as being a “global to local” approach, where global issues like ideology behind jihadist groups were “fused” with a local dimension, was actually quite a bit more nuanced than other approaches voiced to the public in earlier “War on Terror” rhetoric. (George W Bush’s ‘with us or against us’ declaration comes to mind.) Whether
John said that understanding the “nature of the problem” was a fundamental requirement to appease me as an inquiring anthropologist, because he was relatively new to the local context, or because it was a firmly held commitment, such an objective, I would say, is one that all CVE interventionalists must work much more consistently toward.

This recognition that John shared about the importance of seeking to understand the problem may not sound controversial, but it is. It is an act of something approaching empathy to grant and level of rationality to would-be let alone actual violent extremists who take up arms in the name of promoting their version of jihad. Without agreeing with the objectives of one who resorts to violence to achieve their goals, say, of building a Caliphate, it is nonetheless vital to think about what these objectives might be. This inquiry and recognition should be a fundamental component of any practice intended to prevent extremism or build peace. In a situation even more profound than during the Cold War era, even during McCarthyism, there is a tremendous resistance to granting any level of rationality to those working for a violent jihadist goal. There is good reason for this. Terrorist tactics are revolting and inhumane, and, yet, they are still tactics. It would behoove all who are interested in promoting peace to seek to understand how recruitment of would-be fighters works, what motivates people to join violent jihadist groups, and why these individuals would travel thousands of miles to fight for their goals.

Crucial to future research in this area would be the consideration of individual status and especially status degradation, so relevant in the former Soviet context, where in 25 years an entire society’s global economic and, arguably, social standing has plummeted precipitously. Implicitly, it seems likely that those individuals who experience status degradation or humiliation might be more likely to rebel against social norms by taking up violence, in some cases motivated by a particular interpretation of jihad.
This is not to say one should sympathize with the individuals who are seduced by recruiters to travel to Syria or Iraq to pick up arms in order to fight. We need not sympathize with the goals inherent in wanting to construct a Caliphate. To seek to understand what motivates people to work toward that goal, by itself, is certainly not to support that goal. Yet attempting understanding is absolutely necessary work that must be done in order to learn how to prevent it. Looking at the context of one’s recruitment to a violent military group of any kind has the power to help you consider what possible “push factors” might exist in an individual community, perhaps for an individual group of people within that community, that could motivate people to look for ways out, or alternate narratives to the official discourse. Indeed, a reporter friend of mine who has spent decades both serving in the US military and closely researching and reporting on conflict since the attacks of September 11 told me pointed out to me that now that the Soviet model, example, and funding for political revolution is no more, a particular type of interpretation of jihad has taken up root. “What flag do they have to fly?” he asked, rhetorically, apparently referring to the aggrieved would-be rebels, who might be living in a highly repressive context, or see all around them the erosion of social norms that existed during the socialist era. Elsewhere I mentioned the concept of bardak (chaos), and how it is often associated with purportedly democratic reforms after independence of Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian states (Nazpary 2002), and, in a certain time frame, Russia itself. Bardak has not left Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan, as a dominating paradigm for many, as these countries do not have the natural resources to speak of that might fund a “trickle-down” economy to the extent that Kazakhstan, much of Russia, and even Turkmenistan does. With a profusion of societal chaos comes visible alcoholism, theft, and other distasteful social phenomena which religiously doctrinal individuals strongly and effectively condemn.
POTENTAIL PUSH FACTORS

Three potential push factors identified in this research can be related to three sets of assumptions. These three factors – lack of religious education, economic problems, and ethnic marginalization – are associated with very different philosophic and pragmatic approaches to countering violent extremism. Primarily, those approaches would be religious instruction, economic aid or development, and social cohesion programs. Organizational implementers of peacebuilding and CVE projects in the country face a very real decision of which push factor or factors to highlight when developing a plan to promote peace and mitigate further radicalization and conflict. Based on over a year of ethnographic field work and dozens of interviews with members of civil society and the religious community, my research highlights the assumptions interveners make about radicalization in the region. Of course, it is very possible that some version of multiple push factors can each play a role in an individual’s story. That said, I sometimes find it useful to look at these push factor explanations separately, for better understanding of not only the assumptions that are made in narratives of radicalization, but also in narratives of CVE, peacebuilding, and deradicalization projects used in theories of change.

Although I am referring to push factors that could compel Kyrgyzstani individuals toward extremism in a religious Islamic context, and, more specifically, in the context of planning or embarking on travel to Syria and Iraq with the intent of joining the Islamic State or Jamaat al-Nusra, I believe these apparent “push factors” may relate to other forms of political militancy, as well. Focusing on violence coincident with what is often called Islamic radicalism or fundamentalism does not mean that I deny that there are other forms of religiously-motivated radicalization and even militarism outside of Islam. Of course there are, and we don’t have to look far to find examples of Hindu, Jewish, Christian, even Buddhist religious extremism. In
Kyrgyzstan, people also talked even a lot about secular extremism, which, although very interesting, I will leave for another day.

“Poor religious understanding” is often cited as a push factor for radicalization, particularly by members of the local religious community. In Nematullah and Rustam’s accounts of Said’s exodus from Andijon Mahalla, for example, we saw how a shift in Said’s way of speaking and, more importantly, his manner of prayer style marked a departure from the “traditional” Hanafi interpretation of Islam, and into, therefore, a reputedly dangerous space. Often people talked about how those who had turned to violent jihad had had a poor religious understanding. Alisher Haji, the professor at Osh State University, for example, spoke of how proper teaching about Islamic religious practice could counter a “lack of knowledge,” thereby preventing religious radicalization in Kyrgyzstan.

In Kyrgyzstan, it was easy to collect anecdotes and stories about people who were recruited to go fight in Syria who were also economically desperate. A woman I interviewed in March 2016, who runs a women’s religious organization in Osh, cited not only economic desperation, but the related factor of societal marginalization as conditions that made it easier for recruitment to happen. She said:

> Usually, they engage drug-addicted people, alcoholic people, who have nothing here, who are living behind the society. They have no place in their communities. And people who recruit them, she thinks that they come to these drug-addicted, or alcoholic people, and say ‘Look, if you go there, you’ll have a place. You’ll have things, you’ll have a place there. You’ll be a hero.’

This assumption she made, that economically and socially marginalized people are more vulnerable for recruitment, feeds into a third apparent push factor that I will explore shortly: societal marginalization of ethnic minorities or otherwise marginalized, typically subaltern,
communities. Before we get to that factor, though, let’s look more closely at economic marginalization alone.

One story, in particular, stands out, although, in this case, the young man in question did not actually make it to Syria. She told me the following story:

There was one recruitment story at a village in the Kara-Suu District, when one boy was recruited, and received some money from them. He apparently needed to repair his car, which was his only source of income. He was told that he would have to go to Syria and work there if he did not pay back his loan, and he agreed, apparently not knowing much about the situation in Syria. Then, after that, he did some research and understood that this was no good, and he wanted to give back the money, saying that he would not go to Syria. The recruiters came and killed him.

This tragic story is interesting in several ways. First of all, it does seem to represent a recruitment model that feeds on extreme poverty, at least in some cases. But there is more. In Kyrgyzstan, it is very common for young people, and young men in particular, to go to other countries to work and send back remittances. About 1.5 million people from Kyrgyzstan are working in Russia, or one fifth of the population. In better times Turkey was also a work destination, which is perhaps unsurprising given the similarity between the local languages as well as religious practices in Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. In fact, it is not hard to find or at least hear stories about entrepreneurs who would travel through Turkey to Syria prior to the civil war there for either trade or religious training, or both. Istanbul is one of two primary air hubs or gateways that people use when leaving Kyrgyzstan for most other countries, the other one being Moscow. So it is not so incredible to imagine a poorly educated young man thinking that there were legitimate earning possibilities for him somewhere that he would reach by traveling first to Istanbul and then to another, such as Syria.

But the supposed economic push factor for recruitment certainly has its limitations.
As we’ve seen in many places, relatively well-educated, middle-class members of society travel to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State or Jamaat al-Nusra. From Central Asia, we don’t have to look any further then the case of Gulmurod Khalimov, a former military officer in Tajikistan, trained in the United States, who became a top recruiter and commander for the Islamic State, as an example of a man who was accomplished and well-regarded professionally before leaving Tajikistan to join a violent group motivated by a particular interpretation of jihad (Kramer 2016).

So what assumptions do we have to make in order to accept the argument implicit in the claim of an economic marginalization push factor? One corollary assumption is that recruits, or at least a large number of them, are more likely to be enticed into leaving their home and joining extremist groups because of the prospect of pay than ideology. On the one hand, this is an attractive idea, particularly for the political left, or “liberals” in the American understanding of the word. It is an attractive idea, because it assumes that the problems caused by violent extremism can be ameliorated by some act of foreign aid from wealthier countries to poorer ones. This brings us to a related corollary assumption to the concept of an economic marginalization push factor. That is, of course, the belief, very prevalent in policy circles today, that contemporary, globalized capitalism represents the best system to promote satisfaction, purpose, and ultimately inclusion among the world’s population. The metaphorical adage that “Rising tides lift all ships” and the Reaganesque belief in the power of “trickle-down economics” are just two examples of adherence to this pervasive assumption. Most post-colonial models of “development,” like their colonial antecedents, are also reliant on the idea that inclusion in the global capitalist system is essential and fundamental to accomplishing self-actualization and societal harmony. We are told that two countries with McDonald’s restaurants have never gone to war. But, arguably, we do not
have to look very far to see examples of growing dissatisfaction and disappointment with the global capitalist system.

In Kyrgyzstan, it seems likely that certain people have been enticed to join the Islamic State for economic reasons, and this fact alone is convenient for some international organizations and development programs that aim to counter violent extremism by promoting economic development. This convenience I mention is worth considering, for it is always easy to rationalize and explain problems through what we think can fix them. There is a saying that if your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. I feel that it is very appropriate to consider this saying in terms of the economy and CVE, and also to consider how economic development projects often serve interests distinct from those who are expressly intended to benefit – presumably, in this case, the same people that recruiters are targeting.

Economic marginalization often occurs in concert with ethnic marginalization. In Kyrgyzstan, however, that has not always been the case – the minority ethnic Uzbek population, which has almost zero political power, or representation in the law enforcement or education professions, had nonetheless historically been, if anything, more prosperous and successful than the titular Kyrgyz ethnic group in trade. This is no longer the case. In 2010, a political conflict devolved to an interethnic one, and the Uzbeks suffered much more than the Kyrgyz did. Hundreds of thousands of Uzbeks were displaced, at least temporarily. This conflict, and the state-supported Kyrgyz nationalism in Kyrgyzstan that followed, has left the Uzbek population more and more marginalized, less able to be educated in their native language, and more likely to want to flee the country for short-term employment or more permanent migration. These factors have also, apparently, left members of this group comparatively more susceptible to recruitment.
At least that is the perception, among Kyrgyz and some Uzbeks alike. An ethnic Kyrgyz women’s leader who works to prevent recruitment among religious people of both ethnicities in southern Kyrgyzstan explained the phenomenon this way:

“The recruiters think that maybe the Uzbeks dislike the country. Maybe they don’t want to live in Kyrgyzstan and they want to live there, in Syria.

For example, it’s easy to recruit them, because the recruiters can say ‘This is not your country. You can find better opportunity in Syria. Anyway, you will not find those opportunities here.’ It’s easier to recruit Uzbeks than other nationalities.”

This third apparent push factor is related to the second, as I mentioned earlier, but incorporates an acknowledgement of the potential effects of structural discrimination against a group. In the case of the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, this structural discrimination and resultant marginalization seems to contribute to and be dependent on a self-fulfilling prophecy, which claims that ethnic Uzbeks have historically been more religious than ethnic Kyrgyz.

The same woman spoke to this point, too, by saying:

“Usually Uzbeks are more religious than the Kyrgyz population. This is because previously, Uzbek people used to live in urban areas, where they had means of communication, and means of education, so they were more educated in terms of religion. But Kyrgyz people used to live in the mountainous areas, where there was a lack of a like religious education, at that time. But nowadays, a lot of people, let’s say the Uzbek and Kyrgyz, they live together jointly, so they all
have the same opportunities to [access] the means of religious education, so that’s why the people - Kyrgyz and Uzbeks - are nowadays, more or less, the same amount religious.”

The assumptions that we make when we say that ethnic marginalization could lead to greater vulnerability to recruitment are, I believe, more salient than the assumptions that we make about religious education or economic marginalization as push factors. Namely, to conclude that ethnic marginalization leads to vulnerability to recruitment, we really are saying that alienation or lack of a sense of belonging can contribute to this vulnerability. And I think that rings true. In Kyrgyzstan, society is growing more and more nationalistic, by which I mean that more and more people are claiming that the nation belongs to the Kyrgyz. Instead of building houses for the displaced Uzbeks after the conflict in 2010, for example, the city government of Osh erected a massive statue of Manas at the entrance to the city. Manas, the hero of an epic poem revered by many Kyrgyz as historical fact, does not engender feelings of unity or cohesion among the minority Uzbek population. Nationalism is so strong now that many Uzbeks I know are conscientiously speaking Kyrgyz, rather than their native Uzbek, in public places in an attempt to pass as a member of that ethnic group.

This assumption that ethnic marginalization produces an alienation that can lead to vulnerability to recruitment may be particular to the post-Soviet Central Asian context, where, of course, for much of the past century there was tremendous propaganda promoting the myth of a radiant international future. Then again, it may not be. My research demonstrates that nearly everybody who went to Syria or Iraq from Kyrgyzstan with the purpose of jihad had either been to Russia themselves before embarking on a trip to the Middle East, or had a close relative who had been there. I heard many stories of these young men having contact in Moscow with pious Chechens
or Dagestanis, and it’s safe to assume that most, if not all, experienced the virulent anti-Muslim xenophobia and anti-Central Asian racism Russia is now famous for. I think it’s safe to assume that this xenophobic racism so prevalent in post-Soviet Russia, particularly Moscow, can also lead to the kinds of feelings of alienation that recruiters can prey on.

IRBRAHIM, AND OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Among many pious people in Kyrgyzstan, there is a belief that in order to receive quality education about Islam, one must travel to the Middle East, or, in some cases, Pakistan or Iran. For these people, the syncretic version of Islam traditionally practiced in the mountains of present-day Kyrgyzstan is at best insufficient and at worst heretical. These people, who travel to Egypt, Qatar, or the United Arab Emirates to study, typically in post-secondary schools, invariably study Arabic and talk about it as an entry point to a better, truer understanding of Islam. For some who study Islam in distant lands, the language is a primary interest, and religious study comes later.

Take Ibrahim, for example. An ethnic Uzbek man, 37 years old, he lives in Uzgen – a southern city historically mostly Uzbek, very close to the border with Uzbekistan, at the far eastern point of the Ferghana Valley. Uzgen was the site of a fierce conflagration between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 1990, said to have started over a land dispute (Liu 2012). In 2010, when violence ravaged Osh and Jalal-Abad, both cities just down the road but in opposite directions on the Bishkek-Osh highway, Uzgen remained relatively peaceful, according to my research. Perhaps this was because the elders in the city remembered the violence of 20 years ago. Perhaps it was because few Kyrgyz lived in the city. Perhaps it was because, as one person told me, Tablighi Jamaat was active as a peacebuilding religious force in the city.
For Ibrahim, who studied in Saudi Arabia for six years, the Middle Eastern kingdom was a beacon of peace and calm, in stark contrast to the chaos of his home country in the years after independence. Studying in Mecca, Ibrahim told me that his first interest upon arriving in the country in 2003 was the Arabic language.

“For you know that language, you can learn many things, get lots of information,” he said in Uzbek, as his sister translated into English, occasionally relying on Russian to explain difficult passages.

He decided to study in the philology department, he said, rather than in a religion department, because religion “has different directions there and here.” We then got into an exchange where it was difficult to communicate, with my limited Uzbek and his limited Russian language skills.

Ibrahim then said a statement that was easier for his sister to translate and me to understand:

“Saudi Arabia is just one of the most quiet, calm places in the world, in comparison to other countries.”

Ibrahim lived a short drive from Kara-Suu, where the head imam of a major mosque who was accused of preaching sympathetically about the Islamic State had recently been killed in a shootout with police, as described below. He was very much aware, no doubt, of state accusations and allegations against Muslims in the area, and curtailments on the way people lived that resulted. Citing the peace that he experienced in Saudi Arabia, and the freedom “for everyone” to practice the religion, Ibrahim described what an ideal society would look like for him in Kyrgyzstan. He said he wanted to live in a society where freedom to practice Islam without state limitation or interference was sacrosanct. He presented a vision where terrorism was a response to prohibitions on freedom to practice Islam, and one in which he presumed that everybody wanted to practice or would benefit from practicing the religion. He said “In the countries where Islam is
prohibited, there will be terrorism, terrorist actions, bombings, things like that. If, in the countries where Islamic religion is just free for everyone, nobody will prohibit the religion, and then life will be good. If people will get their freedom of religion, nothing bad will happen.”

In this vision, Ibrahim is presuming that everybody wants to and will be Muslim. He said, after all, that in the ideal world the “Islamic religion is just free for everyone.” While this may not be an emphatic endorsement of a caliphate, where the state would presumably require or at least strongly encourage Islamic practice, it is a strong statement about how the state should do nothing to prohibit Islam.

Ibrahim had a firm vision for how society could be improved. He said that Saudi Arabia is one of those countries that has good relations with European countries, and good relations with America. He said that in Saudi Arabia, people can feel free in terms of religion. “If in a country there is peace, people will be just rich, will live in good situations, good conditions,” he said. “If the government just controls the religion of the people, and does not give freedom of religion for the people, the government itself makes people make terrorist actions. The government itself is the cause of those things, not the people. The reason is because the government doesn’t give them freedom. If they just give them freedom there will be no wars or terrorist actions, and there will be peace and if there is peace in the country, that means people can live quietly and they will have freedom, and they will be rich.”

In this view, “peace” seems to be a stand-in for “security,” or at least closely related to it. Ibrahim also uses the Uzbek word for “quiet.” He assumes that everybody wants that style of life, that quiet and peace allow people to create “good situations” and “good conditions.” It is ironic, perhaps, that Ibrahim speaks of Saudi Arabia as a country so intent on protecting religious freedom, but, seen through the lens of the situation for pious Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, the
claim seems a little less odd. Instead, it seems a bit poignant to think that this man simply desires peace and quiet in his life, and a chance to be prosperous, and that he feels the need to call attention to these conditions, which are so notable in their absence in his home environment. He also speaks about “freedom” in an interesting way. The freedom that he yearns for is a freedom to worship his god without state interference. Note that he does not express a desire for state support of his religion, which most observers would identify as existing strongly in Saudi Arabia. For him, the state and religion sound separate, even if that is not the objective case in the country he praised so highly.

Another notable absence in his statements is any recognition that Saudi Arabia is a rich country because of its tremendous natural resource wealth, and relatively low population density. He speaks as if the prosperity of Saudi Arabia is due to the quietude of its citizenry, rather than the opposite. He said “The country is rich, because it has no wars. Everything is ok, and they have good relations with other countries, with European countries and America.” Of course, this vision of reality that he put forth had no recognition of the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran that Americans hear so much about, but that is right now beside the point. What is important to note is that Ibrahim is speaking about peace, security, and religion as closely connected, and emergent when the state gets out of the way.

In Ibrahim’s vision for an ideal society, freedom plays a role, as discussed above. So does democracy. He said that if people have freedom and democracy, “there will be no harm in people’s hearts toward other people or toward other nations. That’s why governments should give freedom to them, so as not to give harm.”

Note that Ibrahim believes that a government must give (religious) freedom to the population in that particular country. He was not espousing a view at the center of the popular American
experience, that citizens must demand and secure freedom from the government that represents
or otherwise has some level of control and regulation over them.

Democracy, in Ibrahim’s vision, is consistent with peace and prosperity. This conception of
democracy is rare in Kyrgyzstan and broader post-Soviet Central Asia, where many associate the
term with the unpredictable poverty and bardak (chaos) that arose in the early- to mid-nineties
(Nazpary 2002), and, according to many, is still in place today.

In written scholarship, the relationship of development and democracy/democratization is a
complex and rich one. While Ferguson famously called development an “anti-politics machine”
(1994), more contemporary theorists talk about development as a political practice (Li 2007). For
Li, development in Indonesia began under the Dutch colonizers as a political act, with
repercussions extending into the postcolonial period. Local indigenous populations, for example,
consequently respond to displacement and subsequent capitalist-era land incursions by waving
flags claiming regional sovereignty to competing groups of people. In this sense, “development”
can introduce capitalist competition to a region, as well as the political competition that often
accompanies it. Supposedly depoliticized international development projects are often used by
local politicians toward their own political advantage. For example, Erica Bornstein shows how
the Zimbabwean state seeks and gains legitimacy through the development work of
internationally funded religious NGOs (2005). In other cases, works concerned with
“development” and oppositional action to it, such as Ajantha Subramanian's work in South India
(2009), demonstrate how democratic ideals such as the pursuit of spatial rights and patronage can
and often do predate modernizing “development” interventions, or even the imposition of the
state itself or a colonial enterprise before it. After structural adjustment, some scholars have
found a situation where governance is privatized by petty administrative intermediaries – indeed,
a “state without civil servants” (Blundo 2006). I am interested in what I presume is a symbiotic relationship between the Kyrgyzstani state and development projects funded by European and American governments. In contrast to the Western-centered idea that development is something that the West or North imposes on “the rest” or the South or the “Third World” (Escobar 2012), a new school of thinkers describe development as “part of the postcolonial predicament” (Yarrow 2011). I tend to agree with this claim, that “development” reflects the realities of a colonialist past, but is not always an imperialist venture. In this light, development can be seen as the “the dominant global denomination of responsibility” (Spivak 1994: 52), and, when thoughtfully and cooperatively carried out, it can be a productive and humane activity.

Mahmood, on the other hand, would not call an intervention designed to make Muslims more governable, through what she might identify as a secularization of permitted Islam, productive or humane. She would likely call it violent. Let’s look a bit further at an example of how things are in Kyrgyzstan.

Is Ibrahim’s vision of an ideal society, where everyone is free to practice Islam, in line with a secularized notion of Islam? On the one hand, he spoke of a governance model that sounded a bit liberal, in terms of the freedom it grants to allow individuals to worship how they want. Key, though, is the point that Ibrahim assumes that everybody will be free to worship Islam how they want. He does not allow for freedom to worship other gods than Allah. This vision could be in line with the role of the Caliph in the ideal society put forth by members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a movement which has been active in and around Uzgen for at least a decade. And yet, it also speaks to a somewhat Hobbesian notion commonly held throughout post-Soviet Central Asia as well as Russia, that the all-powerful state exists very much above its citizenry – at least before the collapse of the Soviet state.
In his celebration of the Saudi state, and that country’s version of religious freedom – for Muslims, at least – Ibrahim reminds us that everything is both global and local today. Calling to mind John’s comments about how CVE programming must be conceived with both the global and local in mind, Ibrahim is using a distant governance model to talk about what is lacking in his own more local sphere. By highlighting the freedom Muslims have to worship in Saudi Arabia, he is drawing a clear contrast to how Uzbek Muslims are treated in southern Kyrgyzstan. Just six months before we spoke, Rashot Kamalov, the de facto imam of the As-Sarakhs mi mosque in nearby Kara-Suu, was convicted for inciting extremism by preaching about a Caliphate. The Global Freedom of Expression project at Columbia University found, upon reviewing this case, that

The case exemplifies the faults of content-based speech analysis. Here, the prosecution and the Court focused solely on whether Kamalov’s statements could be interpreted as propagating the superiority of one religious group, and thus (in their view) being extremist. There was no consideration of the likelihood or imminence of harm stemming from his statements, nor a review of the statements against the accepted interpretation of Islam. Such laws or interpretations of the law can suppress religious expression. (https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/case-of-imam-rashod-kamalov/)

This context of limited religious speech and expression was palpable during the time of my research, including the conversation I had with Ibrahim, himself an imam. As further evidence that Saudi Arabia was a good, peaceful country, and to draw contrast once again to his own environment in southern Kyrgyzstan, Ibrahim mentioned that there is no theft in Saudi Arabia. “There is peace there, and there are no thieves,” he said. “If you put something somewhere, nobody will take it.” He did not talk about the punishments for theft in that country, or criticize the authoritarian state there. The government remained a force for peace, in his description of his six years in the country.
“The government gives a salary to people, just enough for people to exist,” he said. “That is why there is no corruption, because they get enough money from the government.” Again, he did not speak about the very limited number of natural resources in a country like Kyrgyzstan, compared to the Saudi state. His recollections of life there were purely favorable, as if he were looking back on his time there through rose-colored glasses.

When asked if there were Muslims not feeling that they could practice their religion, he said “We don’t have any discrimination; we are free to practice our religion. Even our high officials, they are Muslims.”

Continuing, he said “There is no problem in religion, but there are, for example, in the social media, in the internet, you can find those that are distributing some illegal information about religion, which is followed by the law enforcement agencies in our country - [that] which is forbidden, of course. We are also against these people who are distributing the wrong kind of information.”

When I asked him about non-Muslims, he replied that non-Muslims were welcome everywhere in Saudi Arabia – aside from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He then described how the Koran tells Muslims to respect “people of the book,” namely, Jews and Christians.

“Respect other religions,” he said. “Everyone knows that the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Taliban - those groups just… What they say, it is opposite of what the Koran says. They don’t do what the Koran says.”

For Ibrahim, a set of ideas that might be called Islamic extremism by some does not grow out of Islam; it is a perversion of the religion, involving the “wrong kind of information.” Truth lies in the Koran, he says. In Mahmood’s classification, he is not practicing secular Islam, because, for him, the Koran should be interpreted literally. His version of Islam does not lend itself to easy
liberal imperial governance, it seems, as the authority that he follows is found in the Koran, which he apparently takes as the word of god. Yet, his vision for the ideal government, or the ideal state, is one in which all people are free to practice Islam, as in Saudi Arabia. It is unclear whether he wants the state to support religion, or just get out of the way, but, in either case, the state becomes less important than faith. This vision of the hierarchy of god and government – god on top, government less important – stands in contrast to the liberal imperial state that Mahmood believes the types of interventions USAID and DFID are funding have as their logical end. Ibrahim’s vision is one that Mahmood would argue American Empire intends to moderate. Ibrahim’s story and vision, though, make for an interesting case. As much as he represents a voice that Mahmood would argue the West would want to moderate, or secularize, in that that voice envisions a state where everybody is free to practice Islam how they want, and where faith in god as experienced through a literal reading of the Koran has paramount authority, above the state, Ibrahim also complicates the image of a person who some may go so far as to deem an extremist. Even while he expresses the view that a particular “true” understanding of a religion – Islam – can prevent terrorism, he also advocates for a cosmopolitan exchange – diplomacy – that he says can bring lasting peace. He navigates the tension between these two views – one, in Mahmood’s treatment, extremist, the other cosmopolitan – by reflecting on the technological and communicative advents that have come since the time of the Koran. Even if he thinks that the Koran should be respected as the word of god, he believes that it is also a historical document. He said that it was the religiously “less educated” people who were engaged with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Ibrahim’s own belief is that any conflict can, in the present, be solved by
diplomacy or communication, and he compared this perspective with the perspective of those who subscribe to the beliefs espoused by the Islamic State or al-Qaeda.

“Nowadays, when we have developed technologies and communication possibilities, each country has their consulates, and if there is a problem with another country, they can come together, sit at a table, and discuss the issue,” he said. “In the Koran, it is written about wars that have happened before, when there was no communication means. And, in the Koran, if a person who is, let’s say, less educated - those people who are engaged in war, with the Islamic State and those restricted radical organizations - when they read the Koran, they see that the war is happening, so they think, they misunderstand the Koran, and they think that they have to make war, but nowadays it is different.”

In his nuanced presentation – his longing for a condition where everybody practices Islam, where the state does not interfere, where everybody is educated on religion, and where Muslims and others can conduct honest communication – Ibrahim expresses views that resemble both somebody Mahmood says the Western imperial powers would see as a threat, and somebody who has a distinctly secular view of Islam. Ibrahim’s views represent a tension in the dichotomy that Mahmood puts forth between an observant Muslim who can be seen as a threat to Western Empire and the Muslim who practices a somewhat denuded secular form of the religion, a more “moderate” form, as Mahmood writes. This apparent contradiction is very common in the Kyrgyzstani Muslim context, and surely in broader Islamic contexts around the world, as well. Muslims live in a modern context, just like non-Muslims, and can and do voice their views in a fashion that might be identified as secular.
IBRAHIM AND SECULAR ISLAM

To complicate Mahmood’s depiction of secularism as a paradigm that enacts and inheres in particular types of religious and political dispositions, which, in the moment of the US-led War on Terrorism in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, translates as a subjectivity that allows for easy governance by an imperial liberal government, consider Ibrahim’s story. His version of secularism – secular Islam – makes room for a particular politics that prefers the policies of the Saudi state, where individual freedom to practice Islam is protected by the government. In this form of secularism, the state protects religious freedom – of a particular kind. In my research, I found that this vision of the balance and interplay of religion and politics is very common in Kyrgyzstan among observant Muslims, who believe that security comes from a proper understanding of “traditional,” usually Hanafi, Islam and a state that will not interfere with religion, but does ensure basic order in line with religious-based morals, in line with the fundamental work of judicial systems everywhere. In this view of moral values associated with what I am calling secular Islam, jihad is not typically interpreted or invoked to justify or perpetuate violence, despite its historical scriptural meanings other scholars have identified (Cook 2015). However, those interpretations of jihad that do condone violence also have political underpinnings, and are therefore, I would argue, not exclusive of the domain that we usually call secular. Just as secularism as deployed by American foreign policy at the time of her article, Mahmood writes, “reveals itself in its civilizing and disciplinary aspects rather than as a circumscription of religion or a prophylaxis that immunizes politics from religion within the context of the nation-state” (Mahmood 2006: 330), violent jihad serves a similar, if mirror, set of ends.
Just as Western liberal states’ international military policies are often imbued with the values of the Christian Right (under President Trump, perhaps, as never before), these policies, in as much as they can also said to be secular, share some perspective-based political objectives that formally look parallel to the objectives that motivate the very targets of these military policies: violent jihadists. As Scott Atran writes: “The terrible history of war in the twentieth century is that more than conquest, greed, or even self-defense, all major participating nations justified killing civilian noncombatants on a massive scale to advance or preserve 'civilization.' Jihadism is a transnational social and political movement in the same vein” (2010: xii).

This dissertation tries to make clear that the political, this-worldly life of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan can exist in tension with what some call their religious, “mosque” life. The backdrop of Marxist faith that permeates Kyrgyz society, as a cultural touchpoint if nothing more, was never exclusive of religious practice or identity. Muslims in Kyrgyzstan who may believe in and espouse a vision of authority that Mahmood maintains Western government motives would identify as extremist and non-secular, can and do often hold simultaneous preferences for ideals or objectives that fit nicely into a more cosmopolitan, liberal epistemology that Western government motives would identify as, according to Mahmood, secular. In this way, secularism becomes a term that is more prescriptive than descriptive, saying more about the speaker than the form of practice described. In this context, the terms that I have introduced, secular Islam and Islamic secularism, should be thought of as signifying the deceptively simple point that, depending on what we mean when we deploy the term “secular,” there likely exists a situation, context, or moment when a Muslim, by virtue of the way that she makes sense of the world, can maintain their religious faith and practice while also embodying the set of dispositions that we
are attributing to that term. That is not to throw out the term secularism altogether, but, rather, to embrace a richer and more contextual understanding of it, particularly in the Muslim contexts broadly speaking, and Kyrgyzstani context more specifically. To do this – to understand Muslims’ practices and preferences in political, this-worldly contexts – is, indeed, a fundamental step toward acknowledging and considering what motivates so many Muslims in so many different contexts around the world.

**Afterword**

In the second round of what the ACLU and others call President Donald Trump’s “Muslim Travel Ban,” Kyrgyzstan was added to the list. Announced January 31 and effective February 22, the move would essentially eliminate immigration from the country and five other countries with significant Muslim populations to the United States (Kanno-Youngs 2020).

The tragedy that this action means for Kyrgyzstan-United States relations is not easy to overstate. In The Washington Post, a professor and writing center coordinator at the American University of Central Asia, where I worked as Director of Development in 2009, published an opinion piece about the irony of teaching students who had a Thanksgiving holiday built in to their school years about the supposed values of a country that was explicitly telling them that they were unwanted. “I cannot help but wonder what the administration’s image of Kyrgyzstan is,” she wrote (Eisen 2020).
According to the officially prepared remarks of Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf, the restrictions “do not reflect animus or bias against any particular country, region, ethnicity, race, or religion” (Wolf 2020). That statement, of course, is, in my opinion, preposterous. Clearly, limiting immigrant travel from a particular country or countries is, by definition, reflective of animus and bias toward that country or countries. It certainly does not reflect any favorable or even neutral views toward those countries. Such language seems to me to be a simple disclaimer included in the remarks for citation in the court cases that are sure to come.

The official remarks claim that, rather than Donald Trump’s animus and bias toward Muslims, the reason for the second group of countries being added to the ban list, in Kyrgyzstan’s case, is that the country has certain “deficiencies.” Wolf’s remarks included: “…The current identified deficiencies create vulnerabilities that terrorists, criminals and fraudulent actors could exploit to harm U.S. national security and public safety. As such, travel restrictions are necessary to mitigate the vulnerabilities” (Wolf 2020). Notice that “terrorists” top this list of potential threats to the security and public safety of Americans.

Although according media reports, the State Committee on National Security, or GKNB, of Kyrgyzstan estimates that 800 Kyrgyzstani citizens have traveled to Syria through 2019 to fight for the Islamic State and other militant groups there (Eurasianet 2020), the same article also notes that, according to scholars specializing in the subject, “elites in Kyrgyzstan manipulate the threat of terrorism to fit their domestic agenda, while trying to maximize their interests with
international donors” (Galdini and Iakupbaeva 2016). The truth about the potential threat of terrorists from Kyrgyzstan seems to be elusive, at best.

The Eurasianet article cited above points out that Kyrgyzstan does, indeed, have a fraudulent passport problem. As the Russian-language version of Radio Azattyk, a Kyrgyzstan-based project of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, reports, the plethora of fake Kyrgyzstani passports in the world seem to be linked to corruption schemes among state officials in the country (Радио Азаттык 2019). If true, these allegations will surely not help Kyrgyzstan’s efforts to remove itself from the travel ban. Nonetheless, the fact of the matter is that many, many people in Kyrgyzstan who want to come to the United States will be hurt by the Trump administration’s policy, to say nothing of the United States’ image in the country. Sure enough, the Kyrgyzstan Foreign Ministry issued a statement immediately following the announcement, saying that punishing the country’s citizens contradicted its “understanding of support for a parliamentary democracy” and that the unilateral action had “dealt significant damage to Kyrgyz-American relations” (Reuters 2020).

I would argue that this is precisely what is not the United States does not need right now. The United States cannot go it alone, particularly in its efforts to promote peace and security. Real progress takes cooperation and partnerships, and listening to potential and actual adversaries. In this light, I offer a few concise take-aways from my research on efforts intended to counter violent extremism and build peace in Kyrgyzstan and broader Central Asia.

**Key Takeaways**

Talk to people
I am a firm believer in the power of direct personal interaction to change minds and forge common values through mutual understanding. Mediated dialogue, if facilitated well, can be more effective than informal conversation.

Acknowledge local contexts

As much as violent jihadist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda may purport to be global movements, recruiting through online interfaces and targeting high-visibility sites around the world, those interested in stopping such acts gain nothing by ignoring local contexts that individuals experience and react to. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to ending violent jihad. Looking only at pull factors that draw individuals to embark on a journey to join a violent jihadist group ignores these vitally important local contexts.

Pay attention to push factors

One relevant push factor that seemed to play a role in setting the conditions around some people’s journey to Syria from Kyrgyzstan was ethnic marginalization. While this factor likely cannot easily be corrected by either the state or civil society actors, and is far from predictive in its own right, it is worth considering as a possible destabilizing force in the context of Kyrgyzstan, and surely many other places as well. It seems likely that building an inclusive society where everybody has equal access to opportunity and power would be a very significant step toward preventing violent extremism.
Economic marginalization is another potential push factor that this dissertation discusses, although it is important to note that this condition, also, is far from predictive and certainly not always a relevant factor in an individual’s path to violence. In as much as it ties into ethnic marginalization, however, situations exist where people who feel that they do not have access to meaningful advancement in society may well feel more likely to seek employment elsewhere, including in a conflict situation, particularly if they hear about others who are making a living wage there.

Having “poor religious understanding” was an explanation for pursuing violent jihad that came up time and again in my research. This potential push factor, relevant to the Kyrgyzstani contexts, implies that a “proper” religious understanding can be used to counter a tendency toward violent extremism. Such a claim may rely on a view of religion that contextualizes scripture, and celebrates a pluralist society.

It’s not all foreign influence

An evaluator at a small Washington area consultancy that focuses on work in the countering violent extremism arena, whom I will call Margaret, recently told me that the clients she has worked with who used to be interested in CVE are now all instead funding projects on foreign influence instead. “Well, all of our clients who were interested in CVE are now switching to only caring about ’foreign influence,’” Margaret told me. I asked whether this change seemed to be coming from local governments or donors. She said “It’s not local governments. It is all USG policy driven top down,” referring to the United States Government. While foreign influence certainly plays a role in many security situations, a shift away from
considering or even acknowledging local drivers of dissatisfaction and political or religious radicalization feels very short-sighted. In the Kyrgyzstan context, for example, my research revealed that the ethnic marginalization was likely a major factor that made Uzbeks more likely to be recruited to fight in Syria than Kyrgyz. While there are certainly other factors at play, and the vast majority of ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, of course, are not at risk of being recruited, I contend that the history of marginalization and relative lack of opportunity for ethnic Uzbeks in the country to advance in official or civil society – or even to become police officers in the country – may well make some very few individuals more likely to look for alternative modes of existence, which can include run-of-the-mill economic migration to Moscow or, in rare instances, journeying to Syria to work or even fight. I fear that with a growing focus on malign foreign influence and concomitant decrease in attention to “homegrown” extremism may inadvertently cause domestic causes of instability to be overlooked or ignored.

Economic migration

Many of the accounts of people journeying to Syria from Kyrgyzstan involved families that had already participated in economic migration to Russia, typically Moscow. While this potential push factor is surely not predictive, other researchers conducting interviews on the subject have identified that women who are married to economic migrants may be especially vulnerable (International Crisis Group 2016).

Media deficits
The conspiracy theories that Eldiyar gave voice to in this dissertation, framed around the kernel of truth that now-deceased Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was held by United States forces in Iraq, and mysteriously released from custody and that, somehow, the United States must be behind the formation of the Islamic State, or control it, are born in an environment where accurate media reports are hard to find. The historical record, which says that al-Baghdadi was released from United States custody in Iraq on December 8, 2004, years before the Islamic State formed (McCants 2015), is not a factor in Eldiyar’s understanding of the story. A similar dearth of information in rural Kyrgyzstan about attacks at the Ataturk Airport in Istanbul three days prior was evident in my discussions with Nematullah and his father, Rustam. As Rustam told me, the people in the community where they live do not have time to watch the television, or otherwise consume news, and, as a result, many of facts around violent extremism and the situation in, say, Syria, are not available to them. Education about the real costs and consequences of participating in violent jihad, by a reliable and trusted source, seems like it would be very useful in this context.

While not providing a blueprint for countering or preventing violent extremism, these six elements should, in my opinion, be considered in any effort to do so. This work is exceedingly challenging, of course, but also very necessary if we are to improve the world and create anything resembling a lasting peace. It is an effort that may never be completely successful, but one that must be taken on and pursued whole-heartedly if we are to collectively advance as an inclusive society.
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