

# Negotiating Gender in Central Asia

The Effect of Gender Structures and  
Dynamics on Violent Extremism



Editors  
Peter Knoope & Seran de Leede



CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM

# **Negotiating Gender in Central Asia: The Effect of Gender Structures and Dynamics on Violent Extremism**

**Editors: Peter Knoope and Seran de Leede**

**Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program,  
2022**

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ISBN: 978-0-578-38582-2

Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2022



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## Introduction

### Special Issue: Negotiating Gender in Central Asia The Effect of Gender Structures and Dynamics on Violent Extremism

With estimates ranging from 5,000 to 7,000 men and women migrating to Syria and Iraq from the Central Asian states since April 2013, the region ranks third in supplying foreign recruits for jihadist groups active in the Syrian conflict.<sup>1</sup> Six percent of, or around 620, Central Asian women reportedly are affiliated with the Islamic State (IS).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Central Asian nationals have been involved in attacks outside of the region, including in Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and New York. These developments have contributed to an increased (research) interest in issues around radicalization and the appeal of jihadist groups in Central Asian states. To what extent gender dynamics and dimensions are relevant in understanding violent extremism is, however, less explored or addressed. By adopting a gender-sensitive approach, this Special Issue builds on the work that has been done on the subject so far. It hopes to inspire other scholars to take a similar approach and to generate discussion among professionals working on violent extremism in the region in terms of recognizing the relevance of gender in relation to curbing and preventing violent extremism.

In this Special Issue, Elisabeth Duban, Anara Moldosheva, and Dilbar Turakhanova examine how women's movement away from supportive roles, as well as their demanding an end to persistent violations of their rights and to the patriarchal structures that underpin them cause women to be portrayed as security threats. The authors argue that restricting the space for women's civil-society activism itself is a threat, as women's presence is an essential element of security, and they conclude that curtailing space for women's activism and advocacy ultimately means an increase in instability for all. Elena Kim takes this discussion further by analyzing the links between violent extremism, hostile sexism, and masculinized nationalism using contemporary Kyrgyzstan as a case study. She presents three events that illustrate how the Kyrgyz state promotes nationalist policy and gender politics that condone misogyny and justify the violation of women's rights. Drawing from recent

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing from the updated ICSR dataset in Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12, No. 6 (July 2019): 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

scholarship on the nexus between hostile sexism and violent extremism, she concludes that state-endorsed misogyny can have serious repercussions for national as well as transnational security.

Kathleen Kuehnast argues that an intersectional approach as well as gender analysis may offer a more integrative way to understand the historic and current contexts of violent extremism in the Central Asian region. Expanding the lens to be inclusive of a peacebuilding perspective, her contribution seeks to move beyond the traditional Counter Terrorism (CT) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks that generally leave women invisible in their analyses and to contextualize concerns of extremism with a gendered analytical lens. The paper concludes with the claim that this inclusive approach incorporates research on masculinities and intersectionality as well as the theory and practice of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda, which adds dimensionality to researching the problem of violent extremism that can help analyses of the issue move forward. After all, societal dynamics include, or are even dominated by, gender perspectives and interrelations. Those relations and connected elements, such as masculinity and traditions, determine human behavior and choices up to a point. Manifestations of those dynamics orient our thinking and our understanding of conflicts and violence, either domestically or in the public sphere.

Seran de Leede and Noah Tucker explore in detail the motivating and catalyzing factors that drove Central Asian women towards Daesh. De Leede argues that existing gender structures and the state-condoned subordination of women in a region dominated by a patriarchal culture has shaped women's choices and options in the context of joining Daesh in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, she points out that, while there have been many cases of Central Asian women who have ended up in the Islamic State against their own wishes, the assumption that women are passive victims in this regard is an oversimplification of a highly complex issue. De Leede explores several gendered motivating factors and catalyzing dynamics and concludes that awareness of these gendered factors is imperative for understanding the overall trajectory of radicalization and violent extremism in the region. By extension, she argues, these insights can contribute to the optimization of strategies and programs aimed to curtail and prevent violent extremism.

Tucker's contribution provides additional depth and nuance to this topic by offering detailed, first-person accounts of five Uzbek women who demobilized from the conflict in Syria, to tell their own stories, and thirteen detailed case studies of women who formerly migrated to Iraq, including those of two women held in Kurdish-controlled camps, as well as a woman imprisoned in Baghdad, Iraq. Tucker points out that the pathways of women in armed groups in the Syrian conflict were extremely diverse, that many had little to do with ideology or traditional "pathways to radicalization,"

and that vulnerability to mobilization to violent extremist groups is often similar to and coincides with other social problems including human trafficking, undocumented migration, domestic violence, and institutionalized inequalities. Tucker concludes that radicalization paradigms focused primarily on ideology and progression on a “pathway to radicalization” should not be the primary focus of analysis in explaining mobilization to armed Islamist groups or a central focus in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programming for returnees. Instead, complex combinations of other factors on both the personal and the group or community level should be considered.

In the final contribution, Jacob Zenn discusses Kazakhstan’s repatriation program, Operation Jusan. Zenn describes and analyzes the operation and examines the extent to which this precedent may be applicable to other countries. He concludes by explaining why Kazakhstan repatriated Kazakh foreign fighters and their families when most countries in the world did not and argues that, while the Kazakhstan case may be exceptional, certain aspects can still be adopted by other countries facing similar issues. Of note concerning this operation is the portrayal of women as harmless victims, which reinforces gendered assumptions about women as docile and passive. It is unclear to what extent this framing is the result of subconscious gender-stereotyping of women in terms of violence, or whether it is instead part of a calculated strategy to reinforce ideas of women as powerless and to push them back to a traditional, submissive role. In any case, the narrative limits the acknowledgment of, and adequate response to, the wide-ranging factors and dynamics that pushed women towards groups such as Daesh in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

This Special Issue paints a picture that confirms a general trend of a reduction of political space in the region, especially for women. A call for the return to traditional values combined with the continued lack of religious freedoms and space increasingly leads to a deterioration of the position of women in society, shaping women’s individual options and choices—including, in the context of violent extremism, options and choices in respect of joining Daesh. While domestic violence, misogyny, and a culture of repression of women do not (directly) push women towards violent ideologies, women can end up in (support of) violent extremist groups due to the impact of these phenomena on their lives. The collection of essays in this Special Issue points out that the recognition of the complexity of this matter is an important element for any policy targeted at the prevention and curbing of violent extremism in the region. Simply taking the ideology as a point of

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<sup>3</sup> As also pointed out by Jessica Davis in *Women and Modern Terrorism* in relation to Russian responses towards Chechen female suicide bombers. See Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 92–93.



reference will not guide an effective approach. In addition, repression by the state, including state-condoned misogyny, produces an outcome that generates the securitization of parts of the population that opposes the repression, denying them the space to have their voices heard. At the same time, this paralyzes and silences those actors that can play important roles in peacebuilding and efforts aimed at the prevention of violent extremism.

There are many reasons why inclusiveness, using the perspectives of both men and women, in any research and policy approach is beneficial. This Special Issue demonstrates that in the domain of security, this is even more the case because exclusion is damaging from many angles. The structural exclusion of women harms at least half the population; it allows for strategic advantages of violent actors; it alienates those organizations working for (gender) equality and peace from societal dynamics; and it ignores the real motives and catalyzing factors that lead to counterproductive policies and approaches. This collection of essays demonstrates that, violence, hyper-masculinity, and misogyny are part of the same toxic mixture that can produce an environment conducive to violent extremism. Ignoring this, especially in terms of policy, may very well increase the problem. Instead, exploring, recognizing, and understanding specifics about gender norms and structures and how violent extremist groups benefit from and exploit these may prove a more useful approach.

Editors

Peter Knoope

Seran de Leede

# The “Shrinking Space” for Women in Civil Society in Central Asia:

## Gender and Security Perspectives

*Elisabeth Duban, Anara Moldosheva, and Dilbar Turakhanova*

Women’s equal right to political and public participation is a prerequisite to security. Despite commitments to the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both states have failed to create enabling environments for women’s civil society activism and to counter hostility directed at women activists. Moreover, the states themselves have condoned and even perpetuated anti-gender attacks on women’s (feminist) civil society organizations and movements. This article examines how the accusations levied against feminist activists as being “foreign,” “outside,” and a “threatening” force stems from notions that such women are overstepping their traditional roles. When women move away from supportive roles, demand an end to persistent violations of their rights, and dismantle the patriarchal structures that underpin them, they are portrayed as security threats. In fact, restricting the space for women’s civil society activism, in all its forms, is the genuine threat to security.

### Introduction

In March 2020, as the world was becoming aware of the threat of a newly-discovered coronavirus, women’s groups were organizing peaceful rallies to mark International Women’s Day. These groups shared common goals in their demand for greater attention to persistent gender inequalities. In cities as diverse as Baku,<sup>1</sup> Bishkek,<sup>2</sup> Istanbul,<sup>3</sup> Madrid<sup>4</sup> and Paris,<sup>5</sup> women were met

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<sup>1</sup> “Police Briefly Detained Dozens At Feminist Rally In Azerbaijan, Release Them Outside Capital,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 9, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/police-briefly-detained-dozens-at-feminist-rally-in-azerbaijan-release-them-outside-capital/30477692.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Masked Men Attack Women’s Day Demonstration In Kyrgyzstan,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 8, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/hooligans-attack-women-s-day-demonstration-in-kyrgyzstan/30475849.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Turkish Police Fire Tear Gas to Disperse International Women’s Day March in Istanbul,” *Haaretz*, March 8, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/turkish-police-block-international-women-s-day-march-in-istanbul-1.8640200>.

<sup>4</sup> Kristen Achteelik, “Can feminists be blamed for Corona?” Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, The Gunda-Werner-Institute, June 26, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2020/06/02/can-feminists-be-blamed-for-Corona>.

<sup>5</sup> “French feminists join forces for women’s day as protesters tear gassed,” *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, March 9, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20200308-french-feminists-join-forces-women-s-day>.

unexpectedly with open hostility. Such aggression expressed itself along a continuum, including harassment, violent attacks, the use of tear gas, and detention by the police. While these reactions were largely condemned, justifications quickly followed that the Women’s Day demonstrations had not, in fact, been sanctioned, and that the rallies posed a public health risk in the context of the spreading COVID-19 pandemic. However, underlying each of these events was a subtext that women’s rights were themselves the “real” threats. These sentiments were expressed most overtly by a Spanish conservative and extreme-right party leader who suggested that feminism was to blame for mobilizing thousands of women to take to the streets where they risked spreading a potential contagion.<sup>6</sup>

The characterization of women activists and the rights they are claiming as dangerous and threatening did not arise with the COVID-19 pandemic, but can be viewed as part of a larger trend of anti-gender movements that seems to be increasing around the globe. Extensive studies that examine anti-gender movements and describe a phenomenon of gender or anti-feminist backlash, have mainly focused on Europe and Latin America. This research tends to examine the forces behind such movements and suggest strategies to counter them. Recent scholarship argues that anti-gender movements (or, indeed, movement if one is to argue that there is a single overarching transnational movement), must be analyzed in the context of democratic backsliding, “the general decline in freedom around the world, [and] in particular the shrinking space for civil society.”<sup>7</sup>

This article reflects on how in Central Asia, contrary to commitments toward women, peace, and security, there has been a failure to create enabling environments for women’s civil society activism in all its forms and to counter negativity and hostility towards women activists. Women’s civil society organizations (CSOs) in Central Asia—specifically Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—have increasingly come under attack from conservative and nationalist factions who accuse them of undermining “traditions,” “the family,” and the *status quo*. Similar tendencies are echoed in how governments interact with feminist CSOs; at best, they are not engaging with them as partners, and at worst, they accuse them of being “foreign agents” or outside forces—opposing the state agenda. As has been seen in other countries, anti-gender movements in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan construe specific types of women’s CSOs and the positions they advocate for as threats and, by implication, as undermining security. In this way, such anti-gender trends reduce the space for women’s activism, and this reduction is, in fact, the genuine threat to security.

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<sup>6</sup> Ahtelik, “Can feminists be blamed for Corona?”

<sup>7</sup> Damjan Denkovski, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz, *Power over Rights; Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement*, Volume I, (London: Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, March 2021), 10.

This article explores several interrelated themes: the post-Soviet development and evolution of women's movements and women's CSOs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda to support women's participation and activism; and, against the background of democratic backsliding, how space for women's CSOs is not necessarily shrinking, but is certainly restructuring and shifting.

### **Women's Right to Participate in Political and Public Life**

International law establishes the right of women to participate on equal terms with men in the public and political lives of their countries. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),<sup>8</sup> which guarantees equal rights to be elected to and to hold public office; to participate in the formulation of government policy and its implementation at all levels of government; and to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations (Article 7), reiterates the central tenet that national development, welfare, and peace itself require the maximum participation of women in decision-making.

At the end of the Cold War, the participants of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 recognized that maintaining peace and security at the global, regional, and local levels is critical for the protection of the human rights of women and girls.<sup>9</sup> The resulting Platform for Action drew attention not only to issues of women in armed conflict as a critical area of concern, but also highlighted broader notions of "political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security."<sup>10</sup>

A second important feature of the Fourth World Conference on Women was the reiteration that women must fully participate in decision-making and have equal access to power in order to achieve equality, development, and peace.<sup>11</sup> The Beijing Declaration explicitly recognizes the vital participation and contribution of "all actors of civil society, particularly women's groups and networks and other non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, with full respect for their autonomy, in cooperation with Governments"<sup>12</sup> in implementing the actions outlined in the consensus documents.

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted a series of resolutions that have solidified the notion that both conflict and security have gender dimensions. The adoption of UN Security Council

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<sup>8</sup> Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan ratified CEDAW without reservations, in 1997 and 1993, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women; Beijing, September 4–15, 1995*, (New York: United Nations, 1996), 6, paragraph 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, 16, para. 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, 9, para. 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, 10–11, para. 20.

Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) places women's rights and gender equality at the center of international peace and security. UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions form the globally recognized Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. The resolutions directly called for increased participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels, referring to "conflict resolution and peace processes."<sup>13</sup> Implicitly, civil society organizations are one way to enhance women's participation.

Security Council Resolutions foresee a dual role for civil society organizations as providers of expertise in governmental processes, through consultation, and as implementers of measures to support women and girls.<sup>14</sup> It can be argued that from this point, the commitment to increase women's participation is no longer limited to formal peace negotiations, but refers to much broader social, political, and economic decision-making processes that underpin security and stability. As part of a human rights agenda, this could include, for example, state engagement with civil society on such diverse issues as physical security, economic security, environmental security, and access to education and health services.

UN Security Council Resolution 2121 (2013) urges member states not merely to interact with CSOs, but to actively support the development and strengthening of local civil society networks.<sup>15</sup> The Security Council has recognized that "violence and intimidation, lack of security and lack of rule of law, cultural discrimination and stigmatization, including the rise of extremist or fanatical views on women..."<sup>16</sup> presents obstacles to women's ability to exercise their rights and thus, governments are called on to counter negative societal attitudes about women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. Presumably, by highlighting the negative impacts of "extremist views," the Security Council, whether intentionally or not, signals that measures are needed to counter the influence of anti-gender movements that argue against women's fundamental rights.

The most recent UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security extends the role of member states further, beyond support to the creation of "safe and enabling environments for civil society," which includes formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, and human rights defenders. Governments are urged to ensure that civil society actors can carry out

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<sup>13</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000), S/RES/1325 (2000), October 31, 2000, para. 2.

<sup>14</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 1889 (2009), on Women, Peace, and Security, S/RES/1889 (2009), October 5, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 2121 (2013), on the situation in the Central African Republic, S/RES/2121 (2013), October 10, 2013, para. 11.

<sup>16</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1889, para. 1.

their work “independently and without undue interference...and to address threats, harassment, violence and hate speech against them.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Women’s Civil Society Organizations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan**

The Fourth World Conference on Women has been characterized as a critical point in the creation of an international women’s movement, but more specifically as the initiation of the development of women’s CSOs in the former Soviet countries, occurring just four years after they declared independence. This perception is not entirely accurate as feminist experiences and women’s movements that had previously existed in the Eastern Bloc, and also in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, were largely ignored in the discussions held in Beijing.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the classification and definitions of a “civil society organization” and “non-governmental organization” in Central Asia have themselves been very much influenced by Western and donor-centric conceptions of what constitutes the third sector within a democratic state. Thus, some models of civil society have been privileged over others, and the Soviet predecessors to such organizations are often not acknowledged.<sup>19</sup> This article does not discuss the conceptualization of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in depth, but rather adheres to a general alternative approach, in which civil society is not limited to formal organizations, but also encompass diverse interactions in which “citizens are empowered to express their needs and outline their priorities.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the descriptions of women’s civil society also refers to women’s and feminist movements and actions more broadly.

Like the rest of post-Soviet Central Asia, the modern women’s movement in Kyrgyzstan dates from Soviet times—within the early days of women’s emancipation and “throwing off the veil” and later programs for women’s professionalization in a wide range of economic and social sectors. As is discussed later, women in Kyrgyzstan were drawn into international campaigns for peace and development during the *perestroika* period. Then, from the mid-1990’s, a new wave of women’s

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<sup>17</sup> UN Security Council, Resolution 2493 (2019), on Women, Peace, and Security, S/RES/2493 (2019), October 29, 2019 para. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Pauline Aronson, “Кристен Годси: ‘Америка единолично переписала историю феминизма: это был классический империализм’” [“Kristen Godsey: ‘America Single-handedly Rewrote the History of Feminism: It Was Classical Imperialism’”], *Colta*, September 30, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/society/25536-polina-aronson-intervyu-kristen-godsi-zhenschiny-emansipatsiya-sotsializm-dekoder?fbclid=IwAR3AGZY8GmCRq5i3xqaENZH--GxuF--RyYqDChhTt1Wa28cv0UuRZbKFe-E>.

<sup>19</sup> Janice Giffen and Lucy Earle with Charles Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia* (Oxford: The International NGO Training and Research Centre (ITRAC), 2006, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08c3de5274a27b200108f/R7649-report.pdf> (accessed July 22, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Giffen and Earle, with Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*, 8.

activism began around the Beijing Conference that led to the establishment of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of different kinds, at the local and national levels. The women's movement in Kyrgyzstan exhibits some of the tendencies seen more widely in civil society—for example, professionalization, the gradual focusing on particular “niches,” and the creation of a variety of thematic networks, many of them linked to or sponsored by international donors. Some women's groups have proven more popular with donors—fitting international/Western norms or programmatic priorities; others may be supported in a more limited way or for diplomatic reasons. In the pursuit of development and sustainability, many women's groups practice self-censorship, focusing on concrete tasks where consensus with the donors can be achieved and avoiding raising more uncomfortable ideological or political issues.

The government of Kyrgyzstan has actively engaged with certain types of women's CSOs—following practices inherited from Soviet times—while avoiding contact with other organizations. The environment for civil society was relatively liberal throughout 1995–2005, but with the political turbulence after, various threats to NGO activity arose. In particular, the increase in nationalist feelings and pressures to conform to certain kinds of religious or “traditional” behavior have impacted negatively on the physical safety and freedom of expression of women activists. Nonetheless, the state has also implemented certain reforms that increase women's political participation—for example the adoption of gender quotas for the national parliament in 2007 and for local elections in 2019. The promotion of restrictions on civil society activity that took place after 2010 were associated with two issues. First, forces in and around government wanted to create controls on what external donors could support within Kyrgyzstan; second, they linked the promotion of new controls on civil society with an attack on particular groups—including radical women activists and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) communities. On the other hand, the women's movement has continued to campaign in many areas of social and economic policy and has achieved limited, but important, successes.

The women's movement in Tajikistan is comprised of women-led NGOs and NGOs working on women's rights and gender equality. Both were active in the advancement of the gender equality agenda and women's rights in Tajikistan. They have played a pivotal role in establishing the national machinery for the advancement of women (a strategic objective of the Beijing Platform for Action) and policy and legal frameworks on gender equality.<sup>21</sup> Headed by so-called women-activists, who

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<sup>21</sup> Shirin Akiner, “New parameters for gender relations; Between tradition and modernity: the dilemma facing contemporary Central Asian women,” in *Post-Soviet Women: from the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. Mary Buckley Mary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 293.

were previously active in government, the communist party, trade-unions, women's committees, and academia in the Soviet Union, or who had retired from high-level positions during independence, took leadership roles in the process of promoting women's rights and the gender equality agenda at the national level of the new independent state and used their positions to influence high-level decision-making on this matter.<sup>22</sup> Some of their achievements include advocating for a special Decree on the advancement of the role of women in society adopted by the President in 1999; drafting the first State Program on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women adopted in 2001, and the Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Men and Women and Equal Opportunities for their Implementation in 2005. After almost ten years of lobbying, the Law on the Prevention of Family Violence was adopted in 2013.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to such NGOs' activities at the national level, the women's movement at the local level was mainly focused on the provision of various services to women affected by the civil war, ranging from dissemination of humanitarian aid and recovery to educational, social, and community-based services to aid women to attain higher social and economic status and to address problems related to violence against women.<sup>24</sup> Both national and local level NGOs later united into the coalition From *De-Jure* Equality to *De-Facto* Equality, which was formed with the primary objective of drafting alternative reports on the implementation of CEDAW to those submitted by the government of Tajikistan and, later, for networking. This coalition functions under a memorandum signed by all the NGOs, but their gatherings and communications are not formalized. They do not actively fundraise for the implementation of joint projects apart from drafting CEDAW shadow reports and assessments of the integration of a gender perspective into the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

While noting their many achievements, it should also be acknowledged that these NGOs and women-activists avoided linking themselves explicitly with feminism and calling themselves

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<sup>22</sup> *National Review of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (1995) within the scope of implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000) in the context of the twenty-fifth anniversary in 2020 of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (Switzerland: The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2015 (2014)).

<sup>23</sup> Alla Kuvatova, "Gender Issues in Tajikistan: Consequences and Impact of the Civil War," in *Hommes armés, femmes aguerries: Rapports de genre en situations de conflit armé*, ed. Fenneke Reysoo (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2001), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Parviz Mullojanov, "Civil Society and Peace Building," in *Politics of Compromise The Tajikistan Peace Process, Accord*, eds. Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes (London: Conciliation Resources, 2001), 63; Firdoos Dar, "Changing Legal Environments for Civil Society Organisations the Role of NGOs in Independent Tajikistan," *The International Journal of Non-For-Profit Law* 15, Issue 1 (March 2013), [https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/the-role-of-ngos-in-independent-tajikistan#\\_ftn1](https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/the-role-of-ngos-in-independent-tajikistan#_ftn1).



feminists. They preferred using terms as “women’s rights” and “gender equality”<sup>25</sup> and avoided sensitive topics such as sex education or sexual relations<sup>26</sup> to ensure that their activities and proposals aligned with those of the state. The state’s initial focus was on liberal feminism or ensuring equality of rights between women and men and equal opportunities in law and policy, and, only later, developing into an explicitly nationalist and anti-feminist ideology. Women’s NGOs avoid engaging in political activities such as national-level advocacy through open letters challenging the government on its actions that have an anti-feminist focus or support gender stereotypes; educating the public about feminism as a political project and its aims; or organizing marches and peaceful gatherings.<sup>27</sup> Thus, these NGOs have mainly tried to “adjust” their activities and narratives to the state’s focus and ideology instead of challenging them.

In their routine actions, such as the drafting of shadow reports, women’s NGOs usually begin by enumerating the achievements of the state, and, during sessions with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, avoid open criticism of the state. By way of illustration, when International Women’s Day was renamed Mother’s Day in Tajikistan in 2009, the President noted in his decree that the purpose of this holiday was to honor the “woman-mother,” the creator of life, educator of generations, mentor for young boys and youth on the path of kindness, and as the sustainable foundation of the family. He further noted that the tradition of honoring mothers dated back more than three thousand years when, during the spring, Aryan men paid respect to their wives and mothers.<sup>28</sup> Neither the coalition nor women’s NGOs reacted publicly to this change and redefinition of the celebration as nationalist and anti-feminist. Moreover, during events organized for women and by women, NGOs call for women’s leadership and focus their success stories, on the one hand. On the other hand, they redefine the official narrative about women’s role as wives and mothers, using such slogans as “a happy woman is a happy nation,” and openly declaring that such terms as “discrimination,” “violence,” and “women’s rights,” should be avoided because they believe in changing the mindset of a woman who has problems to that of a “happy woman.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Vuxton, *Гражданское Общество в Центральной Азии: Преодолевая Кризисы Постсоветского периода* [*Civil Society in Central Asia: Overcoming the Post-Soviet Crisis*], (Bishkek: V.R.S. Company, 2017), 150.

<sup>26</sup> Harris notes that topics like sex were so strongly taboo that the heads of women’s movements warned her not to discuss or conduct research on this topic. Colette Harris, “State business: gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan,” *Central Asia Survey* 30, Issue 1 (April 2011): 97–111.

<sup>27</sup> To be fair, tools such as marches and peaceful gatherings are not used in Tajikistan, because State approval is required to hold such events. At the same time, there is no evidence that the women’s movement has ever planned such marches or submitted requests for their approval.

<sup>28</sup> В Таджикистане отмечают День матери [Tajikistan celebrates Mother’s Day], *Information Agency REGNUM*, March 6, 2010, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://regnum.ru/news/society/1260543.html>.

<sup>29</sup> For example, in 2020, the EU supported a two-day event on March 7–8. One of the days was dedicated to the discussion of social and economic empowerment of women in Tajikistan. On the second day, the EU supported

## **Feminist Critique of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda**

Whereas historically, security has been understood in terms of state security, a gender approach to security, the core of the WPS agenda, is a shift in perspective from wars and conflicts between states, or within states, to a range of other threats experienced by individuals, including gender-based violence, poverty, and ecological destruction.<sup>30</sup> However, as it has played out in practice, issues of economic and social rights are absent from the WPS agenda, although these are areas in which women experience tremendous insecurity (e.g., violations of their rights to decent work and to sexual and reproductive health).

While the evolution of the WPS agenda is largely viewed as having had success in advancing the concept of inclusive security, feminist scholars argue that none of the resolutions address the root causes of conflict, and, therefore, do not “confront the structural roots of gender inequalities, including entrenched understandings of patriarchy, masculinity and militarized power.”<sup>31</sup> In contrast, a feminist approach suggests a new way of thinking; one that views “gender security as a route to societal change.”<sup>32</sup>

Women’s participation under the WPS agenda has been almost uniformly interpreted as women taking part in or joining militarized structures where historically they have been underrepresented, but it has not necessarily brought about any changes to those structures. As one scholar notes, “the power structures that feminists want to dismantle are the very structures that condition women’s entry into decision-making.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, the participation pillar of the WPS agenda has come to mean inviting a limited number of women into existing power and security structures, but not dismantling and establishing entirely new ones. The militarized approach to security has become normalized.

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the Forum “Ya” (I) conducted by Idea (a private company). This forum is an annual event for women aimed at advancing the role of women in Tajikistan through exposure to success stories of women from different professional backgrounds to motivate participants and to expand opportunities for establishing and strengthening collaboration between women from different countries of the world. The official slogan of this forum is “A happy woman is a happy nation.” (www.forumya.tj).

<sup>30</sup> Tom Moylan, “Gender Security as a Category of International Politics,” *E-International Relations*, March 12, 2013, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/12/gender-security-as-a-category-of-international-politics/>.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Jansson and Maud Eduards, “The politics of gender in the UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18, (2016): 592.

<sup>32</sup> Jansson and Eduards, “The politics of gender in the UN Security Council resolutions,” 593.

<sup>33</sup> Anna Nikoghosyan, “Co-Optation of Feminism: Gender, Militarism and the UNSC Resolution 1325,” *Feminist Critique* 1 (2018): 7–18, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.52323/fc1-1>.

Feminists have argued that gender security, as set forth in the UN Security Council's resolutions, allows and legitimizes certain actions of the state (those which support the ongoing process of militarization) and excludes others (for example, they silence anti-war and anti-militarist critique).<sup>34</sup> The agenda of “white heterosexual feminism” is reproduced in the WPS agenda, without questioning capitalism, neo-colonialism, or imperialism and without integrating intersectional and postcolonial feminist approaches.

The resolutions that form the WPS agenda are premised on the notion that women's participation should be increased because women are “natural” peacemakers and would bring a “feminizing” influence. Women's contributions, therefore, are expected to concern the care and protection of other women and girls as a vulnerable population, and this notion then reinforces the non-political nature of women's participation. This conservative and traditional notion of women's contributions to security provides a possible explanation for the backlash and hostility towards women's CSOs when such organizations are perceived to be overstepping what is considered “acceptable” under the participation pillar, meaning a role that does not involve questioning or challenging long-standing and masculinised structures and approaches.

The two factors—participation and civil society engagement—are especially critical for the development and implementation of national action plans (NAPs) on women, peace, and security.<sup>35</sup> Monitoring of the implementation of the WPS agenda at the national level indicates that the participation pillar is the one most often taken up by states. However, “women's participation in decision-making processes remains *pro forma*, without meaningful inclusion or diversity.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in addition to the gap between policy and implementation, pushback from members of the Security Council to the language contained across the resolutions on women's civil society organizations and women's human rights defenders is both increasing and becoming more explicit in “direct contrast to the civil society-centered and rights-based framework that feminist activists and women's organizations advocating for UNSCR 1325 had originally championed.”<sup>37</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that the UN Secretary-General in a report presented on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of UNSCR 1325 mentioned such trends as “[r]ecord levels of political violence targeting

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<sup>34</sup> Nikoghosyan, “Co-Optation of Feminism.”

<sup>35</sup> E.g., LSE Pro Bono Matters with the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, *Making the Normative Case: Implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 as Part of a Legal Framework on Women, Peace and Security*, (London: London School of Economics, 2015): 43, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2016/SC1325ProBono.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Senem Kaptan, *UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years; Perspectives from Feminist Peace Activists and Civil Society*, (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, 2020), 26.

<sup>37</sup> Kaptan, *UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years*, 8.

women” and the “rise of misogynistic, sexist and homophobic speech by political leaders in recent years” as threats to civic space for women.<sup>38</sup>

### **Women, Peace, and Security in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan**

In 1987, an international seminar was conducted in Bishkek on the role of women in peace and security. The previous year, antiwar rallies had been held in all republics of the USSR, including the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic under the auspices of the UN International Year of Peace, in which organizations from the women's movement of each country were directly involved. The seminar was organized at the level of the Central Committee of Trade Unions of Kyrgyzstan with the active involvement of the national branch of the Committee of Soviet Women. The seminar brought together dozens of women from various countries of the globe, including representatives of the women's anti-war movement. The program included meetings, discussions, and visits to enterprises and social and cultural sites.

This seminar was also part of the World Congress of Women (the ninth such event in the USSR) of the supreme body of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a pro-communist institution founded in 1945. The congress had the slogan “By 2000—No More Nuclear Weapons! For peace, equality, development.”

In 2000, however, history “began again” with the adoption of UNSCR 1325, proclaimed in official statements as the “first time” women's role in peace-making and peacekeeping had been recognized. A new historical narrative was developed, whereby women's rights and gender equality were put at the heart of international peace and security policy. Accordingly, in 2020, women's organizations in Kyrgyzstan took part in celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Resolution's adoption.

Kyrgyzstan is a recognized leader in women's participation in Central Asia, becoming the first country in the region to elect a woman president as well as the first to draft a NAP on the WPS agenda in 2012 (in accordance with UNSCR 1325).<sup>39</sup> To date, Kyrgyzstan has adopted two successive NAPs (with a third awaiting approval), each very similar in structure and focus to those adopted in Tajikistan.

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<sup>38</sup> UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on Women and peace and security,” October 9, 2019, S/2019/800, para. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Henri Myrtilinen, Laura J. Shepherd, and Hannah Wright, *Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the OSCE Region*, (Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2020), accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/4/444577.pdf>.

These achievements can largely be credited to women's organizations promoting the ideals of UNSCR 1325, and their activism in the period after conflicts erupted in the south of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, centered around Osh. The authorities acknowledge that during these events, they relied heavily on the non-governmental sector, local leaders, and civil activists who organized mobile aid groups, distributed humanitarian aid, and produced first aid products.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, many significant examples of women's participation and leadership<sup>41</sup> were collected, which formed the basis for the development of various women's initiative groups, networks, and councils within the framework of the WPS agenda.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the women who were involved themselves note the importance of such networks for generally increasing their public activism.<sup>43</sup> As described by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2014:

Due to the events in June 2010 and the role played by women both during and after the violence, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek decided to support the establishment of so-called Women Initiative Groups that focused on empowerment through capacity-building on conflict prevention and resolution. The Women initiative Groups were an attempt to support existing resources and efforts. The female members of the groups had been active during the June events providing assistance across all ethnic groups which was made possible due to the status they enjoyed across the divided population. The Women Initiative Groups now have 95 members in three provinces and mainly work as focal points in the communities helping to bridge relations with state and local institutions. One of the key partners is the police. The Women Initiative Groups deal with issues of gender-based violence, early marriages (awareness-raising), bride kidnapping, unregistered births, integration of problematic families, schooling, and humanitarian aid. In 2012 the OSCE Centre supported an initiative

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<sup>40</sup> For further details on the events, see Aida Alymbaeva and Todor Tagarev, eds., *The Experience of the Kyrgyz Republic in Crisis Management: Lessons for the Future*, Almanac No. 2, (Geneva and Bishkek: Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) 2015), accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/almanac-2-English.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> *Женские советы в укреплении мира и стабильности. Практическое руководство [Women's Councils for Strengthening Peace and Stability. A practical guide]* (Bishkek: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Women Support Centre, 2019), accessed July 22, 2021, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/centralasia/2019/Manual4Women\\_RUS.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Plv0USzYTSBbVegLhh7gPhLOXp3-IJyi8DW9jlfWysRDESG1z0ANFhk](https://www.unodc.org/documents/centralasia/2019/Manual4Women_RUS.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Plv0USzYTSBbVegLhh7gPhLOXp3-IJyi8DW9jlfWysRDESG1z0ANFhk).

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., *Женские инициативы во имя мира: оценка влияния программы USAID [Women's Peace Initiatives: Assessing the Impact of the USAID Program]*, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2015, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/ru/kyrgyz-republic/factsheets/womens-peace-banks> and UNODC and the *Women's Councils for Strengthening Peace and Stability*.

<sup>43</sup> Development Policy Institute, "Участие женщин в местном самоуправлении," ["Women's participation in local self-governance"], *Municipality* 7-8 (July-August 2020): 105-106, accessed July 22, 2021, <http://dpi.kg/ru/library/journal/full/394.html>.

whereby male leaders co-operated with the Women Initiative Groups in order to include women in decision-making.<sup>44</sup>

Still, despite the many positive examples of women's participation and the development of NAPs, researchers emphasize that, in a real crisis, women's organizations have little chance to influence the management of the situation. This raises the question of the real impacts of a NAP in practice when developing security responses or peacebuilding activities.<sup>45</sup>

Weaknesses in the practical implementation of the NAP is not a new issue in Kyrgyzstan, but the response is usually limited to technical solutions- the provision of budgets and personnel, for example. At the same time, the political and discursive aspects of the problem are ignored. It is indicative that the authors of the above-mentioned OSCE report on the implementation of the WPS agenda in several countries, including Kyrgyzstan, eventually conclude disappointingly that the NAP is not a suitable instrument for realizing the hopes placed by the women's movement into UNSCR 1325.<sup>46</sup>

Given the criticism levied against this formulation of gender security that does not allow space for anti-war movements, it is not surprising that the modern history of the women's peace movement has been reduced to "20 years of UNSCR 1325," obliterating more than 50 years of women's opposition to war, the arms race, and environmental destruction generated by the capitalist system and its structure of international relations.

It is difficult to imagine how events of the type promoted by the Women's International Democratic Federation, or with its participation, could be held in Kyrgyzstan today, despite the fact that this organization has had consultative status in the UN Economic and Social Council since 1972.<sup>47</sup> The agenda of the International Democratic Federation of Women is indeed far from the ideals that underpin the UN Security Council Resolutions, for example, the idea that women are "natural" peacemakers<sup>48</sup>—a notion that is regularly reproduced in documents on women's participation in Kyrgyzstan. For example, the following text—"women, thanks to their natural specificity and social

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<sup>44</sup> Christin Ormhaug, *OSCE Study on National Action Plans on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, (Vienna: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2014), 34–35, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/0/125727.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Myrntinen, Shepherd, and Wright, *Implementing Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Myrntinen, 75.

<sup>47</sup> This history, as one of the consequences of the "old" and "new" cold wars, is curious. However, it is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>48</sup> See Skevi Koukouma, "Address" (Vice-President of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) to the anti-imperialist mobilization organized by the Cyprus Peace Council outside the US Embassy), Facebook post, April 16, 2018, accessed July 22, 2021) [https://ru-ru.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=801275023404348&id=268867936645062&\\_tn\\_=K-R](https://ru-ru.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=801275023404348&id=268867936645062&_tn_=K-R).

status in society, are closer to a culture that is based on the values of life, the continuation of the human race, care for future generations, and also partnership, non-violence, reciprocity, empathy”— is provided as the grounds for mobilizing women to promote peace in their communities in a 2019 manual developed in Kyrgyzstan on the role of women’s organizations in promoting peace.<sup>49</sup>

Critics rightly point out that not all women have such characteristics. In the context of security, such assumptions embedded in questionable statements can lead to burdening women with excessive and unreasonable expectations about their roles. Women in conflict situations are expected to be “super-heroines,”<sup>50</sup> as evidenced by the experiences of women’s activism in Kyrgyzstan. In addition to the added burdens for women, the conflation of “feminized” characteristics of peace and care with security further reinforces the non-political nature of women’s participation. A striking example of this was demonstrated when Solidarity Marches in honor of International Women’s Day on March 8 in Bishkek were organized in 2019 and 2020, as is discussed in further detail in a later section of this article.

If in Kyrgyzstan the WPS agenda became relevant in the context of the 2010 events in Osh, in Tajikistan the agenda was driven by external groups, essentially by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, known as UNIFEM until 2011) as the primary promoter of UNSCR 1325 on the ground. The promotion of the WPS agenda in Tajikistan was anchored in past experiences of women during the civil war of 1990–1995 and women’s leadership in building civil society in Tajikistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was instrumental in responding to the problems women and girls were facing during and after the civil war.<sup>51</sup>

The civil war in Tajikistan formally ended with a UN-mediated peace and reconciliation agreement in 1997. There are very few accounts of women’s experiences during the civil war or of their contributions.<sup>52</sup>

Three years prior to the adoption of UNSCR 1325, the structures set up to negotiate peace in Tajikistan were neither inclusive of women nor reflective of the impact of the civil war on women and women’s rights, especially the prevalence of various forms of violence against women during and

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<sup>49</sup> *Women's Councils for Strengthening Peace and Stability*.

<sup>50</sup> Nikoghosyan, “Co-Optation of Feminism: Gender, Militarism and the UNSC Resolution 1325.”

<sup>51</sup> Mullojanov, “Civil Society and Peace Building,” 63.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Kuvatova, “Gender Issues in Tajikistan: Consequences and Impact of the Civil War;” Mullojanov, “Civil Society and Peace Building;” Colette Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan* (London, Pluto Press, 2004); and Sophie Roche, “Sophie Roche on Tajik women during the civil war: ‘The breast of the shahid-mother had milk,’” *Central Asian Analytical Network*, March 29, 2017, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://caa-network.org/archives/9168>.

after the civil war.<sup>53</sup> Women working in the government at the time of the civil war testify that female members of parliament participated in negotiating the peace accord in Tajikistan and met with opposing and ruling parties. The peace agreement established a national reconciliation commission, which included only a single woman member.<sup>54</sup>

A decade after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, UNIFEM supported awareness-raising about the WPS agenda and the development of an accountability mechanism for the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions. To this end, in 2010 UNIFEM hosted a regional consultation about “Women for Peace and Security” on UNSCR 1325 in the framework of the Open Peace Day in Tajikistan. Women from Afghanistan, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, and Tajikistan attended the consultation. The final conference called for a clear accountability mechanism through the introduction of mandatory reporting on the implementation of the resolution by the member states. In closing the conference, women activists appealed to the UN Secretary General and the UN Security Council for the comprehensive implementation of UNSCR 1325. Representing Tajikistan, women who worked in the government of independent Tajikistan and women members of NGOs who worked on conflict resolution and assistance to the population, attended the conference.<sup>55</sup>

In a follow-up event in 2011, UN Women in cooperation with the UN Regional Center in Central Asia on Preventive Diplomacy (UNRCCA) hosted an Open Peace Day, in which women active in peacemaking processes in Central Asia met with the UN Secretary-General Special Representative, Ambassador Miroslav Jenca. This event was conducted during a conference of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation member-states that was taking place at the same time in Almaty, Kazakhstan. A key outcome of the meeting was the creation of a regional network of women peace builders, which then called on the UN to support their efforts in mainstreaming gender into security sector reform

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<sup>53</sup> Two example publications narrating the peace negotiation process in Tajikistan—Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes, eds., “Politics of Compromise; The Tajikistan Peace Process,” *Accord*, (London: Conciliation Resources, 2001), [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Politics\\_of\\_compromise\\_The\\_Tajikistan\\_peace\\_process\\_Accord\\_Issue\\_10.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Politics_of_compromise_The_Tajikistan_peace_process_Accord_Issue_10.pdf) and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, “International Peacemaking in Tajikistan and Afghanistan Compared: Lessons Learned and Unlearned,” *Les Études du CERI* 143, (April 2008), <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/etude143.pdf>—barely mention the role of women and impacts of civil war on women. Interestingly, the former publication contains several images of women protesting, a girl child playing with an ammunition belt, women and girls cooking on stoves and collecting water and of the 100 pages, only one is devoted to gender and peace-making, explaining the role of women’s NGOs in conflict resolution.

<sup>54</sup> Anna Matveeva et al., *Women Connect Across Conflicts: Building Accountability for Implementation of the UNSCR 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889: Fergana Valley Baseline Survey and Mapping* (unpublished report, 2012), 64.

<sup>55</sup> Matveeva et al. 64.



and implementing all four pillars of the UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>56</sup> In 2012, the Women's Peace Corps was established in Tajikistan. The majority of these activities centered around civil society activism, and neither a NAP nor any other accountability mechanism on WPS was developed due to the low awareness of the content of the UN Security Council resolutions among law enforcement and the military as well as an overall lack of transparency in the security sector of Tajikistan.<sup>57</sup> For example, security sector institutions do not disclose information on the share of women working in the sector overall, those holding management positions or the ranks of women working in these bodies. Thus, it is not possible to gauge whether women's participation in the security sector in Tajikistan has improved (or worsened) as a result of work under the WPS agenda.

In 2014, in Tajikistan's report under the framework of the twenty-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the government stated that it had adopted a NAP on WPS. Representatives of the Committee on Women's and Family Affairs, a government body, stated that the National Strategy on Advancement of the Role of Women in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2010–2020 included a dedicated section on the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>58</sup> However, no NAP on Women, Peace and Security was ever made available for public review.

In 2019, UN Women supported capacity-building activities and wide consultations on the drafting of a NAP on implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions. In August 2019, a NAP covering the period of 2019–2022 was signed by the First Vice-Prime Minister, who is chairing a Commission on Implementation of International Human Rights Obligations. This NAP has four pillars: prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual abuse; strengthening the role of women in prevention of terrorism and extremism; strengthening the role of women in security decision-making; strengthening peacebuilding in the field of mediation, training and border cooperation. Most activities are aimed at the improvement of statistics on violence against women; the establishment of a referral mechanism for the provision of services for women survivors of gender-based violence; the conduction of studies on the social and economic vulnerabilities of the population (including women) to terrorism and extremism; the training of women in mediation; and the increase in the number of women in law enforcement and security

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<sup>56</sup> C@ucasia, "Открытый День Мира состоялся в Алматы сегодня" ("Open Peace Day Took Place Today in Almaty"), July 21, 2011, accessed July 22, 2021, [https://caucasia.at.ua/news/zhenshiny\\_mir\\_i\\_bezopasnost/2011-07-21-1145](https://caucasia.at.ua/news/zhenshiny_mir_i_bezopasnost/2011-07-21-1145).

<sup>57</sup> Matveeva et al. *Women Connect Across Conflicts*.

<sup>58</sup> "UN Women promotes the integration of peace and security issues into the National Action Plan on gender equality at the national consultations on women, peace and security," UN Women, May 4, 2012, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2012/05/un-women-promotes-the-integration>.

bodies. Conspicuously absent are measures to ensure the participation of and engagement with women CSOs.

### **Evidence for Gender “Backlash” and “Shrinking Space” in Central Asia**

“Backlash” refers to a phenomenon in which there appear to be setbacks and deterioration in relations between women and men, gender equality is on the decline,<sup>59</sup> and hard-won gains in women’s rights are “under attack” and being eroded.<sup>60</sup> While it has been noted that “antifeminism has made strides on the global stage,”<sup>61</sup> there is also a close connection between backsliding on women’s rights’ obligations and more general processes of de-democratization (in other words, democratic backsliding). In general, “[d]emocratic backsliding has also been related to a cultural backlash against ongoing social changes including progress in gender equality.”<sup>62</sup> Thus backlash, in this context, refers to a reaction to loss of influence and power, whether real or perceived. Scholars contend that while there is diversity within the anti-gender movement, anti-gender actors are led by common interests in “maintaining or promoting social and political hierarchies in the face of their (perceived) decline.”<sup>63</sup>

Increasing restrictions on civil society in both Central Asia and the larger post-Soviet space have been well-documented and met with considerable criticism from international human rights organizations. For instance, in its 2020 report on the state of democracies, the V-Dem Institute highlighted Central Asia as a region that is experiencing an intensified decline in liberal democracy with “significant regression” to levels of the immediate post-Soviet period.<sup>64</sup> However, what has been less discussed are the impacts these trends are having on women’s CSOs.

Women’s rights are “particularly vulnerable in fragile and nascent democracies where such rights have been more recently established and where the space for civil society actors to defend

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<sup>59</sup> “Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategising for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Democracy*, Vol. 38 (2015), accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.boell.de/en/2015/04/21/anti-gender-movements-rise>.

<sup>60</sup> Conny Roggeband and Andrea Krizsán, *Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash against Women’s Rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics*, Discussion Paper 35 (New York: UN Women Headquarters, June 2020), accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/discussion-paper-democratic-backsliding-and-the-backlash-against-womens-rights>.

<sup>61</sup> Jelena Cupać and Irem Ebetürk, “The personal is global political: The antifeminist backlash in the United Nations,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2020), accessed July 22, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1369148120948733>.

<sup>62</sup> Roggeband and Krizsán, *Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash against Women’s Rights*.

<sup>63</sup> Denkovski, Bernarding, and Lunz, “Power over Rights.”

<sup>64</sup> Anna Lührmann et al., *Autocratization Surges—Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020*, (Gothenburg, Sweden: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), 2020), 14, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/democracy-reports/>.

them is limited and even shrinking.”<sup>65</sup> In fragile democracies, where there are few mechanisms for legitimate political engagement, and in which women are marginalized or excluded from formal political participation, civil society organizations may be one of the few outlets for women to exercise their freedom of expression. They also serve as a platform for holding governments accountable, making them especially critical. The question of whether either Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan can rightly be characterized as “fragile democracies” is beyond the scope of this article. The term itself is an oversimplification of complex processes that have been unfolding in each country at least since independence, if not earlier. (While much hope was expressed for Kyrgyzstan becoming Central Asia’s “island of democracy and stability,” Tajikistan is consistently described as “authoritarian.”) Still, the notion that support for gender equality concepts are changing, as is the space for women’s activism, within a larger context of global declines in freedom is both relevant and worth exploring.

### **Changing Perspectives on Gender Equality and Women’s NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan**

Quantifying the extent to which “backsliding” on gender equality commitments is taking place in any country is challenging due to the lack of any standard or accepted methodology. By comparing responses to the World Values Survey, carried out over several decades, in four dimensions related to gender equality (political, educational, economic, and physical integrity), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has attempted to measure progress, or loss of progress, towards gender equality. The UNDP concludes that bias and backlash are widespread and increasing; globally, 91% of men and 86% of women “show at least one clear bias against gender equality in areas such as politics, economic, education, intimate partner violence and women’s reproductive rights.”<sup>66</sup>

Responses to World Values Surveys for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan concerning the equal rights of women and men and women’s political participation and confidence in women’s organizations offer insights into the attitudes of the general population towards gender equality ideals and may shed light on the challenges that certain types of women’s NGOs are facing in these countries.<sup>67</sup> (Note that full data tables from the relevant surveys are reproduced in an annex to this article).

In both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, not only does a relatively high proportion of the population express the opinion that equal rights between women and men is an essential

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<sup>65</sup> Roggeband and Krizsán, *Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash against Women’s Rights*.

<sup>66</sup> *2020 Human Development Perspectives, Tackling Social Norms, A game changer for gender inequalities*, (New York: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020), 8, accessed July 22, 2021, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hd\\_perspectives\\_gsni.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hd_perspectives_gsni.pdf).

<sup>67</sup> World Values Surveys have been conducted twice in Kyrgyzstan (2011, 2019: Waves 6 and 7) but only once in Tajikistan (2020), so a long-term perspective is not available.

characteristic of democracy,<sup>68</sup> but this view has gained strength over time (where longitudinal data is available). In Kyrgyzstan, 61% of female respondents and 57% of male respondents support equal rights to the greatest degree, an increase from 35% and 31%, respectively. People in Tajikistan, likewise, have a similar attitude about gender equality, although men's views appear to be somewhat weaker than women's based on the higher proportion of men who tend toward the idea that gender equality is nonessential.

A more concerning trend was revealed by responses to a separate question about women's political leadership.<sup>69</sup> The majority of men and women in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan express the opinion that men are the better political leaders. For respondents in Kyrgyzstan, this viewpoint appears to have become more prevalent from 2011–2019. Whereas 70% of men once agreed or strongly agreed that men make better political leaders, by 2019, the proportion had risen to 77%. For women, the increase was also considerable—from 58% in 2011 to 68% in 2019. The pattern is very similar in Tajikistan, where over 70% of both men and women agree or agree strongly that women are less suited to politics.

The seemingly contradictory views indicated by the data likely reflect that fact that citizens of both countries are aware of laws on gender equality/equal rights that were enacted during the post-Soviet transition period throughout Central Asia. Still, this is a formalistic understanding of equal rights that does not necessarily translate into a willingness to create opportunities for women on an equal basis with men, to participate in governance, for example. While both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have established measures<sup>70</sup> to increase women's position in public leadership, from 2000 onwards, neither national parliament has achieved the 30% target for representation in decision-making positions (to be achieved by 1995 and reiterated in the Beijing Platform for Action). Women's representation in cabinet posts is even lower; in 2019, women held only 14% of ministerial positions in Kyrgyzstan and 6% in Tajikistan.<sup>71</sup> Prejudices and gender stereotyping that bar the way for women to enter political office remain entrenched.

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<sup>68</sup> Survey respondents were asked to respond to the following request: "Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means 'not at all an essential characteristic of democracy' and 10 means it definitely is 'an essential characteristic of democracy': Women have the same rights as men." See the World Values Survey database: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>.

<sup>69</sup> Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do."

<sup>70</sup> For example, a gender quota for candidate lists in Kyrgyzstan and a special program in Tajikistan on women's and girls' leadership.

<sup>71</sup> Women in Politics, Map, Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2019, accessed July 22, 2021 <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2019-03/women-in-politics-2019>.

In addressing men's historical domination in this sphere, CEDAW (Article 7) endorses the broadest understanding of political and public life as encompassing the exercise of political power as well as "many aspects of civil society," including but not limited to women's organizations, community-based organizations and "other organizations concerned with public and political life."<sup>72</sup> Here, the World Values Surveys provide a more positive picture. Even though few citizens reported being active members of a "woman's group" (less than 3% of women and men in Kyrgyzstan; around 12% in Tajikistan), confidence in such organizations is quite high. In Kyrgyzstan, confidence in women's organizations has increased among both men and women (around a third of both groups expressed positive opinions), with a similar proportion of people expressing such attitudes in Tajikistan.

Evidently, for women, public participation remains limited to the "acceptable" form of women's NGOs that are viewed as bringing benefits to society. This contrasts with views on women's participation or leadership in formal power structures, where the idea that women are less suited to politics than men, based on their very nature, does not bode well for women's greater engagement in political activism. The survey results underscore the importance of civil society space for women in the context of the risk that they may be squeezed out of formal political structure and spaces in the long-term, leaving nothing but civil society platforms for them to exercise their rights. The surveys indicate that biases against women as political leaders have increased in Kyrgyzstan and are prevalent in Tajikistan. However, the methodology is not effective to provide convincing evidence of a larger "backlash" phenomenon, in as much as the questions leave a great deal of room for interpretation of the motivations behind citizens' opinions.

Much of the discourse on "backlash" and "backsliding" on gender equality has been premised on an idea that the phenomenon is simply anti-democratic, but some have taken issue with this reductive view. The phenomenon has often been reduced to "mere conservative opposition to the inevitable march towards greater gender equality," which ignores "the complexities of the right-wing narratives."<sup>73</sup> Within disagreements about the root causes of such backsliding, some experts maintain that it is a "symptom of growing discontent with neoliberal globalization and transformation processes."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the complex of the situation is evident in the fact that there are diverging points of view both within the anti-gender movement and among gender activists and dissatisfaction on

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<sup>72</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), *CEDAW General Recommendation No. 23: Political and Public Life*, 1997, A/52/38.

<sup>73</sup> Elena Zacharenko, "The Neoliberal Fuel to the Anti-Gender Movement," *Green European Journal*, October 30, 2019, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-neoliberal-fuel-to-the-anti-gender-movement/>.

<sup>74</sup> "Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise?"

both sides with current political developments. Feminist groups in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, however, face a particular challenge in that there is currently not a recognized political space generally, or as a recognized part of the WPS agenda, to express such views.

### **Solidarity March in Honor of March 8 in Kyrgyzstan<sup>75</sup>**

Women's rights demonstrations in honor of the March-8 celebration (hereinafter referred to as the March) have been held annually in Kyrgyzstan since 2016. The starting point for the annual March was an expression of solidarity among CSOs and activists in resisting all forms of violence against women. At the same time, an important objective of the March was to challenge what had become the mainstream understanding of March 8 as a consumer event and to return political significance to the holiday.

The turning point in the development of the March came in 2019. The situation concerning violence against women had become increasingly threatening in the country. The 2018 murder of a young woman, Burulai,<sup>76</sup> within a police station where she had sought protection after being kidnapped for forced marriage, became a common challenge for all women's organizations.

Previously, local authorities had attempted to ban the peaceful assembly. The unspoken reason for such a ban was the participation of LGBT organizations in the March. Public outrage at the actions of the authorities led to an unprecedented mobilization of residents of Bishkek; for the first time, several hundred people took part in the March. The 2019 March was met with a number of negative reactions—open threats against feminists and LGBT activists; homophobic statements by the media; accusations against the organizers of the March of “stealing” the holiday from women; open calls for violence against activists by government officials, including women parliamentarians; an attack on an event in honor of the Day of Visibility of Lesbians (April 26); an attack on an activist picnic in honor of the Day of Workers Solidarity (May 1); and other attacks on human rights meetings. The complete passivity of the authorities in each of these cases clearly revealed the extent of the dramatic destruction of civil space, in which the only “freedom” was of hatred, and the only “right” was the right to be killed with impunity.

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<sup>75</sup> Information is compiled from a report of the 8/365 movement to The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee (Bishkek, 2020). The 8/365 movement is a grassroots initiative of civil society organizations and activists, formed in 2019 on the basis of feminist and intersectional agendas in order to jointly conduct an annual March of Solidarity in honor of International Women's Day on March 8.

<sup>76</sup> “Кыргызстан: убийца украденной им 19-летней Бурулай получил 20 лет тюрьмы” [“Kyrgyzstan: kidnapper and killer of 19-year-old Burulai received 20 years in prison”], BBC, December 11, 2018, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-46282560>.

In 2020, the March was planned for one of the central squares of Bishkek. Local authorities, violating the norms of national legislation and international obligations, attempted to once again ban the event under the pretext of maintaining public order and protecting against the spread of the coronavirus. At the time, not a single case of the infection had been recorded in the country. As a representative of one of the Bishkek departments of internal affairs stated during court hearings on the prohibition of the March: “They negatively affect our society and do not suit our mentality.” Another justification for limiting the March was the pretext that the participants would “try to destabilize [the] socio-political situation in the state.”<sup>77</sup>

A few minutes before the scheduled beginning of the event, unidentified persons arrived and attacked the gathering participants of the March and journalists. Many of them were wearing masks and carried sticks. The attack was accompanied by anti-feminist and homophobic speeches and statements against NGOs. Contrary to expectations, the police patrolling the area began to detain a large number of the March participants. Meanwhile the attackers were not prevented from beating the demonstrators and destroying the March banners.

As a result of the illegal actions by the police, more than 70 participants of the March, including journalists, were detained. The victims filed dozens of claims of human rights violations with the relevant law enforcement agencies. The organizers of the March, other human rights associations and international organizations appealed to the Parliament, the president, and the government, asking for the actions of the attackers to be officially condemned and for urgent measures to investigate the incidents and punish those responsible be taken. Demands to bring the perpetrators to justice were also voiced in public statements by individual members of Parliament. However, appeals to the authorities remained unanswered. At the same time, several high-level government officials, including members of Parliament, were among those who publicly condemned the March’s organizers.

Among those expressing concern, the UN Office in Kyrgyzstan wrote that such “hatred and violence against women’s groups, activities and civic organizations” undermines the [Sustainable Development Goals], silences the voices of women and “constrain the space for civic action in the

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<sup>77</sup> The 8/365 Movement, *Your traditions, our blood: violation of women's rights to participate in political and public life in Kyrgyzstan*, Submission to the 5<sup>th</sup> periodic report of the Kyrgyz Republic on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women to the 76<sup>th</sup> session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2021.

Kyrgyz Republic”.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, no expressions of public support were heard from women’s organizations and networks active in the peace and security field. This would indicate that such groups view only certain types of women’s activity as relevant, and that in fact the notion of “security” can be used to suppress women’s voices.

The detention of the March participants is a dangerous precedent, leading, on the one hand, to the criminalization of women for their work as human rights defenders, and, on the other, pushing women into the position of victims. Both strategies are examples of reactionary propaganda aimed at depriving women activists of their political agency.

Women’s political activism is accepted until the exact moment when the ruling elites feel that their privileged position is threatened. A statement about the dispersal of the March made by a member of parliament, Zhyldyz Musabekova, is symptomatic of this attitude. In an interview, Ms. Musabekova, evaluating the demands of the March for equality as radical and “foreign,” concluded, “It was right that they were dispersed. Now we need to drive them out of the country.”<sup>79</sup> This is a blatant attempt to link the March to violence and disorderly conduct and thus invalidate the entire women’s rights movement.

Negatively equating the March with radical and extremist manifestations is particularly alarming and draws attention to the dramatic history of women’s resistance. Undermining and dehumanizing women’s political protest through negative images of women as troublemakers, portraying activists as not “real women,” not recognizing those who, by definition, should not exist as a political subject are part of this story.

The interests of grassroots women activists, who stood on opposite sides of the March, paradoxically converge. Reducing political and ideological discussions between different groups of women activists to simplified schemes such as “conservative” versus “liberal” or “foreign agents” versus “national traditions” seems to be a tragic discursive trap. These kinds of schemes are based on the logic of exclusion that forces parties to desperately hold onto fixed identities that provide them with legitimacy in the existing power structure. The March itself is one of the opportunities to

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<sup>78</sup> “ UN Calls for Civic Dialogue on Women’s Rights in the Kyrgyz Republic,” UN Kyrgyzstan, March 12, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/en/37676-un-calls-civic-dialogue-womens-rights-kyrgyz-republic>.

<sup>79</sup> Aidana Abduvaitova, “Жылдыз Мусабекова: Надоели эти геи, которые превращают праздник в беспорядок” [“Zhyldyz Musabekova: Tired of these gays who turn the holiday into a mess”], *Kaktus Media*, March 9, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, [https://kaktus.media/doc/407534\\_jyldyz\\_mysabekova:\\_nadoeli\\_eti\\_gei\\_kotorye\\_prevrashaut\\_prazdnik\\_v\\_besporiadok.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/407534_jyldyz_mysabekova:_nadoeli_eti_gei_kotorye_prevrashaut_prazdnik_v_besporiadok.html).



imagine other choices of political existence based on rethinking the meaning of March 8 for the modern women's movement in Kyrgyzstan.

### **New Forms of Women's Organizing and the Emergence of a Feminist Agenda in Tajikistan**

The implications of the "adjustment vs. challenging" approach of the women's movement in Tajikistan, as discussed in an earlier section of this article, are multi-faceted because they take place in an environment in which state control over civil society is being strengthened and dissenting opinions, activism, and the appearance of new groups of women of a younger generation who promote feminism and openly call themselves feminists are suppressed. While men who express dissenting opinions are jailed or forced into asylum in Europe, women activists, or women denying this "adjustment vs. challenging" approach are disciplined through the system of "honor-and-shame." Harris describes this system as follows:

In Tajikistan shame (*ayb*) has become reified and a notable hindrance in virtually everything a girl or young woman wishes to undertake. Almost anything can be, and frequently is, labelled shameful and the fear of attracting this stigma acts as a strong restraint. While the spotlight on men tends to focus more on their ability to control their womenfolk, their capacity for sexual prowess is clearly tied to a projection of honor or *namus*. *Namus* reflects the ability to display appropriate gender performances, above all masculinity....<sup>80</sup>

In February 2019, the government adopted a resolution to increase internet prices in the country. This decision was met with massive outcry from the Tajik public. Several groups intended to peacefully protest. Amongst them, two young women, S.A. and D.M., started a flash mob in Dushanbe inviting people to come to a public square to sign a letter demanding that the decision be overturned. The letter was eventually signed by more than 600 people. However, it never reached the authorities because the president reversed the decision on the third day of collecting signatures. Despite this, during the two-day campaign, women organizers were attacked on Facebook by people who described themselves as guardians of national interests. They labelled the women organizers as "rebels" and "traitors" who "called for instability," who were "ungrateful" and who were "inciting ethnic hatred" among many other insults. Pictures of S.A. and members of her family were anonymously and publicly posted. S.A.'s sister complained that she was ruining the family because

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<sup>80</sup> Harris, "State business: gender, sex and marriage in Tajikistan," 114.

her husband was very angry.<sup>81</sup> The harassment of the second activist, D.M., was even more extreme: she was set-up by a man who dated her for a month after the signature campaign, with promises of marriage, and an intimate video showing D.M. with the man (whose face was obscured) was leaked on the Internet and national television.<sup>82</sup> D.M. filed a complaint with the Department of Internal Affairs demanding an investigation of the incident and to bring a criminal charge against the person who leaked the video. However, her complaint was dismissed, as the police maintained that the man on the video did not commit a crime.

In March 2020, two young journalists who were organizing a discussion on feminism in Tajikistan on March 13, 2020, were harassed by the authorities. The event was scheduled to take place in a coffee shop after working hours and featured three speakers about misogyny, male perspectives on feminism, and gender segregation in educational subjects as a strategy of self-censorship among girls. Before the event began, the coffee shop cancelled the rental contract for the space. The organizers managed to find a new venue in a co-working space. However, when attendees arrived, the rental agreement was cancelled without an explanation. Finally, the organizers moved the event to a social café founded by women who had survived domestic violence. When the first speaker began, the lights in the café were cut, and, shortly after, the organizers asked the attendees to leave, stating that if they did not, they would all be arrested for violating COVID-19 measures. Notably, Tajikistan officially acknowledged registered cases of COVID-19 only at the end of April 2020, and COVID-19 related restrictions were put in place in May 2020. One of the young journalists was later harassed, allegedly by national security forces, for initiating a social gathering devoted to feminist issues.<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, the implications are indeed multi-faceted. First of all, the “adjustment vs. challenging” approach used by the women’s movement to align themselves with the state has serious implications for their own activities and the newly emerging activism among the young generation of women wishing to pursue an explicit feminist agenda. NGOs lost their ground to promote even liberal feminism, and they have not developed approaches to challenge the state’s anti-feminist inclinations. The attempts to strengthen control over civil society in Tajikistan coupled with this “adjustment vs challenging” approach prevents diversification of the women’s movement and

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<sup>81</sup> Mumin Akhmadi and Takhmina Khakimova, “Поплатились за гражданскую позицию. Кто угрожает активисткам?” (“Paid for their civil standing. Who threatens women activists?”), *Radio Ozodi*, April 26, 2019, accessed July 22, 2021, <http://rus.ozodi.org/a/29905543.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Mumin Akhmadi, “В Таджикистане автора скандального интимного видео не нашли. Или не искали?” (“In Tajikistan, the author of scandalous intimate video was not found. Or was he not looked for?”), *Radio Ozodi*, January 19, 2020, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30385311.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Personal observations of the author who attended the event.

inclusion of a younger generation of women keen to use feminist perspectives to address gender inequality in Tajikistan, through political activities such as social mobilization and education about feminism. The positive outcomes of the women’s movement and their past achievements are likely to evaporate because backlash against women’s activism, feminist groups, and attacks on women demonstrating a “non-traditional” way of life show that gender equality and women’s rights issues are no longer “neutral” or “less sensitive” as they were perceived in the past. Thus, in Tajikistan, the space is shrinking for ideologies and opinions that challenge the official narrative about the role of women as mothers and wives promoted by the state and for new forms of (self-)organizing than for civil society, at large. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tajikistan faced unprecedented civic organizing of people willing to support health personnel working in red zones with food and protective devices and for the low-income and vulnerable population with food packages and hygiene items.

### **Concluding Thoughts: for whom is space shrinking?**

This article began with the premise that women’s political and public participation on an equal basis with men is not only a human right but is a prerequisite for security. However, the implementation of the WPS agenda, and, indeed, other international commitments on women’s political participation in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has centered around an understanding of a “traditional feminine” role for women—one that is “superheroic” in all those women are expected to take it on. Yet, women have not been given space to enter or dismantle masculinized structures that perpetuate insecurity in all forms.

In presenting information about the diversity of women’s organizations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this article argues that in Central Asia, as in other regions, certain types of women’s NGOs are caught up in two nets. First, the narrow space which is allocated to them for activism is closing, as it is for other CSOs. Second, they are also targeted because of the focus of their work, which is “often viewed as endangering ‘traditional values.’”<sup>84</sup> Some women’s organizations, those that can be considered “mainstream” in their approach and supportive of the state, continue to receive support. The strongest reactions, in terms of reducing political space, have been towards feminist groups and those supporting LGBT rights. It must also be acknowledged that anti-gender movements themselves can be considered manifestations of civil society (especially, for example, when GONGOs—government-organized non-governmental organizations—take an active role) and they have enjoyed a broadening of platforms to express their views.

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<sup>84</sup> Roggeband and Krizsán, *Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash against Women’s Rights*.

In Kyrgyzstan, women's organizations have become more diverse, meaning they represent and advocate for a wider spectrum of gender issues, but still very much centered on notions of security and safety. Yet rather than promoting such diversity as a sign of a healthy third-sector, anti-gender movements, often with the support of the authorities, have portrayed such CSOs as radical and threatening. It is difficult to speak of space shrinking in Tajikistan, given that a legitimate platform for civil society has not existed. Still, even within these conditions, grassroots movements of women are suppressed under the justification that they are threats to national interests (even those that are organizing around gender neutral topics) and linked to a view that they are taking on a role not appropriate for women. As trends in de-democratization evolve, which can also be characterized as opposition to a neoliberal order, we see that anti-gender movements are able to manipulate the idea of a feminist or "gender ideology" in order to advance their own agenda of maintaining political hierarchies.

Suppression of civil society and gender backlash are intersecting trends that are larger than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but clear and recent examples of how they come together with dangerous results are demonstrated in these countries. It is especially worrying that women's CSOs are depicted as destabilizing when, in fact, their presence is an essential element of security. When space for diverse forms of women's activism and advocacy are curtailed, it ultimately means increased instability for all.

**Annex: World Values survey data for Kyrgyzstan<sup>85</sup> and Tajikistan<sup>86</sup>**

Tables 1 and 2. Responses to the question: “Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means “not at all an essential characteristic of democracy” and 10 means it definitely is “an essential characteristic of democracy”: Women have the same rights as men.

| <b>Kyrgyzstan</b>                                   |                 |                   |                 |                   |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|   | <b>2011</b>     |                   | <b>2019</b>     |                   |
|   | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> |
| <b>Not an essential characteristic of democracy</b> | 4.6             | 6.0               | 7.9             | 4.7               |
| <b>2</b>  | 3.4             | 2.0               | 0.4             | 1.0               |
| <b>3</b>  | 1.8             | 2.5               | 1.7             | 0.8               |
| <b>4</b>  | 3.1             | 3.7               | 0.8             | 1.7               |
| <b>5</b>  | 14.8            | 9.4               | 14.5            | 11.6              |
| <b>6</b>  | 8.8             | 8.1               | 0.9             | 1.7               |
| <b>7</b>  | 8.0             | 8.4               | 0.8             | 1.6               |
| <b>8</b>  | 9.9             | 10.9              | 1.0             | 2.2               |
| <b>9</b>  | 14.4            | 13.2              | 5.3             | 6.7               |
| <b>An essential characteristic of democracy</b>     | 30.7            | 35.5              | 57.0            | 61.2              |

<sup>85</sup> *WV6\_Results, Kyrgyzstan 2011\_v20180912 and World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2020) Kyrgyzstan Study # WVS-2017*, World Values Survey Association, accessed July 22, 2021 <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>.

<sup>86</sup> *World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2020) Tajikistan*, World Values Survey Association, Study # WVS-2017 v1.5, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>.

| <b>Tajikistan</b>                                   |                 |                   |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|
|   | <b>2020</b>     |                   |
|   | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> |
| <b>Not an essential characteristic of democracy</b> | <b>0.5</b>      | <b>-</b>          |
| <b>2</b>  | <b>0.3</b>      | <b>0.5</b>        |
| <b>3</b>  | <b>1.5</b>      | <b>0.7</b>        |
| <b>4</b>  | <b>1.0</b>      | <b>1.3</b>        |
| <b>5</b>  | <b>5.4</b>      | <b>5.9</b>        |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>5.9</b>      | <b>6.8</b>        |
| <b>7</b>  | <b>8.6</b>      | <b>7.1</b>        |
| <b>8</b>  | <b>15.5</b>     | <b>17.5</b>       |
| <b>9</b>  | <b>12.2</b>     | <b>18.5</b>       |
| <b>An essential characteristic of democracy</b>     | <b>49.2</b>     | <b>41.7</b>       |

Tables 3 and 4. Responses to the question: Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree? “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.”

| <b>Kyrgyzstan</b>     |                 |                   |                 |                   |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|                       | <b>2011</b>     |                   | <b>2019</b>     |                   |
|                       | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> |
| <b>Agree strongly</b> | 27.7            | 18.7              | 46.2            | 35.8              |
| <b>Agree</b>          | 42.0            | 39.1              | 31.0            | 31.8              |

|                 |      |      |      |      |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Disagree</b> | 23.9 | 31.8 | 19.3 | 20.6 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|

| <b>Tajikistan</b>        |                 |                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|                          | <b>2020</b>     |                   |
|                          | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> |
| <b>Agree strongly</b>    | 46.6            | 38.4              |
| <b>Agree</b>             | 32.3            | 31.7              |
| <b>Disagree</b>          | 12.3            | 16.0              |
| <b>Disagree strongly</b> | 8.8             | 13.9              |

Tables 5 and 6. Responses to the question: Could you tell me how much confidence you have in women's organizations?

| <b>Kyrgyzstan</b>    |                 |                   |                 |                   |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|                      | <b>2011</b>     |                   | <b>2019</b>     |                   |
|                      | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> |
| <b>A great deal</b>  | 12.4            | 15.7              | 17.2            | 18.2              |
| <b>Quite a lot</b>   | 43.5            | 43.6              | 47.4            | 54.2              |
| <b>Not very much</b> | 30.0            | 27.9              | 18.4            | 15.6              |
| <b>None at all</b>   | 14.0            | 12.2              | 11.1            | 6.6               |
| <b>Don't know</b>    | -               | 0.1               | 4.5             | 3.7               |

Note: data on non-answers are excluded.

| <b>Tajikistan</b>    |                 |                   |
|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
|                      | <b>2020</b>     |                   |
|                      | <b>Male (%)</b> | <b>Female (%)</b> |
| <b>A great deal</b>  | 26.1            | 27.7              |
| <b>Quite a lot</b>   | 33.7            | 35.8              |
| <b>Not very much</b> | 22.6            | 19.8              |
| <b>None at all</b>   | 4.7             | 5.0               |
| <b>Don't know</b>    | 13.0            | 11.7              |



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# The “War on Women” in Kyrgyzstan: Navigating between Nationalism, Extremism, and Patriarchy

*Elena Kim*

This article discusses the links between violent extremism, hostile sexism, and masculinized nationalism using contemporary Kyrgyzstan as a case study. It presents three events that illustrate how the Kyrgyz state promotes nationalist policy and gender politics, which condone misogyny and justify violation of women’s rights. Recent scholarship has established strong associations between hostile sexism and violent extremism to caution that the former serves as a tacit predictor for violent radicalization.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on such scholarship, I conceptualize these incidents as having serious repercussions for national and transnational security. State-endorsed misogyny runs a risk of collapsing into what Mattheis has referred to as “mainstreaming extreme ideology and divisive practices predicated on gendered topics.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

This article explores the inter-connections between misogyny, violent extremism, and nationalism by scrutinizing a pattern of the state’s responses to public attacks on women and women’s rights in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Three specific and seemingly separate events are examined here to argue that they must be analyzed as a pattern stemming from a power structure and a broader ideological context in which diverse ideas about gender, nation and patriotism are in conflict. The state-imposed suppression of “Feminnale,” a feminist art exhibition in December 2019, the attacks on the participants of a peaceful women’s rally by far-right nationalist groups and the police’s complicit participation in March 2020, and the public lynching of a woman in June 2020—each sparked its own controversial public debate. I conceptualize these events as particular expressions of interactions among post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani nationalism and gender relations. They demonstrate the position and the role of the Kyrgyz state in promoting a nationalist policy and gender politics that condone and reinforce misogyny and justify the violation of women’s rights in

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Johnston, Jacqui True, Eleanor Gordon, Yasmin Chilmeran, and Yolanda Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base: The Impact of Gender Identities, Norms and Relations on Violent Extremism* (Bangkok: UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ashley A. Mattheis, “Gender and Violent Extremism Today,” Live Briefing, filmed June 4, 2020 at The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, video, 1:29:00, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://icct.nl/event/icct-live-briefing-gender-and-violent-extremism-today/>.

private and public domains both implicitly and explicitly—all in the name of the nation. Bringing together cases with distinctive features, I believe that the themes that emerge may resonate with the currents that are taking place in many other geographies and that are shaping gender politics elsewhere. The intention here is to produce an informed understanding that pervasive violence against women should be categorized as nothing less than ideologically motivated violence with a goal to promote the interests of those in power. Importantly, the second aim of this article is to argue that the political exploitation of such violence creates domestic conditions that confound radicalization. I build upon the empirical support that has been provided to caution that “attacks on women’s rights and women’s human rights’ defenders are early warning signs for extremist violence”<sup>3</sup> and that hostile sexism, violence against women, and support for violent extremism are strongly associated. I argue, therefore, that the enactment of nationalist gender politics in Kyrgyzstan reproduces, maintains, and promotes conditions conducive to the rise of conventions in which violence is not only a legitimate action, but a desirable one. Hence, violence against women can no longer be seen as only a matter of breaching individual human rights, but as having serious repercussions for national, regional, and international security.

In this article, I explore the interface between gender violence and violent extremism through inquiring how the former, in the specific context of Kyrgyzstan, is constructed, mediated, used and responded to by individuals at many levels in ways that allows us to speak about it in relation to peace and security. In the context of an acknowledged insufficiency of analysis of violent extremism and terrorism from a gender perspective, I keep in mind that state security has been found to rest, in the first place, in the security of women and “to the extent that if the security of women is a societal priority, the security and peacefulness of the state will be significantly enhanced.”<sup>4</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, much of the discussion has been based on the assumption that gender violence is about individual struggles, dysfunctional families, specific non-conforming women, etc., but less as part of a wider system of power relations which are inherently gendered and as having the capacity to produce effects with implications not only for women and girls but for state stability and peace. Doing this kind of analytical work appears to be urgent and imperative. While the linkages between the situation of women and economic indicators of a country have received greater research attention and more research has focused on women’s own participation in violent extremist groups as combatants, suicide bombers, or civilian bedrocks, connections among security and behavior of the state and

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<sup>3</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran, and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Valerie M Hudson, Mary Caprioli, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Rose McDermott, and Chad F. Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter: The Security of Women and the Security of States,” *International Security* 33, no. 3 (Winter 2008/2009): 26.

security of its women, though theorized, have not.<sup>5</sup> My focus in this article is on a particular angle of the gendered perspective of violent extremism. The concern here is how we can better understand these linkages between gender violence and violent extremism through introducing mediating roles of state national identity politics, gender policy, and the invisible “war on women” expressed as unpunished attacks on women’s rights and women’s human rights defenders. The latter, as mentioned earlier, has been found to be “early warning signs for extremist violence.”<sup>6</sup> In analyzing the contemporary process of development in Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region in general, scholars have explored importance of nationalism and national ideology in shaping gender norms.<sup>7</sup> They have argued that, while nationalism and national ideology shape the daily lives of women and men living in post-socialist era, women themselves negotiate, adapt, and contest them. Through the presentation of case studies, this article shows how such negotiations actually take place, with what consequences, and what questions they leave unattended.

Methodologically and conceptually, I respond to the acknowledged need to use in-depth qualitative information in promoting the research agenda linking women and security issues<sup>8</sup> and to base such analysis on the understanding that violence against women cuts across class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. Yet, the context in which violence against women takes place profoundly shapes its meanings. Here, terrorism within the home (“home” being defined as the walls of your house and your country) is an experience in the political context of routine violence from the state<sup>9</sup> and a “global condition within which recourse to (male) violence is valorized;”<sup>10</sup> yet, I refuse to believe in the universality of violence against women. That experience will vary greatly. My goal is to present an analysis whose value is in its particularity, specificity, and time- and space-delimitation. While I do agree that, in Kyrgyzstan, political order is “the sexual political order set by male-female dynamics. The character of the first order molds the society, its governance and its behavior, creating the conditions for state fragility and insecurity.”<sup>11</sup> I extend this argument by analyzing a particular space and time to demonstrate exactly how state, violence, and gender are interrelated and how

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<sup>5</sup> Hudson et al., “The Heart of the Matter,” 26.

<sup>6</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran, and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger, “Gender and nation in post-Soviet Central Asia: From national narratives to women’s practices,” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (November 2018): 195–206.

<sup>8</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott, and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 26.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Pain, “Everyday terrorism: Connecting domestic violence and global terrorism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 4 (2014): 531–550; Sandra Walklate, “What is to be Done About Violence Against Women? Gender, Violence, Cosmopolitanism and the Law,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 48, no.1 (January 2008): 39–54.

<sup>10</sup> Walklate, “What is to be Done About Violence Against Women?” 49.

<sup>11</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, *Evidence: Security of Women and Security of the States*, Futures Without Violence, May 2017, 3, [https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/FWV\\_blueprint\\_1-Evidence.pdf](https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/FWV_blueprint_1-Evidence.pdf).

invisible, but traceable, the connections are among those who work to create an environment of continuous terror. These linkages may not be entirely new, but what is new is the evidence allowing us to see them. My focus here is on how the state exploits misogyny to advance its goals and breeds the grounds for home growing terrorism and violent extremism.

### **Kyrgyzstan: Nation-Building, Gender and Violence Against Women**

Following independence, Kyrgyzstan projected an image of a steadily developing post-socialist democracy and engaged in neoliberal interpretation of gender equality. Since 1991, it has ratified major international human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), adopted national legislation to guarantee equal rights, and protect women from gender discrimination. But all of those triumphs failed to capture the reality of gender relations in the country and the shifting narratives about Kyrgyz womanhood. Critical observers contended that, in Kyrgyzstan, the transition was to “male” democracy where political construction of gender took place against the backdrop of the waning amalgamation of state nation-building, the construction of ethnic identities, and the elaboration of national ideologies<sup>12</sup>. Within competing identities of womanhood, women became the “foci of a great deal of violence and ‘transitional’ stress.”<sup>13</sup> Pertinent historical analysis of national identity politics in Kyrgyzstan after 1991 shows that independent statehood arrived with scarce economic and institutional preparedness for sovereignty, political instability, corruption, high levels of organized crimes, inter-ethnic violence, and poorly developed national ideology.<sup>14</sup> Leading political elites groped for national ideas that would help legitimize and stabilize their rule as well as create cohesion and loyalty among the population. The emerging national ideology drew on monopolistic versions of re-interpreted ethnic history with the grand underlying narrative that a stable future required a full grasp of the nation’s past and a return to Kyrgyz cultural and religious traditions through “cults of historical personas and periods.”<sup>15</sup> Kyrgyz presidents utilized ethno-centric ideology to mobilize support by relying heavily on the “cults” of epic Manas, “2200 years of the Kyrgyz statehood,” “nomadism,” etc., associating the ancestral way of life with a

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<sup>12</sup> Lori Handrahan, “Gender and ethnicity in the ‘Transitional Democracy’ of Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 467–496.

<sup>13</sup> Handrahan, “Gender and ethnicity,” 484.

<sup>14</sup> Erica Marat, *National Ideology and State-building in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Paper, 2008), [https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008\\_01\\_SRP\\_Marat\\_National-Ideology.pdf](https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_01_SRP_Marat_National-Ideology.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Marat, *National Ideology*, 34.

positive impact on contemporary Kyrgyz politics. Aimed at re-traditionalizing society, ancestral traditions were constructed ambiguously and contemporarily<sup>16</sup> while civic-based ideas were not only unappealing to political elites, but exacerbated the politicization of nationalist movements.<sup>17</sup>

Diverse research elsewhere has shown that nation-building refers to men and women with specific, hierarchized, and binary representations to their assigned roles in different realms of life.<sup>18,19</sup> In Central Asia, this process was related to revivalism's requiring a return to lifestyle uncontaminated by the Soviet promotion of the "women's question."<sup>20</sup> Re-traditionalization asserted a hierarchized gender order with the male and the masculine having preeminence over the female and the feminine.<sup>21</sup> Women's subordination was accentuated through the enunciation of gender complementarity with an impenetrable division between private (female) and public (male) spaces; control over women's bodies through construction of honor, shame, and maternity as women's national duty; and imposed restriction on women in the name of the nation's tradition and authenticity.<sup>22</sup> Political identity merged with ethnic in "ethno-politics" superseding "nationality politics."<sup>23</sup> The nationalist state and nationalist men enacted what they saw as protection of the purity of their homeland from external influences and at the same time enhanced their masculine ethnic qualities.<sup>24</sup> Close associations between representations of femininity and the notions of honor, shame, and reputation of the nation elevated control over women's movement, appearances, behaviors, and occupation of public space not so much as a private or family concern but a national one.<sup>25</sup> Expressions of violence against women received prominence as done in the name of nation.

Ethnicity has been said to be gendered and phallogocentric with males who determined who was "a member of the in-group, and who belonged to out-groups, based on male reproductive concerns."<sup>26</sup> To illustrate, contemporary ideas about Kyrgyz people's values and principles heavily relied on the most powerful ethno-national image of Manas hero canonized in the eponymous epic, which captures the imagined and real history of major inter-tribal and inter-ethnic battles and

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<sup>16</sup> Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation: Gender and politics of dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 247–265.

<sup>17</sup> Marat, *National Ideology*.

<sup>18</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Cleuziou and Direnberger, "Gender and nation in post-Soviet Central Asia."

<sup>21</sup> Cleuziou and Direnberger.

<sup>22</sup> Lucia Direnberger, "Gender, Religion and Nation among NGOs Acting for the Prevention of Domestic Violence in Tajikistan," *Sociétés Contemporaines* 94, no. (2014): 69–92.

<sup>23</sup> Handrahan, "Gender and ethnicity."

<sup>24</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

<sup>25</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

<sup>26</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott, and Emmett, "The Heart of the Matter," 21.



victories, delineates the different foes and friends of the Kyrgyz people, reflects the philosophy of national unity, and identifies the heroic actions of the main protagonist, Manas, and his followers. Manas is the ideal and collective image of what it means to be a male warrior; a defender of the motherland; and an exemplary son, husband, and father<sup>27</sup>. Such origin myths are predicated on sexual order, which works to “exclude women from the community, the creation and the polity because the myth of origin relies on ‘essential identities’ to define belonging, resulting in exclusionary male ideologies.”<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, “Kyrgyzness” became defined by maleness, while ethnic womanhood was defined in terms of women’s bodies; reproductive and sexual capacity were markers of their ethnic identity. Nationalists used women’s bodies as national symbols but defied the specific reality of women’s lives thereby giving men and the state the power and legitimacy to act on behalf of and in the name of the ethno-nation and mandated masculinized patriarchy and male sexual control over women to ensure ethno-national unity.<sup>29</sup> Male control over women’s behaviors, appearances, bodies, and societal roles becomes a foundational component of ethnic identity. Control of this kind has a nearly sure propensity to justify the violence of men against women as a tool to counteract deviations.

The specific attacks on women’s rights in Kyrgyzstan discussed in this article happen in the context of pervasive violence against women and girls, with only the first quarter of 2020 marked by a 65 percent rise in domestic violence cases and four women murdered by their intimate partners (Kyrgyz Vice Prime Minister Aida Ismailova).<sup>30</sup> In 2019, police registered more than six thousand domestic violence cases and in 2020 there were at least 3,713 allegations of domestic violence registered in Kyrgyzstan in only the first five months of that year (the head of the Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Stalbek Rakhmanov, revealed at an online conference).<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch was concerned about underreporting and a lack of reliable domestic violence data, due to a poor response from the justice system, the lack of shelters, social pressure, and a general lack of protection and support to the victims.<sup>32</sup> While the state’s response called to strengthen

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<sup>27</sup> Marat, *National Ideology*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Charles and Hintjens, 1998 in Handrahan, “Gender and ethnicity,” 481.

<sup>29</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

<sup>30</sup> Aichurek Kurmanbekova and Mihra Rittmann, “Video of domestic abuse sparks outrage in Kyrgyzstan calls to strengthen justice and support for abuse survivors,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/16/video-domestic-abuse-sparks-outrage-kyrgyzstan>.

<sup>31</sup> Ruslan Kharizov, “3,713 facts of domestic violence were identified in Kyrgyzstan for five months,” *24.kg*, June 19, 2020, [https://24.kg/obschestvo/156724\\_tsifra\\_dnya\\_3713\\_faktov\\_semeynogo\\_nasiliya\\_vyiyavili\\_vkyrgyzstane\\_za\\_pyat\\_mesyatsev/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/156724_tsifra_dnya_3713_faktov_semeynogo_nasiliya_vyiyavili_vkyrgyzstane_za_pyat_mesyatsev/)

<sup>32</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: Pressure builds to protect women and girls on anniversary of woman’s murder, act to halt violence against women,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/28/kyrgyzstan-pressure-builds-protect-women-and-girls>

laws and make penalties harsher, women's rights groups have had no trust that these official calls will result in realistic changes.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, even as Kyrgyzstan has undertaken measures such as strengthening the law on domestic violence in 2017, the criminalization of religious marriages of children under 18, an increased prison sentence for perpetrators of abduction of women for marriage, there has been an apparent recourse to the use of violence by men against women. This violence continues to be categorized a misdemeanor rather than a criminal offense, carries lesser penalties,<sup>34</sup> and often leads to impunity for the abusers.<sup>35</sup> The existing state recognition of the issue, purged by the local and international advocacy, has focused on the law as the only change mechanism epitomized in the national plans of actions to achieve gender equality and adherence to international human rights treaties. The state legislation that pledges to protect women from gender violence has been adopted and amended to lend more justice to the victims of abuse yet, the power of these laws has been only symbolic and questionable as the criminalized behavior continues to be seen as acceptable, supported by the culture of impunity, and implicitly endorsed by the "war on women" by the state.

### **The "War on Women": 2020 Events in Kyrgyzstan**

The analytic objectives of this article are informed by a discussion of the events that took place in 2020 in Kyrgyzstan effectively demonstrating how easily a state claiming to adopt democratic values can condone and enact violence against women and consider it "justified" and "justifiable." This is only a slender sample of cases drawing on the boldest among them. The selection is motivated by the level of their publicity, the public outcry they triggered, and the unfinished nature these cases continue conveying. They still swell with a deep sense of uncertainty about what they meant; what caused them; what consequences, long and short-term, they posit for women, girls, citizens, and the country. Questions also remain about how to redress these kinds of instances and ensure they do not happen again.

#### *Kyrgyz Feminnale*

Feminnale is a composite word comprised of "feminist" and "biennale." Feminist art communities around the world organize Feminnale at various locations and at different times to help

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<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>34</sup> Hillary Margolis and Mihra Rittmann, "Impunity for Domestic Violence Still the Norm in Kyrgyzstan; Man Who Abused His Wife in Viral Video Sentenced to Probation Only," *Human Rights Watch*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/03/impunity-domestic-violence-still-norm-kyrgyzstan>.

<sup>35</sup> Kurmanbekova and Rittmann, "Video of domestic abuse sparks outrage in Kyrgyzstan."

fight gender inequality and violence against women. In 2019, the Feminnale was on view in the Kyrgyz Museum of Fine Art in Bishkek for seventeen days, from November 28 to December 15. The title of the exhibition was *Kormilitzi. Economic Empowerment*. *Kormilitzi* was translated from Russian as “she-breadwinners,” also as “wet nurses”. The exposition included artwork from a total of 56 artists from 22 countries. Feminnale’s seventeen days corresponded to seventeen women who died while locked inside a private printing house during a fire in Moscow. Fourteen of these women were migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan. One of the Kyrgyz Feminnale’s organizers, Mohira Suyarkulova, described the event as follows,

Throughout the exhibition, artists from all over the world called attention to, problematised and valourised women’s labour, as well as issues of workplace discrimination, harassment, and pay inequality. Women’s labour comes under multiple forms: the invisible reproductive labour of childbirth and care, nurturing, cooking, cleaning, washing; the emotional labour of maintaining good relationships, creating a positive atmosphere for everyone, always smiling; and the demands on women to perform beauty work by always staying young, attractive, skinny and sexy.<sup>36</sup>

The Feminnale art works called into question “the systems of oppression that are widely seen as ‘natural,’ inevitable and even necessary.”<sup>37</sup> But just a few days into the Feminnale, its organizers encountered bullying, harassment, and threats, both online and in person, from far-right nationalist individuals and groups. A highly aggressive chauvinist nationalist movement called *Kyrk Choro* (translated from the Kyrgyz language as “Forty Knights”) was especially persistent. One of its members, Torokan Zhunusbaev, exasperated,

There were slogans there [at the Feminnale] about how it was their [women’s] right to take off their clothes, to get abortions, to get divorced. This is leading young people down the road. This is not defending the rights of women but instead perverting young people.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mohira Suyarkulova, “Fateful Feminnale: an insider’s view of a ‘controversial’ feminist art exhibition in Kyrgyzstan,” *Open Democracy*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fateful-feminnale-an-insiders-view-of-a-controversial-feminist-art-exhibition-in-kyrgyzstan/>.

<sup>37</sup> Suyarkulova, “Fateful Feminnale.”

<sup>38</sup> Bermet Ulanova, “Zheenbekov about feminnale: The fact that there was a nude woman in the museum is humiliation for women”, *Kaktus*, December 25, 2019, [https://kaktus.media/doc/403406\\_jeenbekov\\_o\\_feminnale:\\_to\\_cho\\_v\\_myzee\\_byla\\_obnajennaia\\_eto\\_ynijenie\\_jenshin.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/403406_jeenbekov_o_feminnale:_to_cho_v_myzee_byla_obnajennaia_eto_ynijenie_jenshin.html).

*Kyrk Choro* and like-minded men self-define as traditionalists, but they are best known for “queer bashing and highly publicized inspection of the capital’s brothels.”<sup>39</sup> For that group, tradition is above the law, and their goals include banning divorce and abortion. On December 2, groups of such men gathered at the entrance to the museum to “ask questions” to the organizers. They introduced themselves as citizens “concerned with maintaining the Kyrgyz mentality.”<sup>40</sup> One man from the crowd, identified as Ilimbek Israilov, said, “I came here because I care. They came to our museum; they force upon us what does not fit our mentality and tradition.” Petting the whip in his hands he added, “it was never like this before. Women have always been raised by men and their parents.” When Altyn Kapalova, the curator of *Feminnale* stepped out, she explained to the crowd that the exhibition was about equality and how violence against women and economic empowerment were intricately related. Yet, it seemed this was not of much interest to these whips-brandishing squads. They demanded that Kapalova and her colleagues “apologized to the Kyrgyz nation” and chased her as she tried to leave, shouting “Our mentality is different!” and “It is our national museum!” Kapalova received numerous threats, including death threats. Museum Director Mira Dzhangaracheva also received threats from nationalist groups who threatened to “tear her apart, rape her.”<sup>41</sup> Another curator, Aigul Karabalina, was physically attacked and suffered from a concussion and bruises on her face.<sup>42</sup> None of the perpetrators was taken to justice.

Director Dzhangaracheva shared in an interview that she “did not know that the nationalist—patriotic groups, who are against contemporary art, have so much influence in our country’s politics.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, they did. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture and Minister Azamat Zhamankulov sided with the ideas expressed by the national patriotic forces. After forcing the Director Dzhangaracheva, a former prominent political figure, to resign from her position, Minister Zhamankulov said at a briefing that the Culture Ministry “objects to a fashion show by nude women in a temple of art and

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<sup>39</sup> Bermet Borubaeva, “A reverse strip-tease upsets an international feminist art show in Kyrgyzstan,” *Russian Art Focus*, [access date July 25, 2020] <https://14thissue.russianartfocus.com/kyrgyzstans-scandal-struck-first-feminnale/?fbclid=IwAR2yFBTVBIDrLSwojj22AenbpBDqeL-ygm8GiNnbl25MxgYmLN69yAwdAA>.

<sup>40</sup> Ulanova, “Zheenbekov about feminnale.”

<sup>41</sup> Mills and Margolis, “Feminist art exhibit threatened in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>42</sup> Aizirek Imanalieva, “Activist Karabalina reported an attack—she has a brain concussion,” *Kloop*, December 27, 2019, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2019/12/27/aktivistka-karabalina-soobshhila-o-napadenii-u-nee-sotryasenie-mozga/?fbclid=IwAR0HdWoKQc9xHoVUUKKdddrITTBfOEdhxiFuogpCU-tQ00PAn9yybvD4nYg>.

<sup>43</sup> Farangis Najibullah, “Feminist exhibition in Kyrgyzstan Forced to Confront Naked Truth about Societal Attitudes,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/feminist-exhibition-in-kyrgyzstan-forced-to-confront-naked-truth-about-societal-attitudes/30310906.html>.

does not support such provocative gesture by contemporary artists.”<sup>44</sup> He accused the organizers of Feminnale of engaging in pornography under the influence of foreign agents. In his opinion, “when an artwork is made, the opinion of the public, their ideas, mentality and tradition, must be considered. Today we will edit the exposition. All provocative exponents will be removed. Some have been removed already.”<sup>45</sup> Minister Zhamankulov arrived at the museum and pointed his finger to those that he felt were particularly “provocative” and ordered their removal. According to him, his selected exhibits would be “provocative” for 80% of the population. Most of the banned artwork focused on violence against women. Among them was Kazakhstani Zoya Falkova’s punching bag in the shape of a woman’s torso with the *Evermust* logo inscribed on it. The artwork was designed to signal a woman’s body as an object of violence. Among other banished objects was a tapestry by Anya Kislaya, “Is Yulia to blame?”, which problematized victim-blaming culture in situations of sexual violence against women. Another removed work was an embroidery piece with dates when women obtained the rights to an education, to vote, and to get an abortion. More censored objects included artefacts that focused on women’s bodies, women’s sexuality, their autonomy, and violence. They were all removed via, ironically, an ambulance.

The Kyrgyz Artists’ Union publicized their reaction to the Feminnale, condemning it as a “provocative performance” and rated its quality as “lacking artistic value of the ‘art,’” “based on the banal and dated formal tricks with long outdated relevance,” and hurtful to the “traditional” sensibilities of the Kyrgyz people. The male-dominated Union noted that “despite secular orientation of our state, we cannot ignore the feelings and mental sets of the majority of the Kyrgyz society which maintain tradition values.” At the same time, these respected artists remarked that it was nevertheless impossible for Kyrgyzstan to return to the “feudal obscurantism in the Kyrgyz culture.”<sup>46</sup>

The publicity about the Feminnale reached the Kyrgyz Parliament. Those who voiced their opinions seconded the points made by the Minister of Culture. Parliament member Mahabat Mavlyanova posted on her Facebook page her reaction to the Feminnale, “We need to bring our girls and young women in conformity with national values. For 30 years we have been losing our national

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<sup>44</sup> “Journalists of the New York Times are worried about censure of Feminnale in Bishkek”, *Reporter.kg*, December 4, 2019, <https://ru.reporter.kg/zhurnalisty-the-new-york-times-obespokoeny-tsenzuroi-na-feminnale-v-bishkeke/>.

<sup>45</sup> “Journalists of the New York Times.”

<sup>46</sup> Baktygul Osmonalieva, “Scandal with feminnale; The Artists’ union of KR demands a return of Mira Dzangaracheva to the museum,” *24.kg*, December 4, 2019, [https://24.kg/obschestvo/136793\\_skandal\\_snbspfeminale\\_soyuz\\_hudojnikovnbspkr\\_prosit\\_vernut\\_miru\\_djanganarachevu\\_vnbspmuzey/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/136793_skandal_snbspfeminale_soyuz_hudojnikovnbspkr_prosit_vernut_miru_djanganarachevu_vnbspmuzey/).

identity and justified this fact by globalization.”<sup>47</sup> Parliament member Mahabat Ergeshova called Feminnale “incompatible with national traditions” and “alien to us.”<sup>48</sup> Parliament member Kurmankul Zulushev called for law enforcement to set up new investigations into other uncensored works of art.<sup>49</sup> Even the Kyrgyz President, Sooronbai Zheenbekov, decided to share his opinion on the Feminnale in one of his own briefings. “The fact that there was a nude woman in the museum is humiliation for women,”<sup>50</sup> was his rather conformist traditionalist position.

On December 9, a counteraction to Feminnale occurred. A bus with the slogan “A popular route. Nation is above the rights” and full of older women wearing traditional Kyrgyz ethnic clothes rode through the Bishkek. Dozens of these women were said to discuss the issue of the young generation’s upbringing during the ride and it symbolized the oblique morale of today’s Kyrgyz people. The organizers of this “moral tour” are not known, only the names of the passengers themselves. Yet, the infamous Minister Zhamankulov met the bus at the outset and gave a speech emphasizing that “lately there have been some negative events happening. Considering this, the Kyrgyz people must make efforts to save its traditions and values.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Georgiy Mamedov, a scholar, activist, and art critic, “when women become visible, it irritates men. Particularly, if these men have resources and power.”<sup>52</sup> Such privileged groups of men who are self-proclaimed moralists give themselves permission to occupy a place from which they see themselves as legitimate and “sophisticated enough”<sup>53</sup> to make distinctions between the “us” and “them” and make pronouncements about what constitutes a fit with Kyrgyz culture and what does not. As Suyarkulova notes,

the anonymous “masses” on whose behalf the privileged speak’ become an alibi for opposition to progressive cause and critique. While it might be problematic for a political or a representative of the intelligentsia to publicly support inequality, violence against women

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<sup>47</sup> “Reversed strip dance: why museum director had to resign”, *BBC Russian*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50636420>

<sup>48</sup> “Reversed strip dance.”

<sup>49</sup> Laura Mills and Hillary Margolis, “Feminist art exhibit threatened in Kyrgyzstan; Museum Director Resigns in Wake of Violent Threats,” *Human Rights Watch*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/06/feminist-art-exhibit-threatened-kyrgyzstan>.

<sup>50</sup> Ulanova, “Zheenbekov about feminnale.”

<sup>51</sup> “Kyrgyzstan. Don’t undress, it is a shame. Public servants salute campaigns against the feminnale”, *Stanradar*, December 10, 2019, <https://stanradar.com/news/full/37436-kyrgyzstan-ne-razdevajsja-stydno-chinovniki-privetstvujut-aktsii-protiv-feminnale.html?page=7>.

<sup>52</sup> Georgiy Mamedov, “The Invisible feminnale. The scandal which overshadowed the exhibition,” *Kloop.kg*, January 16, 2020, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/01/16/nevidimaya-feminnale-skandal-zatmivshij-vystavku/>.

<sup>53</sup> Suyarkulova, “Fashioning the nation.”

or hate, speaking from the standpoint of “common people” is a convenient cover to maintain the status quo along with their privilege.<sup>54</sup>

The ruling authorities, formal and informal, by either rendering support or by remaining silent sided with the militant nationalism of the Feminnale’s detractors. By doing this, the Kyrgyz government has demonstrated its stance that supports violence against women and rejects freedom of expressing discontent with it. As a Feminnale’s curator, Altyn Kapalova said sadly, “this is not just about the Feminnale. This is about the country. About freedom.”<sup>55</sup>

### *Police Attack on International Women’s Day Rally*

Only three months following the Feminnale, Bishkek gained an international media spotlight again due to another backlash against civil activism on women’s rights and the issue of violence against women, specifically. In late February and early March 2020, reacting to a recent avalanche of abuse and killings of women, Kyrgyz civil activists organized for a peaceful march to celebrate International Women’s Day on March 8, 2020, in an act of solidarity and fight against violence against women in Bishkek. The event, however, was disrupted before its start due to an attack on and detainment of its participants and organizers.

Developments precipitating the rally demonstrated the government’s overt and covert unwillingness to host it. Only three days before the rally, Bishkek city administration banned all public events in the capital city due to the “coronavirus threat” even though no cases of the disease had been confirmed at that time. March organizers suspected that “the reason given was a smokescreen and that authorities were opposed to the event in principle and wished to defer to the often-violent sentiments of radical-chauvinist groups.”<sup>56</sup> The head of the city council apparatus, Balbak Tulobaev, said he was afraid these gatherings would promote “untraditional sexual relationships.”<sup>57</sup> Activists put pressure on city council by condemning this decision as unlawful and stirred debates in the district court. Eventually, the ban was lifted, but only one Bishkek district, Sverldovsky, responded to the retraction. So, the march was swiftly re-rerouted to this district.

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<sup>54</sup> Suyarkulova, “Fashioning the nation.”

<sup>55</sup> Ulanova, “Zheenbekov about feminnale.”

<sup>56</sup> Nurjamal Djanibekova, “Kyrgyzstan: Women’s march against male violence attacked by masked men. Police detained marchers, but not attackers,” *Eurasia.net*, March 8, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-womens-march-against-male-violence-attacked-by-masked-men>.

<sup>57</sup> Editorial Office, “Unknown have attacked Bishkek march for women’s rights; Police detained the victims of the attack,” *Kloop.kg*, March 8, 2020, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/03/08/live-bishkekiskij-marsh-za-prava-zhenshin/>.

On the day of the rally, an hour before the march, organizers and participants began arriving to its starting spot, the Victory Square, making last preparations. Prominent human rights activists, women’s crisis center workers, journalists, scholars, university professors and students, and representatives from the art community were among them. Many brought their young children along. Some unrelated men were also noticed standing in groups slightly aside the square. Police vehicles and buses had been prepared and parked on the road adjacent to the square. Police officers were observed in the vicinity as well. Some of them were talking to the “mysterious” men. When a journalist approached one such officer, he told her that he did not know what kind of march was planned for the day and that they had a task of detaining those who would violate the public order.<sup>58</sup> As the demonstrators were ready to start on the route, the unidentified men attacked them. Dozens of men fiercely destroyed banners, dragged women to the ground, threw eggs at them, and popped balloons with toy pistols. They wore *ak kalpaks* (traditional Kyrgyz felt headwear for men), medical masks and other coverings on their faces, and some carried sticks. Rally participants fought back protecting their materials, but without much success. During the attack, police officers marched onto the square. The participants hoped they would receive protection, and some of them reported a sense of relief and hope at the sight of police. However, those were quickly overshadowed with confusion along with feelings of betrayal, disappointment, frustration, abandonment, and anger—all because the police arrested the victims of the assault and allowed the attackers to flee the crime spot without even pretending to chase them. The police pushed and jammed the detained rally-participants into the waiting police buses (amid a coronavirus threat) and marshalled them to the enclosed sections of the Sverdlovsk district police station without informing the “passengers” where they were being taken. Inside the station building, the officers failed to explain the grounds for detention, harassed the women, shamed them for their “gullibility” to foreign influences, denied them access to their lawyers, and refused entry to the Kyrgyz Ombudsman’s representatives. Police confiscated water bottles from the women and did not provide anything to drink during the entire detainment. When one young woman felt sick of dehydration and a panic attack, she was told by police “why did you go out to the march if you are so sick?”<sup>59</sup> At least one woman reported being hit by a police officer.

For most participants, the detainment lasted two hours, after which they were released with no explanations. The march organizers, about seven people, spent more time in the facility, and six of them were charged with disobedience towards police officers and fined 3000 Kyrgyz som.<sup>60</sup> Five

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<sup>58</sup> Editorial Office, “Unknown have attacked Bishkek.”

<sup>59</sup> Djanibekova, “Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>60</sup> “Department of Internal Affairs: six participants in March 8th rally were fined,” *Kaktus*, March 9, 2020, [https://kaktus.media/doc/407557\\_yvd:\\_shesteryh\\_ychastnic\\_marsha\\_v\\_chest\\_8\\_marta\\_oshtrafovali.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/407557_yvd:_shesteryh_ychastnic_marsha_v_chest_8_marta_oshtrafovali.html).



of the attackers were said to also have been fined for the same offense.<sup>61</sup> A senior women's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch, Hillary Margolis commented that "on a day meant to celebrate women's rights, these activists were doubly punished—first by an angry mob and then by the police."<sup>62</sup> Experts converged that "people should be protected, not penalized, when exercising their right to assemble and protest peacefully"<sup>63</sup> and contended that the police and mobs colluded to detract the rally<sup>64</sup>. Human right activist, Azamat Attokurov, said,

the state power apparatus was in collusion with the provocateurs. This was why police did not detain them but twisted the arms of the march participants. Those people (the attackers) were hired. They shouted all the standard slurs about LGBT, "pro-west", "grant-eaters". These slurs are not new.<sup>65</sup>

Activists doubt that perpetrators will ever receive adequate, if any, punishment.<sup>66</sup>

Lack of a proper reaction on the part of the state implicates its condonement of and collusion with the perpetrators. Observing the injustice in action on the morning of March 8, a friendly media organization called the Ministry of the Interior for an explanation, but they gave no response. In the following days, the Kyrgyz Government explained the police behavior as "violence prevention."<sup>67</sup> The Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Adilet Sultanaliev, reported to Radio Azzatyk that the police's actions were justified because the city council did not grant permission for the march. But on March 9, the Prosecutor General's office claimed that the city council's ban was unconstitutional and referred to "Article 34 of the Kyrgyz Constitution. Everybody has a right for peaceful gathering. Banning and imposing limitations for peaceful gatherings are unconstitutional, so is denying this right due to absence of a notice."<sup>68</sup> Police claimed that they detained participants on both sides of the conflict, but none of the attackers were observed in the police station. Instead, some of them were

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<sup>61</sup> "Five people who attacked women's solidarity march were brought to police," *Svodka.akipress.org*, March 8, 2020, <http://svodka.akipress.org/news:1601484?f=cp&fbclid=IwAR3aZMclkejRqd07UcLZwbFhlqhs1Lil31-dh3-Ar2kHjwpRxxUGE0EVPjM>.

<sup>62</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Women's activists detained; Investigate attacks of marchers," *Human Rights Watch*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/11/kyrgyzstan-womens-activists-detained>.

<sup>63</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Women's activists detained."

<sup>64</sup> Inna Aksenova and Erkina Asanbaeva, "Kyrgyzstan: Amnesty International demands investigation of dispersion of March 8 peace walk," *Cabar*, March 16, 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/kyrgyzstan-amnesty-international-demands-investigation-of-dispersion-of-march-8-peace-walk>.

<sup>65</sup> Aksenova and Asanbaeva.

<sup>66</sup> Aksenova and Asanbaeva.

<sup>67</sup> Editorial office, "Unknown have attacked Bishkek march."

<sup>68</sup> Aksenova and Asanbaeva.

seen on the square as they enjoyed watching women being arrested; they even stood by the police buses and mockingly waved at the detained locked inside them. Later, the Deputy Head of the Sverdlovsky Police Department, Erlan Atantayev, said that they arrested the women for the violation of a public order and that the police officers had to do the explanatory work with the detained.<sup>69</sup> Three days later, on March 11, Kyrgyz Parliament held a hearing on the Women's March issue where questions were asked to the Ministry of Interior and the General Prosecutor's office, but the discussion mainly focused on deliberating whether the demonstration for women's rights could be equated with a "gay parade."<sup>70</sup>

*Domestic Violence: The Horrific Case of a Woman from Suzak Province*

On June 11, 2020, social media and the press widely shared a video of a man torturing a woman. The man had tied the woman's hands behind her back and hung tires filled with rocks around her neck. The video showed how he then poured cold water on her and hit her face multiple times. The entire video was recorded at the man's insistence because, as he said on the video, he wanted to teach his wife a lesson. It was later revealed that the woman was tortured because she came home late after visiting her sister. The abuse resulted in a concussion, and family members confirmed that this was not the first incidence of the husband being physically abusive to her.<sup>71</sup> Human rights experts qualified the case as torture and ill-treatment under the general comments of the UN.<sup>72</sup>

The incident was called a "horrific abuse"<sup>73</sup> and described as "a deliberate act of cruelty and violence [that] constitute a grave assault causing bodily harm and should attract serious criminal charges—if the victim was anyone other than his wife."<sup>74</sup> The woman reported the abuse to the police on June 11, but they reacted two days later, on June 13, only after the video's broad circulation instigated a public outcry, and the video showed unquestionable evidence of the man's horrendous brutality. The perpetrator was detained on misdemeanor charges of domestic violence, and only later was charged with "cruel treatment," a charge punishable by a prison sentence. The victim wrote a counterstatement on June 15 stating that she had forgiven the offender. Withdrawal of complaints is frequent in Kyrgyzstan because of the social stigma and pressure on women to maintain their family

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<sup>69</sup> Aksenova and Asanbaeva.

<sup>70</sup> Aksenova and Asanbaeva.

<sup>71</sup> Zarina Mamatzhanova, "Victim of husband's abuse in Suzak withdrew her complain but the police will keep investigating," *Kloop.kg*, June 15, 2020, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/06/15/postradavshaya-ot-nasiliya-muzha-v-suzake-zabrala-zayavlenie-no-militsiya-prodolzhit-sledstvie/>.

<sup>72</sup> Mills and Margolis, "Feminist art exhibit threatened in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>73</sup> Mills and Margolis.

<sup>74</sup> Kurmanbekova and Rittman, "Video of domestic abuse sparks outrage in Kyrgyzstan."

and reconcile with abusers. Police, judges, and family members often persuade victims to discontinue pursuing complaints.<sup>75</sup> The perpetrator was placed in pretrial detention for 15 days. The trial lasted two days, and the court ordered the perpetrator to serve a two-year probation, which is a non-custodial sentence requiring him to occasionally check in with police. The torturer walked free from the courtroom. The long-term consequences of such a sentence were characterized as “today’s ruling shows that in Kyrgyzstan, a man who slaps his wife, forces her to stand weighted down by tires and bricks, and repeatedly douses her with water—all on video—can count on doing so with little fear of consequences.”<sup>76</sup>

The case triggered a massive public outcry. On June 15, following the video’s wide circulation, activists planned a protest against domestic violence in front of the Parliament House in Bishkek to demand attention to the problem and tougher penalties for this crime. Following COVID-19 pandemic regulations, the protesters wore masks and observed a distance of 1.5 meters, but even before the start of the protest, more than a dozen police officers emerged and dispersed protesters. They rudely pushed the protesters and, when asked why, one officer responded, “something is happening abroad, do not disturb Kyrgyzstan. It is not necessary to instill Western values here.”<sup>77</sup> Apparently, the police interpreted the citizens’ discontent as foreign influence.

### **Nationalist Misogyny, Security and Violent Extremism**

The vignettes above could be supplemented by many more recent stories of horrific violence against women in Kyrgyzstan that have remained unaddressed and that are illustrative of the state’s failure to support their citizens if they are women. These women were treated as ineligible to their rights as full citizens guaranteed under the Kyrgyz constitution; they were stripped of their right to hold the authorities accountable; and they were not allowed to criticize those who were appointed to provide protection and support and the form in which those were supplied. The vignettes exemplify a systematic condition where women, who need support, are actually being forced into a position of obedience and subordination in relation to men, the state, and the law, with the use of violence as a legitimate and only course of action. I attempt to understand this systematic condition by introducing the interface between gender and nationalism.

Gendered hierarchies are helpful in understanding nationalist violence because nationalism is constituted in the diffusion of structural inequality at the center of which is the hierarchized

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<sup>75</sup> “Police hinders protest against domestic violence in Bishkek.”

<sup>76</sup> “Police hinders protest against domestic violence in Bishkek.”.

<sup>77</sup> “Police hinders protest against domestic violence in Bishkek.”

difference between women and men.<sup>78</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, pressures on women to conform to a dominant socio-political power and to negotiate their ethnicity and womanhood in a patriarchal, political, and transitional context have accelerated many-fold in the last few decades and entails pervasive rates of violence against women often promulgated by the state politics.<sup>79</sup> Male specialization in security bestows the men the patriarchal rights<sup>80</sup> to engage in masculinist protection taking an apparently benign form of male domination. In Kyrgyzstan, likewise, patrilineality has resurged in recent decades as a means for providing group security.<sup>81</sup> The logic of Kyrgyz masculinist protection is in the benevolent men who protect their country, their families, and women in relation to negative influences that are liable to attack. The Kyrgyz state seeks to identify the national enemy within the nation to counteract “agents who have an interest in disturbing our peace, violating our persons and property, and allowing outsiders to invade our community and institutions”. The state “keeps a careful watch on everyone, observe and search for them to make sure they do not intend evil actions and do not have the means to perform them.”<sup>82</sup> Nationalist groups and regular Kyrgyz citizens alike appear to have voluntarily and ardently taken up the state’s surveillance function and extended the state function of dissent monitoring. A “protection racket” operates as the nationalist state pledges to protect “good” women in exchange for their loyalty and submission but withholds such services from the “bad” women who claim the right to run her own life. The “bad” women conceptually become the nation’s enemies due to their being incompatible with the accepted notion of femininity.<sup>83</sup> The situations analyzed here demonstrate that such security regime is inward looking and helps male citizens acquire a unifying force against which to assert themselves and prove their value to the nation.

The vignettes presented above illuminate that this inward-looking security regime prohibits any form or expression of discord with the masculinist protection. Feminist attempts are seen as inherently external and threatening to a nationalist agenda because they question its phallogocentric premises, and they ask for a redistribution of power and of the “economic, sovereign and political interests that have been defined by men through war, conflict and diplomacy for centuries.”<sup>84</sup> The state protection to its citizens rejects dissent, criticism, and deliberation and necessitates the

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<sup>78</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott, and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 26.

<sup>79</sup> Handrahan, “Gender and ethnicity.”

<sup>80</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

<sup>81</sup> Hudson, *Evidence: Security of Women and Security of the States*.

<sup>82</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Feminist reaction to the contemporary security regime,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 1(Winter 2003): 227.

<sup>83</sup> Peterson’s 1977 concept of the “protection racket” in Young, “Feminist reaction,” 228.

<sup>84</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 60.

limitation of freedom, especially the freedom of particular classes of people.<sup>85</sup> If women or men step outside of the designated and gendered boundaries delineated for “good citizens,” they may find themselves unprotected. If they publicly criticize state policies, the state, or officials for action or inaction, they end up being called attackers on the country, peace, and national security; they experience harassment and attack themselves. As an extension of this regime, women are not allowed to assemble in public spaces to demonstrate about their rights and the issues that concern them, and they become arrested when they try. The Bishkek rally participants were pushed to conform to certain ideas of Kyrgyz femininity by the aggressive far-right nationalists and then by law enforcement representatives. When the woman from Suzak retracted her appeal to police announcing that she had forgiven her husband, she nullified all efforts by women’s protection groups, but apparently this was her way to transform herself back to a “good woman” who does not bother her husband, the national justice system, and her state.

Masculinist nationalism expresses concerns for the wellbeing of citizens including women themselves, but they do so within the system of subordination and superiority of the national men. Its logic in conjunction with nationalist revivalism promotes a faith in masculine force and enforces ideas of men and masculinity in which male roles of protectors, warriors are inextricably linked to ferocity and aggression. Glorification of masculine force informs the confident choice of violence over other available alternatives for dealing with those considered the enemies of the men, i.e., the women, especially in the context where any gains for women are automatically considered as men’s losses.<sup>86</sup> Kyrgyz nationalists conflated violence against women and with legitimized national activism, firmly believing that they could punish women if they see them act in a non-Kyrgyz manner and that they would be acquitted. In all these cases, masculinized states operated on the ideas of dichotomous gender order and an underlying belief that gender equality connotes disadvantages for men as a group. It legitimized an idea that violence and aggression are the only solution to dealing with such losses, uncertainty, and contradictions. Dispersed are the ideas about Kyrgyz women’s place and roles in the Kyrgyz society as unimportant, inferior, as dehumanized and dispensable—all of which become naturalized, widely accepted and appear to be common sense. Themes of “us” and “them,” “undermined traditions,” “non-Kyrgyzness” appear and authorize a common sense of autonomous women as a threat to nation, a danger to security, and as a calling for counteraction. The events taking place in Kyrgyzstan are expressions of the state’s material social practices of misogynous terrorism

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<sup>85</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, 26.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Digby, *Love and War: How Militarism Shapes Sexuality and Romance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

which perform, express, and recreate discourses around women, ethnicity, and nation that instigate forms of violent patriarchal patriotism such as the one epitomized by the stories retold here.

Such gender ideologies and politics are transmitted variously. What the state, media, and public debates do and the kind of language they use when they publicly discuss women's situations become the means through which patriarchal terrorism and the war on women become inserted into the everyday lives of the Kyrgyz people. How the state fails to enforce its law to support and protect women is another way it diffuses ideas about women, men, and the use of violence among them. When the state takes little or no action towards the tremendous cruelty against women, when it shuts down women's contemporary art exhibitions, and attacks and arrests peaceful women's marchers, this is misogynous gender politics. It sends the message that women's issues are not important, that it is acceptable to publicly torture women, that women demonstrating their voices need to be put down, and that the latter can easily be done in the name of "tradition," "purity of nation," and a return to the "uncontaminated ethnic past." This "nationalist men's justice" dominates national laws and informs an ineffective justice system that does not take gender violence seriously; women and girls "continue to be humiliated, beaten, forcefully abducted for marriage, and even killed—and their abusers will get away with it."<sup>87</sup> Such a dysfunctional system, when it comes to protecting women from men, reflects and influences the views of the wider Kyrgyz society and, as such, will require systemic cultural changes to effect any change. Because when women become arrested for peaceful marching, when women's art is censored, or when a notorious torturer receives a negligible sentence for his brutal crimes against a woman such a state gives permission, implicitly and explicitly, to its citizens to act in the manner reflective of the values and norms inherent in these behaviors. These values and norms produce and reproduce widely shared ideas about what constitutes proper and improper behaviors of men and women. The common sense translated here is predictably misogynist and nationalist. These themes support the "war on women" and authorize its extension in the most brutal and inhumane forms. They obscure and mystify the social, cultural, political, and economic relations of the state and its citizens and increase societal acceptance of values consonant with those propelled by violent extremism. All of this works to devalue women's lives and breed grounds in which violence against women without repercussions stretches beyond women and has direct links with global violent extremism.

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<sup>87</sup> Mills and Margolis, "Feminist art exhibit threatened in Kyrgyzstan."

## **Violence Against Women: Home-Growing Extremism, Violence and Misogyny**

The situations described in this article are logical extensions of the state's gender politics, which produces, reinforces, reproduces, and disseminates misogyny. They, I argue, are nothing but expressions of violent extremism per se, i.e., when aggression and brutality are ideologically justified. Parallels between terrorism and violence against women have been drawn by scholars who used concepts such as "everyday terrorism,"<sup>88</sup> "patriarchal terrorism,"<sup>89</sup> "intimate terrorism,"<sup>90</sup> "domestic terrorism,"<sup>91</sup> "family terrorism"<sup>92</sup> to highlight the point that if assessed by the criteria applied to conventional definitions of terrorism, violence against women is very effective because "it terrorizes its targets and those close to them, it exerts psychological control in a way that the terrorist intends, and it leads to securitization in the form of changes to its targets." These are behaviors that that are not necessarily successful in challenging violence."<sup>93</sup> The important distinction here is that patriarchal terrorism tends to be invisible and silenced or as illustrated in this article covered up by invocations of national identity, state security, and the nation, masking multiple expressions of extreme forms of violence of which violence against women is just one. Patriarchal masculinized nationalism justifies misogyny with abusers positioning themselves as ethical partners<sup>94</sup> and as those who protect the ones they abuse.<sup>95</sup> Fear and trauma become political because they are constituted as "fundamental to the social structures of power and control that create and compound women's vulnerability and insecurity"<sup>96</sup> and any perpetrator of gender violence is complicit in this because, by dominating over their womenfolk, they strip women of the capacity to gain control over their own lives. In the situation analyzed here, violence perpetrators utilized far-right nationalist sentiments and xenophobic rhetoric to dehumanize women, while the state treated the men as their allies, and, by legitimizing their actions, gave them the "license to kill." Punishing women was seen as justifiable because they were considered as failing at being "good women" and, more importantly, "good Kyrgyzstani women," and, therefore, unworthy of humanity, personhood, identity, and dignity.

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<sup>88</sup> Pain, "Everyday Terrorism."

<sup>89</sup> Michael P. Johnson, "Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: To forms of violence against women," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57, no. 2 (1995): 283-294.

<sup>90</sup> Michael P. Johnson, *A Typology of Domestic Violence: Intimate Terrorism, Violent Resistance, and Situational Couple Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2008).

<sup>91</sup> Ruth Phillips, "Feminism, policy and women's safety during Australia's 'war on terror'," *Feminist Review* 89 (2008): 55-72.

<sup>92</sup> Rhonda Hammer, "Militarism and family terrorism: A critical feminist perspective," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 25, no. 3 (2003):231-256.

<sup>93</sup> Pain, "Everyday Terrorism."

<sup>94</sup> Pain, 537.

<sup>95</sup> Pain, 537.

<sup>96</sup> Pain, 538.

Dehumanization made it “easier for men not to care about women’s sufferings, about ‘their problems’” and “to kill or maim someone who is not deemed a full person.”<sup>97</sup> It must be noted that expressions and constructions of femininity and masculinity in the ethno-national narratives tightly resonate with those exploited by radical militant groups and make the connections between violence against women and violent extremism more logical and straightforward. In fact, gender relations have the potential to mediate societies’ propensity to violent extremism.

### **Violence Against Women as a Predictor for a Global Threat of Violent Extremism**

In the last few years, recognition of the links between violence against women and extreme forms of violence has grown globally. In September 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, in his UN General Assembly address in remarked that “there is a troubling commonality in terrorist attacks, extremist ideologies and brutal crimes: the violent misogyny of the perpetrators.”<sup>98</sup> Practitioners have agreed that gender violence and global terrorism must be addressed as necessarily interconnected because they are “related attempts to exert political control through fear.”<sup>99</sup> Researchers have explored the nature of these connections to understand their drivers and propose solutions to countering radicalization and terror. It was found that unequal power relations among women and men invoked within a patriarchal gender order were reported to be exploited by violent extremist groups.<sup>100</sup> To illustrate, it was found that harmful traditional practices such as bride price and extremist behavior were directly linked because when the bride price increase, terrorist recruitment of young males becomes much easier.<sup>101</sup> Important findings are supplied by research, which has shown that, more than any other factor, support for violence against women predicted support for violent extremism.<sup>102</sup> Individuals who supported misogyny were three times more likely to support violent extremism than those who did not. Factors that had been frequently thought to affect support for violent extremism such as levels of education, religiosity, employment, age, or geographic area and gender, did not have a predictive value. Results indicated that misogyny was integral to the ideology, political identity, and political economy of violent extremist group. Explaining why “the common thread in violent extremism is often hostile sexism

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<sup>97</sup> Digby, *Love and War*, 56.

<sup>98</sup> “Warning against ‘Great Fracture’, Secretary-General Calls on General Assembly to Reconnect with Organization’s Values, Uphold Human Rights, Restore Trust,” United Nations, September 24, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sgsm19760.doc.htm>

<sup>99</sup> Pain, “Everyday Terrorism,” 532.

<sup>100</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran, and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*.

<sup>101</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott, and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 26.

<sup>102</sup> Melissa Johnston and Jacqui True, *Misogyny & Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism* (Philippines: UN Women Asia and the Pacific, 2019).



and misogyny,”<sup>103</sup> Johnston et al. conclude that “committing one type of violence (i.e., in the domestic or private sphere), makes it more likely for an individual to commit violence on an escalating scale (i.e., more violence in the private sphere or public sphere).”<sup>104</sup> Indeed, drawing on the social sciences, theorists have shown that societies in countries where domestic violence is a normalized practice are more likely to choose violent conflict resolutions, militarism, and war than those with lower levels of domestic violence.<sup>105</sup> Societal expectations of benefits from violence increase if men—who are dominant in political power in virtually every human society—have received many rewards from committing high frequencies of aggressive acts toward women.<sup>106</sup> Men who engage in violence against women both inside and outside their home use aggression and extreme force in resolving tension on a frequent basis. Moreover, they experience low barriers to engaging in violence on an even larger scale, up to intra- and interstate conflict.<sup>107</sup> Social learning theory-inspired researchers agree that lessons from home are carried over into society, and if a society’s prevalent norm is that male interests trump female interests, that conflict is resolved through violence, and such violence is frequently met with impunity, then these norms become the template for dealing with other differences—ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, and ideological. When these dynamics predominate, prejudicial discrimination, intolerance, and a propensity toward violence create a climate of insecurity ripe for instability<sup>108</sup>. Societies and individuals who disagree with the ideas of equality between women and men tend to demonstrate significantly higher hostile attitudes towards other minorities within their own countries and outside.<sup>109</sup> The way women and men co-exist in a society mirrors how a society addresses all kinds of differences and tensions arising from those differences. After all, “in terms of power and control, personal value and respect, and expectations for equality and healthy interactions, the dynamics in a relationship between males and females is usually the first experience of difference in life because it is within the family and at home.”<sup>110</sup> This body of newest research supports the claim that culturally based beliefs about gender status mirror societal practices, traditions, legislations and entail important political repercussions for nation-states’ security policies and relations within and beyond its borders<sup>111</sup> and that “where violence against

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<sup>103</sup> Johnston and True, *Misogyny & Violent Extremism*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*, 18.

<sup>105</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 60.

<sup>106</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, 60.

<sup>107</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, 60.

<sup>108</sup> Hudson, *Evidence: Security of Women and Security of the States*.

<sup>109</sup> Eline Bjarnegård and Erik Melander, “Disentangling gender, peace and democratization: The negative effects of militarized masculinity,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 139–154.

<sup>110</sup> Hudson, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 26.

women and insecurity are prevalent, conditions are ripe for violent extremism.”<sup>112</sup> Violence against women has been found to serve as an indicator for state peacefulness, compliance with international treaty obligations, and relationships with neighboring countries.<sup>113</sup> Its predictive value is stronger than the level of democracy, wealth, and civilizational identity of the state. Women’s situation in any given country is a strong positive correlate with the country’s propensity to turning into a cradle for extremist organizations.<sup>114</sup> Hence, normalization of violence in a society and oppression of women has national and international adverse effects.<sup>115</sup>

If, in all the above discussed ways, gender acts as a “critical model for the societal treatment of difference between and among individuals and collectives,”<sup>116</sup> Kyrgyzstan’s record of state-approved gender-based violence against women and girls and a pervasive backlash in terms of women’s rights, pose fundamental questions about their potential repercussions for national and international security and peace. Its state-endorsed misogyny runs a serious risk of “mainstreaming extreme ideology and divisive practices predicated on gendered topics.”<sup>117</sup> Connections among violence against women and a propensity towards the use of force and aggression in international politics in Kyrgyzstan are likely to be context-specific and diverse, possibly even implicit and invisible, yet there is sufficient ground to expect more violence. When the government diffuses misogynous ideas and normalizes violence against women, it simultaneously disseminates ideas of extreme violence against any group of people and/or society that are characterized as different.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars have agreed that much policy and practice mostly inadvertently have marginalized women’s diverse roles in violent extremist activity and/or reduced women’s involvement to supporting and passive participation within associated groups, thereby undermining programmatic interventions to prevent violent extremism.<sup>118</sup> Lately, however, recognition of the gendered aspects of the latter has increased and links among gender-based violence and extremist violence have become an emerging area in literature to which this article attempts to contribute. In this article, I theorized about the significance of intersections among nationalism and gender politics for a better

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<sup>112</sup> Hudson, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, 26.

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Weingarten and Valerie Hudson, “Gender as a Second Language,” *New America*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/gender-second-language/>

<sup>115</sup> Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine. Sex and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>116</sup> Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott and Emmett, “The Heart of the Matter,” 9.

<sup>117</sup> Mattheis, “Gender and violent extremism today.”

<sup>118</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran, and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*.

understanding of violent extremism as gendered. I looked carefully at the specific junctures of nationalism and gender politics where women's sufferings are normalized. Integrating nationalism into such analysis allowed for advancing the emerging discussions about the linkages among extremism and gender and extending arguments to areas which are more nuanced but less visible than, for example, those focusing on women's participation in radicalized movements per se.

Women's sufferings can no longer be seen as a mundane and apolitical issue, but "intimately bound, too, into national and global politics, and profoundly shaped by state and social responses"<sup>119</sup>. Scholars have pointed to the mutually constitutive nature of misogyny and conservative politics in violent right-wing<sup>120</sup> and religious fundamentalist groups.<sup>121</sup> This article has argued that seemingly isolated attacks on women and women's human rights in Kyrgyzstan are more than what they seem. Moreover, they are more than just by-products of unequal political regimes and exploitative economic and social systems. It is more than just what individual men and women do. It appears that the current politics of gender and gender order itself is predicated on violence. In the presence of formal peace, women live with violence and experience everyday terror and fear because violence and coercion demonstrate that their male partners, the state, and fellow citizens appear to have already been radicalized and engaged in violent extremism against them. As in Cockburn's research, women have reported that "they experience coercion by men in disturbingly similar forms in war and so-called peace. [...] War as institution, seen from a woman's location inside it, reveals itself as made up of, refreshed by and adaptively reproduced by violence as banal practice."<sup>122</sup> And, as in any war, this everyday violent extremism against women in Kyrgyzstan, some powerful groups of people have vested interests in its institutionalization and perpetuation.

Violence against women is nothing but a form of extreme violence and terror, only it has a less unequivocal exterior because it is hidden under the façade of traditional values and ethno-national identity. Right now, it seems to help refurbish post-independence ethno-national identities, produce and express associated gender identities, and, ultimately, legitimate the ruling power. In Kyrgyzstan's colonial history and post-independence nation-building state narratives gender norms have always occupied an important place in the public realms.<sup>123</sup> In the context of post-Soviet nation-

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<sup>119</sup> Pain, "Everyday Terrorism," 533

<sup>120</sup> Dara Kay Cohen, Amelia Hoover Green, and Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Wartime sexual violence: Misconceptions, implications, and ways forward* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2013).

<sup>121</sup> Chang-Ho Ji and Yodi Ibrahim, "Islamic Doctrinal Orthodoxy and Religious Orientations: Scale Development and Validation," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17, no. 3 (2007): 189–208.

<sup>122</sup> Cinthia Cockburn, "Gender relations as causal in militarization and war. A feminist standpoint," *Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, no. 2. (Summer 2010): 146–147

<sup>123</sup> Cleuziou and Dierenberger, "Gender and nation."

building's, valorization of the "revival" of Kyrgyz "authentic" ethno-national past<sup>124</sup><sup>125</sup> enforced masculinized nationalism as a dominant national ideology. Such an approach has legitimized patriarchal authoritarianism and shaped not only the political construction of womanhood, but also women's lives inside kinship relations, both relying on gendered division of roles and hierarchized relationships between women and men.<sup>126</sup> Such constructions of masculinity and femininity resonate with those believed to drive, enable, as well as counter ideological fundamentalism and political violence.<sup>127</sup> All of this predisposes societies like Kyrgyzstan to violence and permanently disturbs its potential to peace. It is my hope that analysis like this provides some understanding of the disconcerting dynamics taking place in contemporary Kyrgyzstan in relation to hostile sexism and backlash in women's rights. I hope that I have made a case to illustrate why violence against women must be seen from the perspective of global security, using a specific context of Kyrgyzstan. I also hope that my contribution inspires practitioners to take seriously the claim that "attacks on women's rights and women's human rights' defenders are early warning signs for extremist violence"<sup>128</sup> and integrate the issue of violence against women in the countering violent extremism programs and projects.

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<sup>124</sup> Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the nation."

<sup>125</sup> Marat, *National Ideology and State-building in Kyrgyzstan*, 35.

<sup>126</sup> Aksana Ismailbekova, "Constructing the Authority of Women Through Custom: Bulak Village, Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 266–280.

<sup>127</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran, and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*.

<sup>128</sup> Johnston, True, Gordon, Chilmeran, and Riveros-Morales, *Building a Stronger Evidence Base*.

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# Women as a “Political Site” in Violent Extremism: The Central Asian Case

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This paper focuses on why gender analysis may yield a more extensive understanding of the culture of violent extremists than using only kinetic approaches. Situated in Central Asia, the backdoor to Afghanistan, the paper argues that women as a cisgender category become a vital “political site” and a valuable resource to extremist groups, especially through women’s role in the ideological space of the “family,” a key institution necessary to building a new state. Incentivizing foreign recruits to join the ranks with the promise of a wife has been well-documented. It contends that violent extremism (VE) literature does not include a more holistic analysis drawn from a peacebuilding approach, which would allow for a more comprehensive gender inclusive analysis. VE literature ignores a more comprehensive definition of gender, and potentially loses a valuable early warning system, namely, the marginalization, torture, and murder of gender and sexual minorities in states overrun by extremists. Applying ethnographic and historic research methods to exploring these separate analytical approaches, the paper concludes that the normalization and/or the minimization by the international community of violent actions toward women as well as gender and sexual minorities is an impediment toward comprehending the full impact of extremism.

Central Asia lies at the border of several countries that experience active violent extremist groups. As a region, since 2012 it has been the third largest point of origin for Salafi jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq under the name of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),<sup>1</sup> as well as the third largest source of women;<sup>2</sup> more than 4,000 total fighters, both men and women, from Central Asia joined the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Given their critical role in the family, women became a valuable resource to extremist groups, and it has been well-documented that many foreign recruits were incentivized to join extremist groups by the promise of a wife.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, Central Asia offers relevant markers for a broader understanding of the context for how violent extremism is navigated between societal narratives, including religion, nationalism,

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<sup>1</sup> ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), is a Sunni jihadist group that is sometimes called Daesh.

<sup>2</sup> Uran Bobekov, “The Central Asian Women on the Frontline of Jihad,” *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Interview with Tatiyana Dronzina by Elnu Alekperov,” , October 14, 2016, <https://azeri.today/articles/1014/>.

<sup>4</sup> Anita Peresin, “Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (June 2015): 21–38.



and especially, gender dynamics. The term “gender” is understood to be a framing device to interrogate the power dynamics between men, women, and other gender and sexual minorities or between the individual and larger political projects, be they be nationalism, extremism, or religious re-identification, as is the case in post-Soviet Central Asia.<sup>5</sup>

### **Considering Gender in the Analysis of Violent Extremism**

Violent extremist groups often amplify gender divisions as a means of incentivizing recruitment. Highly regimented gender codes of dress, behavior, and ideologies for young men and women are found in extremist propaganda materials. Among extremist groups, such gender ideals and codes are highly defined, with rewards and/or punishments propagated to reinforce rapidly changing gender norms. An early indicator of encroaching extremism is the increase in gender-differential markers, including rigid notions of binary conceptions of men and women’s roles as well as a lack of tolerance for gender and sexual minorities. Rarely do policy circles consider such gender markers as an early warning system, and infrequently is it noted in the security literature on violent extremism.

Preventing and countering violent extremism is a relevant topic in policy agendas in most governments throughout the world today. However, the gendered dimensions of violent extremism, especially in the policies concerned with preventing and countering violent extremism, is typically not considered as a part of the analysis. To realistically address the radicalization and de-radicalization processes and to more fully grasp the utilization of violence by extremists, especially against marginalized groups, and, hence, to make policy responses more effective, a greater understanding is needed about how gender plays a role in all aspects of extremism. A discussion about gender has also proven to be a critical entry point for engaging communities in addressing and preventing violent extremism.

An essential part of this analysis must begin with a set of definitions. “Gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, expectations, and attributes that any given society and/or institution considers appropriate for women and men, girls and boys, and gender and sexual minorities. It is critical not to conflate “gender” as another word for “women,” or as only the biological and physiological characteristics of males and females. Gender instead needs to be analyzed in its complete socio-cultural dimensions—that is, gender is not simply another name for women, as men and boys are also gendered beings. The tendency among policy makers and practitioners alike is to

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<sup>5</sup> The former Soviet Union (1922–1991) outlawed religious practices.

use gender and women interchangeably, but this limits an understanding about what is happening to men and to others who do not identify as *cisgender*, or, in the standard social binary where gender is defined by biology, that is male and female.

Why is this important? To understand the nature of violent extremism, a broader analytical lens should include how are “hyper-masculinity” and “militarized masculinities” of manhood propagated by radical groups and likewise, is there low or zero tolerance for gender and sexual minorities? We need to ask more gender-sensitive questions, such as, does a sense of “failed adulthood” figure into the appeal for young men and women in their efforts to join ISIS? How do the hurdles (financial, ideological, or physical) to becoming a man in society lead to distorted notions of power and extreme violence?

In the case of Central Asia, it is also important to add an intersectionality approach when analyzing gender in the region. Intersectionality is an analytical framework that encompasses other identities including gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, location (urban or rural), and examines aspects of power.<sup>6</sup> All five countries in Central Asia have large rural populations, which in turn has increased the vulnerability of both young men and young women, but for various reasons.<sup>7</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, education for rural boys and girls became increasingly difficult to access and afford. Within months of the collapse, a great number of religious-affiliated groups infiltrated the rural areas and offered religious teachings in lieu of secular education. The predominant group was the Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia. Within the span of five years, fewer and fewer girls were welcomed into these rudimentary educational schoolhouses where a boy’s education was prized over girl’s education. As a result, girls found themselves at home and marrying at an early age. At the same time, economic hardship in rural regions meant that young men often traveled to Moscow or other major cities outside of Central Asia in search of seasonal labor opportunities. These simultaneous “push and pull” factors left families more vulnerable and some impoverished especially families with households headed by young women. It is the first generation of the post-Soviet period, those who were young in 2012, who have joined ISIS and other extremist groups.

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<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality was conceptualized by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1989) and challenged the notion that gender was the primary determinant of an individual’s life.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Kuehnast, “Poverty Shock: The Impact of Rapid Economic Change on the Women of the Kyrgyz Republic,” In *When Things Fall Apart: Qualitative Studies of Poverty in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Nora Dudwick, Elizabeth Gomart, Alexandre Marc, and Kathleen Kuehnast (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2003), [33-55].

The problem of extremism is also a definitional one. As Noemie Bouhana<sup>8</sup> rightly characterizes, violent extremism is defined by various fields of inquiry, and is further complicated by the hyper analysis at the individual (or micro) level instead of a more integrative, inclusive approach that allows for the perspective at the community and/or group level as well as the macro or structural levels. Most social problems are complex and require a deeper understanding of interlocking problems, and most efforts to understand extremism over the past several decades emphasize the individual and their susceptibility to new ways of thinking. But amid these analytical approaches, gender is rarely used as an analytical lens toward understanding the more complex social patterns of violent extremism.

This paper suggests that a gender analysis may provide a more integrative approach toward understanding the historic and current contexts of why Central Asian women may or may not be vulnerable to extremist recruitment. It frames the problem of extremism from the lens of peacebuilding instead of through the kinetic frameworks of counterterrorism (CT) or countering violent extremism (CVE). In doing so, it offers more avenues for investigative methodologies, including ethnographies, which allows for in-depth interviews and oral histories.

Expanding the lens to be inclusive of a peacebuilding perspective, this paper seeks to contextualize current concerns of extremism with a more definitive gender analytical lens and to explore how women navigate their roles in such societies rife with both traditional and religious dichotomies and practices, wherein both ideologies usually leave women invisible to any CVE or CT analysis.<sup>9</sup> In the context of recent returnees to Central Asia from violent extremist groups, this paper explores whether historic predicaments and a perception of women's invisibility make Central Asian women more vulnerable to engaging in violent extremism. This paper also explores trends that reveal women's resistance and agency in the prevention of extremism. The paper concludes with the assertion that to fully understand extremism in a Central Asian context both a peacebuilding perspective and a gender analysis of past and present factors reveal important clues.

### **Turning the Lens of Peacebuilding on Violent Extremism**

The narrative about violent extremism experienced an explosive shift twenty-years ago with the 9/11 attacks, when a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Wahhabi-funded terrorist group Al-Qaeda were committed against the United States on the morning of Tuesday, September 11,

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<sup>8</sup> Noemie Bouhana, "The Moral Ecology of Extremism: A Systemic Perspective," (London: Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London, July 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Unaesah Rahmah, "The Role of Women of the Islamic State in the Dynamics of Terrorism in Indonesia," *Middle East Institute*, (May 10, 2016).

2001. The priority of the security agenda became focused on how to counter such terrorist groups' agendas. The 9/11 attack spawned new national and global policies, programs, and practices in the burgeoning industry of counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE). Underlying many of these efforts is the question of what motivates an individual or a group to engage in violent extremism, that is, to become radicalized and express their set of beliefs through violence.

Now, with two decades of focused research and practice on the radicalization concern in violent extremism, the CVE field continues mostly to be embedded in international and national security institutions. Nevertheless, parallel to these CVE efforts is the role of the peacebuilding community's analysis, which has brought an important lens to understanding more about the prevention of the violence that extremists commit.

Because the peacebuilding community is often focused at the local level, the dynamics of violent extremism are conceived less from a causal perspective and, thus, offer an expanded understanding of local social and structural conditions. In her report, Georgia Holmer<sup>10</sup> lays out some of the challenges of bringing a peacebuilding lens into a highly securitized approach to dealing with violent extremism. Most relevant to this discussion is the problem of defining violent extremism from a peacebuilding perspective. In its efforts to maintain the lanes of jurisdictional scope (criminal violence versus extremist ideologies turned to violence), violent extremism does not easily have one definable cause or outcome and, in effect, operates in what Holmer calls a "grey area." Ironically, it is this same grey area that the field of peacebuilding, founded primarily upon social science methodologies, finds itself on familiar ground.

Those working on peacebuilding in fragile and conflict-affected settings are typically operating in such grey areas, where the rules of the road shift often and identities can morph quickly to adapt to new actors on the scene. Peacebuilders focus on the strategic aspects of the prevention of violent extremism, and therefore, are not locked into singular security definitions of a predicament. In other words, the ambiguity of these grey areas is an opportunity for peacebuilders to see the larger picture, and, often at the same time, see a more nuanced storyboard. With a broader lens to study the problem, interventions can be conceived at many junctures, not just at the individual level of radicalization or that of the recruitment mechanisms. Moreover, the peacebuilding approach toward understanding violent extremism allows for the diversity of situations and not a "one size fits all" analytic framework.

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<sup>10</sup> Georgia Holmer, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective," *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 336 (September 2013).

Among the key criticisms of the peacebuilding approach toward addressing violent extremism is the lack of engagement with the security sector. While this conundrum invites opportunities to draw from both fields, this paper will focus on using a peacebuilding lens. This approach seeks explanations, but also recognizes the ambiguity that is at the heart of understanding the intersection between security, civil society, and the disruptive dynamics of extremist ideologies and violence on communities.

Even amid the ambiguity, the peacebuilding field offers something that the CT/CVE sector has not been able to fully embrace in its studies—the benefit of conducting a gender analysis as a defining element to an investigative approach toward understanding violent extremism.<sup>11</sup> A defining policy in the peacebuilding sphere is that of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which after two decades is still gaining momentum in helping to shape the analysis that gender studies, peace studies, and security studies each bring to the problem of violent extremism. Emblematic of this thinking is the United Nations Security Resolution 1325, which has been the primary rubric of intersecting three different policy and practice effort and weaving it into a doctrine that seeks to bring women out of the space of invisibility when it comes to both violent conflict and peacebuilding.<sup>12</sup> As in nearly all disciplines, women have been erased from history, and as a result, as a result there is a dearth of lessons learned on their relative contributions to both war and peace. Bringing the lens of peacebuilding into our analysis of violent extremism can also set the framing for using gender analysis in addressing the problem of extremism.

### **Reinvented Notions about Women**

To introduce gender analysis and how women’s roles are often the focal point of political and social change projects, I shift now to a scene from my ethnographic research in 1994 during a period of great ideological and political transition in Kyrgyzstan. Extracted from my field notes, this example illustrates the multiplicity of female identities that co-existed in the early days immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this time, the wave of nationalism was slowly on the rise as well as a re-identification with religious practices, once outlawed by the Soviets. Gender expectations were still very much in flux and the politicization of women’s roles were only beginning to appear.

In the spring, a motley group gathered at the Ala-Archa Cemetery in Bishkek to commemorate the dead Kyrgyz poet, Aлымkul Osmonov. Among those congregated were a few

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<sup>11</sup>Phoebe Donnelly, “Demystifying Gender Analysis for Research on Violent Extremism,” RESOLVE Network, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.37805/rve2021.2>.

<sup>12</sup> Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E. Brown “Gender and Security: Framing the Agenda, In *“The Gender and Security Agenda: Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Routledge, 1-27).

members of the Kyrgyz elite who were only recently members of the Communist apparatchiki and had become pro-democracy reformers. As we listened to the prayers recited by the region's head mullah, as an anthropologist studying social change, I found myself drawn to a woman whose every movement was signaled by the rustling sounds of her paper shopping bag. Standing in a trim lime-green business suit, wearing sunglasses and a bobbed haircut, the middle-aged Kyrgyz woman stood out against the drab palette of dreary gravestones, dark-headed men in dusty gray suits, and the mullah's black gown. As she moved nearer and nearer to the Muslim leader, her bag came into view—printed on it was a photograph of a bare-breasted woman with an American flag loosely flung over her shoulders. I unconsciously reached for my camera. I wanted to capture this moment as it represented all the contradictions co-existing in this post-Soviet time warp—a well-dressed Central Asian woman, without any scarf covering her hair, holding an imported bag stamped with the image of a nude woman on it, standing next to a mullah who was publicly reciting Muslim prayers over a dead Kyrgyz poet in a Soviet cemetery surrounded by former Communist leaders. This woman defied Soviet norms by dressing brightly and expensively. She defied Muslim norms by praying in public with men. She defied Islamic codes by carrying an image of the female body. She defied former Soviet loyalties by remembering a Kyrgyz poet in “traditional” way; the list of contradictions continued in my mind. Although I stopped short of photographing this moment, the memory serves as an iconic snapshot of what I would describe as the contradictory gender discourses permeating Kyrgyz society in the first years after independence from the Soviet Union and that continue thirty years henceforth.

Deconstructing such an image with all its ambiguity and all that it represents offers a metaphor for the context of extremism today in Central Asia, which has become more commonplace as an ideological stance of resistance. The paper continues to ask what is the benefit of adding a gendered perspective to these dynamics of social change and, in some instances, the process of radicalization?<sup>13</sup> One direct answer is that extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISIS are astute about what gender tropes sway their recruitment efforts. Young people are typically searching for some sort of belonging, and fulfillment differs in every society; but many still realize their society's socio-cultural gender norms of marriage, family, and security of home.

With great appeal, extremist groups adapt their promotional recruitment efforts, and, like all good entrepreneurs, they prey upon young people's need to belong to a social group and matriculate through various stages with similarly-aged cohorts. In the time between their wish or dream

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<sup>13</sup> Leanne Erdberg Steadman, “What Policymakers Can Learn About Gender from Terrorists,” United States Institute of Peace, November 18, 2019. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/what-policymakers-can-learn-about-gender-terrorists>

appearing to be answered and the ensuing violence and repression that most women experience at the hands of extremists, women are continually invisible to the analysis of these processes of extremism. However, unlike the woman's ability to navigate conflicting narratives as noted in the cemetery scene described above, their fate is often relinquished to the ideological narratives that extremist groups propagate to men about appropriate gender ideals for women. During periods of great societal transition or upheaval, these narratives are open to rewriting by those who hold the power of influencing such norms. The next section offers a myriad of examples to further illustrate how women become a political site, especially when outside forces confront and infiltrate local systems of everyday society.

### **Bringing Gender Analysis to Political Projects**

Peacebuilding engages in the sociocultural understanding of gender that is inclusive of the roles, expectations, and norms that society has for its men, women, and gender minorities. This expansive perspective gives a more nuanced understanding of how extremist groups draw narratives from traditional gender ideals to gain influence and power over their nascent recruits.

Gender analysis encompasses the investigation or mapping of how men, women, girls, boys, and gender and sexual minorities (GSM) are conceptualized and the power dynamics inherent in their sociocultural prescribed roles. Gender analysis is based on the sociocultural understanding that gender is a dynamic organizing principle in society,<sup>14</sup> and it is inclusive of an individual's biological sex (male/female). Gender is a learned pattern of behavior that is embedded in everything we do at the individual, community, and institutional levels. A gender mindset is the socialization and internalization of the prescribed roles and expectations that a society finds most appropriate and valuable for a person—men, women, girls, boys, and GSM. A person's gender mindset can alter based on new community values, norms, and expectations.

Specifically, this paper explores gendered perspectives on how the "category of woman" becomes an ideological site for political, religious, economic, and extremist projects. This intersection is relevant to this research because it reveals the way gender expectations for Central Asian women dynamically shifted after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the reformulation of nationalism and the state occurred. There was a rapid ideological shift from Soviet ideals to a multiplicity of competing projects, including Islam, nationalism, globalism, and, more recently, extremism projects, including

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<sup>14</sup> See Kathleen Kuehnast and Danielle Robertson, "The Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory," United States Institute of Peace, January 27, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/programs/gender-inclusive-framework-and-theory-gift>

ISIS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).<sup>15</sup> A long-term generational perspective allows for greater understanding of the disruption and continuity of influences on the group along with external intervening factors.

For decades, anthropological and historical research has contributed to the study of the construction and reconstruction of gender ideologies in conjunction with larger political goals, especially nation-building projects. Whether conducted in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, or Central Asia, these studies illustrate how, in transitional societies, the category of “woman” becomes a pivotal site where “tradition” and “modernization” are debated, where new governments are legitimized, and where ancient traditions are reconstructed in the name of protecting the “woman.”

Harmful traditional practices toward women and girls become pivotal sites where colonizers, dictators, or violent extremists can use violence to control women’s access to power and opportunity. In the work of Valerie Hudson et al., the authors identify eleven practices that perpetuate the persistent and systematic subordination of women that underlies all other institutions, whether they are the state, the religious institutions, or the family.<sup>16</sup> Their research examines how such a wide swath of contentious issues, including early marriage for girls, bride price, honor killing, polygyny, veiling, and arranged marriages become symbolic discourses about women’s position in society and about the nature of national or ethnic identity, while often distancing the gender debates from the day-to-day lives of women. Each of these practices occur at different levels in Central Asia depending on the country, its legal system, and its cultural/religious norms. What each of these complex social forces shares with the other is a common ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity are debated and where women’s appropriate place and conduct serve as “boundary markers.”<sup>17</sup>

Illustrating this latter point, Lata Mani argued that in nineteenth-century India, both British colonial administrators and local male elites debated the issue of *sati* (widow burning) to advance their own political projects.<sup>18</sup> Mani asks rhetorically, “Do women become the currency, so to speak, in a complex set of exchanges in which several competing projects intersect?”<sup>19</sup> Not only did

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<sup>15</sup> See Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast, “Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,” Special Report 355 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, October 2014). [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR355\\_Preventing-Violent-Extremism-in-Kyrgyzstan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR355_Preventing-Violent-Extremism-in-Kyrgyzstan.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, Donna Lee Bowen, and Perpetua Lynne Nielsen, *The First Political Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, “Women, Islam, and the State: A Comparative Approach,” in *Comparing Muslim Societies: Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization*, ed. Juan R.I. Cole (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 246.

<sup>18</sup> Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. K. Sangari and S. Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Mani, 119.



colonialists utilize gender for political ends, but Hindu and Muslim groups turned to the category of “woman” in the name of nationalistic projects; Mani maintains that these political camps were not seeking to improve the status of women, but instead to gain strategic political leverage over their enemy.

In another study of nineteenth-century India, Partha Chatterjee suggests that Indian women were indeed the currency in the conflict between colonial forces and the Indian nationalist movement, and that such a conflict assigned to women “a place, a sign, an objective value” while leaving them, seemingly, without “a will and a consciousness.”<sup>20</sup> The British sympathized with the oppressed position of Indian women and made it their “civilizing” mission to demonstrate that the state of women reflected the entire cultural tradition of the country. Reacting to the colonialists, the nationalists generated an image of a new Indian woman, who was not only to be superior to western women but also superior to traditional Indian women and lower-class women. For both the colonialists and the nationalists, the political maneuvering and focus on the category of “woman” concealed other major cultural problems, such as those relating to the large number of minorities.

Although many studies have examined the ideological conflicts between colonial and nationalistic forces, Beth Baron looks at how the “women question” in early twentieth-century Egypt became polarized between two nationalist camps, the Islamic-oriented Egyptian Ottomans, and the secular nationalists.<sup>21</sup> Women’s activist groups came to symbolize the different discourses: followers of the religious Egyptian Ottomans rejected the spread of colonization and its immoralities and advocated instead the idea that women return to the strict Islamic law of the Sharia; in contrast, the women who sided with the secular-nationalists referred to indigenous gender models from their pharaonic past as a means of expressing the need for women’s emancipation. Baron brings important challenges to the origins of the nations’ debates, whether they are “constructed,” “invented,” or “imagined,”<sup>22</sup> and especially that gender analysis yields pivotal understandings in the ways in which gender is a cornerstone to the construction of new nations. This echoes the newer work of Hudson et al. on gender being the first political order.<sup>23</sup>

The Soviet infiltration of the Muslim kinship systems in Central Asia during the 1920s provides a relevant demonstration of how this ideological use of gender occurred in a Muslim region.

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<sup>20</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 632.

<sup>21</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17–39.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>23</sup> Hudson et al., *The First Political Order*, 12–20.

In his examination of the confrontation between the “highly developed, radical, determined, authoritarian communist forces and a cluster of traditional Muslim societies,” Gregory Massell traces how a modern political machine attacked traditional solidarities based on kinship, custom, and religion through undermining Muslim ideals of women.<sup>24</sup>

In another relevant example of how the state covertly used the category of woman to perpetuate racism and religious prejudices, Lynn Attwood offers a cogent analysis of gender construction in the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> During the 1980s, conflicting messages about women in society were promulgated in the various Soviet republics. In the European Republics (Russia, the Baltics, Ukraine, and Moldova), emphasis was placed on creating a convincing and positive image of women as full-time housewives and mothers that included the offer of special incentives for women who had two or more children. In what were the Central Asian Soviet Republics (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), however, persuasive arguments were constructed to convince this predominantly Muslim population that women should become more involved in the workforce and place their children in childcare centers. These differing views of what constituted a “good” Soviet woman were expressions of the Soviets’ mobilized effort to increase family size in the European Republics and decrease it in the Central Asian Republics. The motivation behind these political campaigns was the Russians’ fear of the growing influence of Islam in direct proportion to an increasing Muslim population.<sup>26</sup>

In Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast’s 2014 study of emergent indicators of violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan, the question of the role of women was featured in both extremist ethno-nationalist narratives as well as various religious groups and gangs. Often using “Kyrgyz traditions” as the reason why the revival of polygyny and justifying “bride kidnapping,” this included the backing of unaccredited and often uneducated imams who blessed such “marriages.” Nonconsensual marriage, however, was uncommon in Kyrgyzstan until late in the Soviet period, when the costs of weddings and mutual family gift giving became exorbitant. Some offer the Kyrgyz literary epic, *Manas*, as evidence that Kyrgyz culture never accepted kidnapping-for-marriage.<sup>27</sup> Such groups also began to target women with an appeal to their traditional gender roles as wives and child-bearers.

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<sup>24</sup> Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), xx.

<sup>25</sup> Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Rywkin, *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1982) and Azade-Ayse Rorlich, “Islam and Atheism: Dynamic Tension in Soviet Central Asia,” in *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*, ed. William Fierman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), [186-218].

<sup>27</sup> Russ Kleinbach and Lilly Salimjanova, “Kyz Ala Kachuu and Adat: Non-consensual Bride Kidnapping and Tradition in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (June 2007): 217–33.

Gradually, however, they elevated the status of women in their messaging by recognizing women as militants, and, thus, reflecting a message of empowerment.

Zenn and Kuehnast<sup>28</sup> explore the intersection of tradition, religion, and extremism. An expert formerly with UN Women in Bishkek indicated that Wahhabi institutions are growing because of the absence of government-funded programs that provide similar educational or social services, especially to youth whose parents are laborers in Russia, and that the Wahhabis target women for the same reasons that Hizb ut-Tahrir does. Wahhabis institutions, however, often teach only religious education and minimal Arabic language, so students are left largely unprepared for the types of jobs needed to prosper in a modern economy. Women are particularly vulnerable because of a vicious cycle that the expert at UN Women identified: extremist imams teach men that women are less valuable than men; men then abuse women; and finally, women seek help from the same extremist imams, who encourage them to join extremist groups that have little respect for women's rights.

Finally, in the discussion of how the category of woman plays a significant role in forms of nationalism and in the context of extremism, research sheds light on the relationship between authoritarian governments and women's rights. Daniela Donno and Anne-Kathrin Kreft's findings<sup>29</sup> note that many autocracies have prioritized the advancement of women's rights for securing women's loyalty whether there is any sort of multiparty elections. Their research asserts that autocratic party coalition-building as seen in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, uses gender and the rights of women as a tool for expanding their party coalition. It also reflects the many ways in which the Soviet Union deepened their following by promoting women's right to work and to have an education while not actually changing any of the social contracts in terms of women's work within the home and the husband's family. In other words, such autocratic tactics toward gender liberal approaches hit women with the double burden of working both inside and outside the home.

Each of the studies cited above helps illustrate the inherently complex situation of competing political projects. Yet, their common theme is how the category of "woman" has been covertly used as a strategic project to achieve political ends, and, in the case of violent extremist groups, the category of "woman" is especially relevant to recruitment strategies during times of intense social, political, and economic change.<sup>30</sup> Applying the category of "woman" is relevant to the study of violent extremism and how such groups promote hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine notions to promise

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<sup>28</sup> Zenn and Kuehnast, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>29</sup> Daniela Donno and Anne-Kathrin Kreft, "Authoritarian Institutions and Women's Rights," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 5 (2019): 720–53.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender," in *Feminism as Critique: On the Politics of Gender*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 131.

young recruits worldwide a less ambiguous and more narrowly-defined idea of men and women, using complex recruiting techniques including, “the shaming of men into battle and policing of women into modesty.”<sup>31</sup>

In summary, gender analysis<sup>32</sup> has concrete benefits, especially in its ability to expand the underpinnings of motivation and experiences of men and women in the context of violent extremism. It further uncovers how women and men are impacted by violent extremism in different ways as well as how their engagement in extremism may have been influenced by heightened gendered experiences (i.e., intimidation, sexual violence, and rape.)<sup>33</sup> Further, scholarship is helping shed light on the grey areas of ambiguity where motivations for joining extremist groups are not linear or even necessarily causal, where an “individuals’ personal and political choices are complicated and contingent.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Gender and Intersecting Identities**

Gender must also be understood in relationship with the intersecting theme of religion. In the Kyrgyz case, as well as other former Soviet Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), religion presents an important consideration. One of the most contentious newer religious influences in Kyrgyzstan is *Wahhabism*, which connotes the Saudi state-sponsored religion; it is also called *Salafism* elsewhere. Wahhabism is a highly conservative interpretation of Islam that first began to spread in Kyrgyzstan during the early 1990s when Persian Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, began to fund the construction of mosques and madrasas throughout Central Asia. Wahhabism calls for an Islamic practice based on the ways of the *Salafs*, or the devout followers of Islam’s seventh-century prophet, Muhammad. Wahhabism is hostile toward *Sufism* and syncretic brands of Islam that combine elements of local tradition and that allow followers to practice *takfir* (the practice of labeling people as non-Muslims, which, in some cases, legitimized their murder).

With the end of Soviet atheism in 1991, religion filled the ideological void in Central

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, “Online as the New Frontline: Affect, Gender, and ISIS-Take-Down on Social Media,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 11 (2018): 850–74, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1352280>.

<sup>32</sup> Gender analysis is a methodology used to study the relationships between men, women, and gender minorities, to illuminate power differentials, and to make visible the power dynamics inherent in any gender relationship.

<sup>33</sup> See Alexandra Phelan, “Special Issue Introduction for Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (April 30, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> See Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, eds., *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

Asia, and thus, some of the most pervasive patriarchal influences in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the southern and rural regions, originated from the revitalization of the practices of Sunni Islam. With funding from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, an estimated 2,000 mosques were constructed throughout the country between 1991 and 2014. According to Shahrani,<sup>35</sup> the Islamic resurgence that occurred during that period throughout Central Asia was not necessarily associated with any political activity, but instead linked more with religious education. Even the new state holidays that emerged after the Soviet collapse were founded on traditional religious holidays. As these mosques were built and established as the center of communities, *mekteps* (elementary religious schools) also sprang up, training both boys and girls in the teachings of the *Qur'an*. Shahrani's suggestion that Central Asia's approach to Islam is unique due to the legacy of the Soviet educational system means that there was nowhere else in the Islamic world where both men and women were as well educated as in the former Central Asian Republics.

Conservative Islamic influences readily infiltrated the region immediately following the break-up of the Soviet Union. This is particularly evident in the southern regions of Osh and Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan, where Muslim leaders advocated that women leave their jobs and return to the home. In 1992, several regional mullahs publicly considered the reinstatement of the Muslim custom of women wearing some form of hijab or the concealing of the hair and parts of the face.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, the issue of the historical connection between Islam and Kyrgyz ethnicity is not easily deciphered due to the gerrymandering of Soviet borders to separate ethnic groups.<sup>37</sup> The southern Kyrgyz were once a part of the Karakhanid State, which adopted Islam in 960 AD,<sup>38</sup> whereas the northern Kyrgyz, a semi-nomadic group with animistic practices and originating in the Yenisei River of Siberian region were never highly Islamicized during Catherine the Great's effort to "civilize" the nomadic groups. Despite the distinct relationship of the North and the South Kyrgyz to Islam, it is worth considering Ernest Gellner's argument that Islam is one of the viable alternatives to the

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<sup>35</sup> Summarized from a presentation by anthropologist Nazif Shahrani (Indiana University) speaking at the forum "Flashpoints in Central Asia: Sources of Tension and Conflict," May 16, 1997 (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace).

<sup>36</sup> Historical documents about Central Asia often note that the Kyrgyz women were without veils. This appears to be accurate for the northern tribes of the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, but, in the South, photographic documents from the personal archives of Russian ethnographer Klavdiya Ivanovna.

<sup>37</sup> Zeyno Baran, S. Frederick Starr, and Svante E. Cornell. "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU." Silk Road Paper, (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> See Azade-Ayse Rorlich, "Islam and Atheism: Dynamic Tension in Soviet Central Asia," in *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*, ed. William Fierman (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

(post-colonial) civil society model of the late twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> Noting that Islam offers its followers a shared moral vision that civil society lacks, Gellner suggests that Islamic ideology took over where Marxism leaves off. According to Gellner, Marxism offered the masses a sacred purpose—work for the service of society—but Islam confers a sacredness on everyday life: “So perhaps the world’s first secular religion [Marxism] failed not because it deprived man of the transcendent, but because it deprived him of the profane.”<sup>40</sup> And, unlike Marxism, Islam in Central Asia appeared at this point to be navigating the competing forces of capitalism and globalization not by resisting them, but by coming to terms with them.<sup>41</sup>

Central Asian governments often consider anyone who practices Islam outside official structures as a *Wahabi*, implying that their religious inspiration is not native to Central Asia.<sup>42</sup> Many Central Asians also consider *Wahabism* a rejection of secularism and other schools of Islam, including Central Asia’s most widespread school, *Hanafi’s*, to be a threat to traditional culture. For example, *Wahabis* in Kyrgyzstan, including Tablighi Jamaat members, often preach that Kyrgyz should adopt Arab-Islamic names; should wear *hijab* or *niqab* for women or grow a beard for men; should abstain from nationalistic music, dance, and sports; and should follow conservative social mores that exclude women from public life. This latter approach toward women stands in dramatic contrast to the elevated role of women during the Soviet period and the role of women in nomadic Kyrgyz society.<sup>43</sup>

The growing numbers of *Wahabis* in Kyrgyzstan were often due to youth recruited from the hundreds of unregulated and Pakistani- and Middle Eastern-funded *madrasas* in the country or to those who receive scholarships for religious training abroad in either South Asia or the Middle East and returned home. It is widely believed that these *madrasas* carry a hidden agenda to teach youth extremist ideology and to facilitate their transport and entry to Syria. According to the head imam in Kara Suu, near Osh, “*Wahabis* imams promote themselves as experts because of their knowledge of Arabic, Internet skills, and veneer of profound knowledge of Islam,” but they succeed only because their propaganda and its ideology are not contested.<sup>44</sup>

During the 2014 Peace Games held in Bishkek for university students, one of the more cogent

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<sup>39</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, 41–2.

<sup>41</sup> Shiva K. Dhungana, “Reducing Violent Religious Extremism and Preventing Conflict in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia 2013–2016,” Search for Common Ground Kyrgyzstan, Internal Reflective After-Action Review (April 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> See Kathleen Kuehnast, “Dilemmas of Gender and Generation in Central Asia,” in *Women in Central Asia: A Turn of the Century Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson International Press, 2001): 24–31.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with the head imam of a mosque in Kara-Suu (near Osh) Kyrgyzstan, March 15, 2014.

findings discussed the need for dialogue between “believers and non-believers” as well as between the older “Sovietized” generation and the younger “new believers” generation.<sup>45</sup> Such a recommendation offers an excellent example of how gender cannot be contextualized without also looking at the multiple roles and identities that each individual and groups navigate over time. Clearly, a gendered perspective of violent extremism in Central Asia must take such an intersectional approach to examining the many different textures of the society and its threads that continue across societal change.

### **Ethnographic Approaches to Understanding Gendered Practices**

The ways in which Kyrgyz women interpret, subvert, resist, acquiesce, or collaborate with the various ideological projects is also critical to examine in light of violent extremism.<sup>46</sup> Central to my decades of investigation is the question of how Kyrgyz women have selectively and strategically interpreted different gender ideologies. As my ethnographic evidence offered in my research from thirty years ago, Kyrgyz women embraced Soviet gender notions of emancipation, education, and employment, while at the same time they maintained and preserved Kyrgyz “traditional” practices. Further, that study suggested that Sovietization and Kyrgyz traditionalism were not two different realities operating in separate domains. Women did not make clear distinctions in terms of a dominant (Soviet) or a subordinate (Kyrgyz) ideology.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the two realities invariably shaped one another to create a Soviet-Kyrgyz identity. Another way to examine this conundrum of shifting dominant ideologies in Kyrgyz society is to consider that Sovietization gave Kyrgyz women a means by which to contest certain oppressive Kyrgyz familial expectations for women, while that very same familial umbrella simultaneously provided insulation and protection from those Soviet practices that attempted to sever cultural continuity.

In the 1980s, the theoretical study of everyday forms of resistance and “dominated” peoples permeated the social sciences, history, literature, and cultural studies. The then-novel theoretical orientation challenged the simple, polemic view of domination versus resistance.<sup>48</sup> Even the refinements made to resistance models resulted in an overly dichotomous framework, especially when considered from an anthropological approach.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Zenn and Kuehnast, “Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>46</sup> Kathleen Kuehnast, ed., *Charting a New Course: Women Preventing Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C: The United States Institute of Peace, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Kuehnast, “Let the Stone Lie Where it has Fallen: Gender in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1988).

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Engelke, *How to Think Like an Anthropologist* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 94.

Sherry Ortner<sup>50</sup> examines the inadequacy of recent resistance studies in terms of their limited scope. She also criticizes their overly simplified approaches that only consider the primary relationship between the dominant and the subordinate and do not contemplate the many sublevels within that relationship, including conflicts between men and women, parents and children, seniors and juniors; inheritance conflicts among brothers; etc. Ortner elaborates, “Resistors are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical *re-* action. They have their *own* politics.”<sup>51</sup> Ortner suggests that an important way of uncovering the many ambivalences and ambiguities of resistance is by enriching our ethnographic studies and creating “thick” ethnographies as opposed to “thin” resistance studies that tend to sanitize politics, dissolve human agency, and minimize aspects of cultural influences (e.g., value systems or religious beliefs). Thick ethnographies reveal “the ambivalences and ambiguities, [that] in turn, emerge from the intricate webs of articulations and disarticulations that always exist between dominant and dominated.”<sup>52</sup> Within these webs, Ortner argues, is a much larger story than the one just about opposition; it is a story of the transformative capabilities of social beings who are involved in a multiplicity of projects and relationships that may well collaborate as well as collide with one another.

In her ethnographic material on North Indian women’s oral traditions, Gloria Raheja,<sup>53</sup> provides a relevant example of what Ortner is suggesting. Examining how dichotomous models oversimplify the multiple solidarities that women maintain and the multiple hierarchies with which they must contend, Raheja contends that “What looks to some observers like inconsistency and co-optation may in fact be strategic deployments of different relationships that advance a woman’s interests in different ways, at different times of her life or when the configurations of power around her shift from day to day.”<sup>54</sup> The challenge in this approach, as Raheja points out, is to keep a simultaneous perspective on the multiple identities (mother, wife, daughter-in-law, etc.) and multiple solidarities (kinship, local community, larger political sphere) that frame women’s everyday lives.

Ethnographic studies that have “thickness” reveal the complexities inherent in these multiple projects and also the human agency that exists to “weave alternative, and sometimes brilliantly

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<sup>50</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Sociological History* 37, no. 7 (1995): 173–193.

<sup>51</sup> Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” 176–77.

<sup>52</sup> Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” 190.

<sup>53</sup> Gloria Goodwin Raheja, “Introduction: The Paradoxes of Power and Community: Women’s Oral Traditions and the Uses of Ethnography,” *Oral Tradition* 12, no. 1 (1997): 1–22.

<sup>54</sup> Raheja, “Introduction,” 9.



create, forms of coherence across the divides” and “is one of the heartening aspects of human subjectivity.”<sup>55</sup> These theoretical contributions have dispelled some of what Lila Abu-Lughod<sup>56</sup> has called the “romance of resistance.” They have expanded the debate about the discourses of dominance and resistance to include discussions of the ways in which linguistics, visual texts, and the media are active sites where communities negotiate their social identity<sup>57</sup> and the ways in which to broadly conceptualize the subordinate in terms of notions of collaboration,<sup>58</sup> ambiguity, fragmented and shifting selves,<sup>59</sup> multiple solidarities; and the oscillating boundaries of collectivities.<sup>60</sup> These expanded conceptual perspectives on resistance are not only relevant to the dilemmas that Kyrgyz women experienced in the post-Soviet predicament, but also pertain to the more recent insipid emergence of various brands of extremism.

“Post-resistance” literature is critical to understanding the complexities inherent in these transitioning political and economic spaces. Moreover, ethnographic accounts can provide important evidence of how women from the former Soviet Union navigated multiple solidarities. Ethnographic accounts also offer a critique of the polemic literature that emphasizes the totalitarian view of Soviet domination without allowing individual experiences to give voice to a complex set of cultural exchanges. In addition, there is a parallel predicament to consider as scholars explore social issues of ideological extremism. Problems of scholarship about the Soviet milieu, particularly issues of Soviet domination and women, are in part due to the limited access that political scientists and historians have had to the Soviet people who left only archival material as a source for understanding.<sup>61</sup> Even in the rare instance as when an American anthropologist Elizabeth Bacon<sup>62</sup> traveled throughout Soviet Central Asia during 1933, the findings of her research offer little in the

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<sup>55</sup> Ortner, 186.

<sup>56</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (February 1990): 41–55.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Gal, “Language and the ‘Arts of Resistance’,” *Cultural Anthropology* 10, no. 3 (1995).

<sup>58</sup> Christine Pelzer White, “Everyday Resistance, Socialist Revolution and Rural Development: The Vietnamese Case,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 2 (1986).

<sup>59</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>60</sup> Raheja, “Introduction.”

<sup>61</sup> See Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman*; Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).; Gail W. Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development and Social Change*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*; Ellen Mickiewicz, “Mass Culture, Change, and Mobilization: The Media Revolution,” *Soviet and Post Soviet Review* 15, no. 1–3 (January 1, 1988): 187–200.1988; Rywkin, *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge* *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe Inc. 1982; and Richard Stites *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Bacon, *Central Asians under Russian Rule*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988[66]).

ways in which Muslim women actually encountered the Sovietization experience.

As theoretical perspectives broaden to accommodate the complexities of women's involvement in multiple social and political projects, the illusion of a homogenous understanding of women gives way to recognizing intersecting identities where women find commonalities through their diversities. Chandra Mohanty<sup>63</sup> raises this problem of western scholars' homogenizing tendencies that produce the essential "other" woman. Indeed, whether as the result of age, race, class, or kinship position, women often play multiple roles that simultaneously embrace contradictory perspectives<sup>64</sup> and there is a need to illuminate the multiplicity and complexity of gender ideologies.

Due to the absence of literature offering individual views of Central Asian women, much less the views of Kyrgyz women, it is prudent of scholarship to consider that unofficial narratives (not those collected for historical documents or official records, but those that are simply the conversations between the social scientist and her informants about everyday life) reveal a wide spectrum of opinions among various generations of what it means to be a "Kyrgyz woman." Further, such informal conversations expose the types of personal conflicts that have developed for Kyrgyz women as multiple gender discourses have emerged while the influence of Sovietization receded, and a younger generation explores the possibility of other ideologies, including religious understandings, and how they might be integrated into their lives. These unofficial stories may shed light on the yet larger question that Partha Chatterjee<sup>65</sup> has also considered in his work on post-colonial India, that is, are women inevitably a political site for competing ideological frameworks to debate their brand?

In considering the multiple and conflicting gender expectations that emerged during the period immediately following the dissolution of Soviet socialism and thirty years on, the lessons learned can shed light on how women have agency in the multiple ideological processes underway. To fully analyze the predicament of women in Central Asia, and particularly the younger generation most affected by extremism, it is critical to examine various age groups for differing generational perspectives regarding the fluctuations of social practices underway. This intersection of gender and generation as captured through the vehicle of narrative ethnography, is an important methodological tool that is not reductionistic and allows for the framing of paradoxical societal expectations for women at different points in their life cycles. We must listen directly to a group of

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<sup>63</sup> Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12/13, n. 3 (Spring-Autumn 1984): 333-58.

<sup>64</sup> See Gloria Goodwin Raheja, "Women's Speech Genres, Kinship, and Contradiction," in *Women as Subject*, ed. Nita Kumar (Calcutta: Stree, 1993), [49-80].

<sup>65</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

women who were primarily invisible during the former Soviet period and today are still creating space to articulate the important perspectives of the changing Kyrgyz society. Narrated memories do not automatically give voice to the muted,<sup>66</sup> but analyzing these particular narratives confirms Carolyn Steedman's observation that, "the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture."<sup>67</sup> Such "unofficial" versions of the lives and times of Kyrgyz women are more than just an alternative interpretation of reality: they offer important fragments of a yet-to-be-formed identity of these women.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This paper suggests that when analyzing violent extremism, a greater set of analytic perspectives needs to be applied to understand the many dimensions of this complex phenomenon. I contend that because violent extremism has no national boundaries, limiting analysis to only CVE or CT also restricts potential interventions at the local level. An inclusive analysis offers an initial perspective for the analyst to observe early gender trendlines, such as heightened and/or hyper separation of male and female roles, including antagonism, aggression or violence against gender and sexual minorities.

For the past decade, a handful of scholarly studies have explored a working hypothesis that home-grown attempts to prevent and counter radicalization may prove more effective than international efforts.<sup>69</sup> With this consideration, greater attention has been given to women and their agency. Because of women's local backgrounds and diverse portfolios, preventative efforts conceived and developed by individual women and women's organizations have demonstrated special advantages when building resilience at the community level. Indeed, these grassroots networks and/or organizations often have deep and meaningful relationships within their communities and a track record of successfully addressing community needs. This gives them legitimacy to organize community forums and to act as mediators within their own communities. In many instances, women's organizations are found to be non-polarizing, and hence, efficient conduits for expressing

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<sup>66</sup> Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," in *Perceiving Women*, ed. S. Ardener (London: Dent, 1975), [1-17].

<sup>67</sup> Caroline Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>68</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*.

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.usip.org/programs/women-preventing-violent-extremism-wpve-horn-and-sahel>; <https://www.usip.org/events/women-preventing-violent-extremism-charting-new-course>, March 6, 2016; <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/files/Women-Preventing-Violent-Extremism-Charting-New-Course.pdf>

and addressing grievances that may arise within communities. For them to do so however, it is important to build skills and capacity, in other words, to support local empowerment efforts of women to address the potential or evidence of “extreme gendered notions” that imagine strict and traditional roles and expectations for men and women, boys and girls, and further, no conception, much less acceptance, of gender and sexual minorities.

Promoting the role of women in preventing violent extremism is part of a larger effort of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda as embodied in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which emphasizes women’s engagement in peacebuilding and security efforts as critical to creating a foundation for sustainable peace. This larger gender framing approach suggests that women’s empowerment and their active participation are cornerstones to building communities resilient to violent extremism. As suggested earlier in this, peacebuilding frameworks lend themselves to a more nuanced analysis of social situations that may breed extremists’ attitudes and practices, and the ways in which gender is used to recruit others to their group. In addition, the paper amplifies the need for rigorous gender analysis as a precursor to gathering information on any group dealing with extremist recruitment, re-integration, and reconciliation. To broaden these analytical lenses, it requires diverse approaches of analysis since current tools are often difficult to disaggregate and are often interdependent.<sup>70</sup> Many feminist scholars have lamented the lack of attention to gender and gender hierarchies as a factor in explaining armed conflicts and violent extremism, as well as how transitional societies often make women the focus of political projects among groups competing for power. Inherent in these studies, scholars have questioned the assumption of the state as a unitary and genderless actor; instead, they have emphasized the gendered nature of institutions and relationships within and between states in the international system.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, the current global craving for rooting out rogue actors like violent extremists continues to be at the center of foreign policy, especially after the United States pulled its military and diplomatic efforts out of Afghanistan on August 31, 2021. With Central Asia sitting at the back door of Afghanistan, the question of what are the best analytical strategies for the next decade becomes pertinent to the crisis at hand and requires truly new and more refined frameworks of analysis. Incorporating a peacebuilding approach with a gender inclusion lens to the problem of violent extremist groups and their activities is a beneficial way forward. After all, two decades ago,

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<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Kuehnast, “Gender and Armed Conflict,” in *The Gender and Security Agenda: Strategies for the 21st Century*. eds., Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2020). See also Laura Sjoberg and Sandra Via, eds., *Gender, War and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA; Denver, CO; Oxford, England: Praeger, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> See Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True, eds., *Revisiting Gendered States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

the Taliban's infamous effort to make women the "political site" of their extremist campaign reinforces the thrust of this paper, and today they seek again to make women invisible, erasing all the gains of the last thirteen years. Unless we incorporate gender as a part of our strategic analysis of power and the abuse of power, we will still be scratching our heads in another decade and wondering what happened to the women of Afghanistan, and perhaps, of the larger Central Asian region. As the world has witnessed using small and large arms as the only approach to dealing with extremism has failed with such groups as the Taliban and ISIS-K; now is the time to regroup and bring better tools of analysis to the issue of violent extremism in the region. Knowledge about social and cultural gender norms and how extremist groups build expectations and incentives around narrowly defined and highly limited gender roles may prove a more decisive and useful analysis moving forward. Decades of research now underlines the maxim that the fate of a nation is correlated with the relative gender equality of that country. Ignoring the way gender norms and expectations are manipulated by extremist groups to achieve their objectives is a critically missed opportunity by the international community, especially since these are sophisticated tactics that significantly undermine the human rights of various gendered groups and, ultimately, weaken the protection and security of these groups.

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# **Female Supporters of Daesh: A Gender Perspective on the Motivating and Catalyzing Factors that Drive Central Asian Women Towards Daesh**

*Seran de Leede*

This literature-based study explores the motivating and catalyzing factors that drove Central Asian women towards Daesh. The study argues that existing gender structures and the state-condoned subordination of women in the patriarchal culture dominant in the region have shaped women's choices and options in the context of joining Daesh in Syria and Iraq. A gendered perspective can increase our understanding of the overall dynamics of violent extremism in the Central Asian region, which, by extension, can contribute to the optimization of preventive strategies and programs aimed to curtail violent extremism. The study suggests that while gender equality and the protection of women's rights are key objectives, they could also contribute to the curtailing and prevention of violent extremism in Central Asia.

## **Introduction**

The misogynistic, violent, and patriarchal characteristics of Daesh and related groups intuitively lead to the assumption that women supporters are manipulated or forced into joining. While this has been the reality for several women worldwide, it is an oversimplification of a far more complex issue. People's actions are shaped as much by their personal characteristics and situations as by their social, cultural, and political surroundings. By extension, explanations for why and how women joined Daesh can be found in both their personal make up as well as their environment. Yet, in part due to gender stereotypes about women and violence, the simplistic, single-causal explanatory frame that portrays women as passive actors remains persistent, in particular, concerning (Muslim) women outside a Western context. This stance severely restricts our understanding of Daesh's gender-specific recruitment strategies, of gendered push and pull factors driving women towards Daesh, and of the rhetoric resonating with women from different geographical contexts, which subsequently hinders the development of effective counterprograms aimed at preventing violent extremism.

This article explores the factors that drove some Central Asian women towards Daesh. As the socio-economic, political, cultural, and demographic situations differ between each state, the study identifies country-specific factors relevant to the involvement of women in Daesh; a full comparative



analysis of the region, however, is beyond the scope of this article. Providing some background and context, the article opens with an exploration of the extent to which women have been involved in Islamic opposition groups in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with a special focus on the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the banned political Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation). It explores the different motivations of women travelling to the caliphate and argues how existing gender structures and the state-condoned subordination of women in many parts of the region have shaped women's choices and options vis-a-vis joining Daesh. Drawing from the presented findings, the article closes with some final observations.

### **Islamist (militant) opposition in the Central Asian region**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states experienced rapid changes in their social, economic, and political structures, and most were confronted with political instability and unrest. Kyrgyzstan faced two revolutions (2005 and 2010) and heightened tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations predominantly in the southern province in the Fergana Valley. Tajikistan experienced a devastating civil war (1992–1997), causing social and economic instability in the country for many years. The Soviet and U.S. withdrawals from Afghanistan, which led to fighting between different fractions and plunged the country into anarchy and led to the rise of the Taliban, also contributed to political instability in the region.<sup>1</sup> Against this background and for various reasons, most Central Asian states cracked down hard on (Islamist) opposition.

With the purpose of setting the background and context of this paper, the section below explores three of the main Islamist political opposition movements that have been active in the region, all holding very different political aims and stances towards the use of violence. While relevant for a better understanding of the threat of violent extremism in the region, the debate on the traces of political Islam and the threat posed by the groups discussed below exceed the purpose of this section and fall outside the scope of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As explained by Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2014), 143–144.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this discussion find: Khalid, *Islam after Communism*; David W. Montgomery and John Heathershaw, "Islam, secularism and danger: a reconsideration of the link between religiosity, radicalism and rebellion in Central Asia, *Religion, State and Society* 44 no.3 (2016): 192–218; Noah Tucker, "Domestic Shapers of Eurasia's Islamic Futures: Sheikh, Scholar, Society and the State," in *Islam in Eurasia: A Policy Volume*, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, ed. Thomas W. Simons Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2015), 43–76.

### *The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)*

During the Soviet administration (1918–1991), religious education and practices were tightly controlled by the state, forcing those seeking other forms of religious education to look outside the infrastructure of state-sponsored institutions. Under perestroika, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, debates on the correct interpretation and the “right followings” in Islam were waged across the region. Formed in October 1990, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) wanted to restore Islamic values back into public life after seven decades of religious suppression under Soviet rule. Demanding political representation in the newly formed government, it challenged existing power structures of the old political elite and demanded political and social reform. Civil war ultimately broke out in 1992 between those supporting the late Soviet status quo and those who desired change. The IRPT formed one of the main players advocating for political change.<sup>3</sup> After the civil war, the IRPT became the only Islamic party in Central Asia that legally participated in national politics, until it was banned in 2015 and listed as an extremist organization.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)*

The Fergana Valley, covering Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, suffered particularly from the disintegration of the former Soviet Republic states with high rates of youth unemployment and criminal gang activity. These developments exacerbated existing political, social, and economic grievances as well as feelings of marginalization, frustration, and discrimination among some Central Asian nationals.<sup>5</sup> In 1991, a group of disillusioned youth organized themselves into an Islamist militia, Adolat (justice), in the Uzbek part of the valley. The newly-proclaimed President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, took a harsh stance on Islamist opposition and responded with fierce measures in order to root out militia activity in the valley. His repressive regime outlawed all unauthorized expressions of Islam. The founders of Adolat moved to Tajikistan to fight alongside the IRPT in the Tajik civil war. Other Uzbeks followed them to flee religious persecution at home, many of whom ended up in Pakistani training.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 146–153.

<sup>4</sup> Hélène Thibault, “Political Islam in Central Asia, from religious revival to securitization,” in *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam; Second Edition*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (London; New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2021), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Noah Tucker, “Terrorism without a God: Reconsidering Radicalization and Counter-radicalization Models in Central Asia,” *Central Asia Program papers*, no. 225 (September 2019); Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci, and Chinara Esengul, “Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia; The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening In and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,” *UN Women* (June 2017): 4, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 141.

After the civil war, many Uzbek fighters moved to Afghanistan, where they formed a separate organization, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The aim of the group was to spread Islamic culture and order in public life and to overthrow the Uzbek government. In Afghanistan, the group received support from al Qaeda and the Taliban. The IMU's peak was between 1999 and 2001, and in the summer of 1999, it took several people hostage, including four Japanese geologists, in Kyrgyzstan's Batken district. The IMU issued a statement declaring that this was the beginning of a jihad against the Uzbek government. The next year, the IMU kidnapped a group of American mountaineers. While the mountaineers managed to escape, the U.S. State Department classified the IMU as a foreign terrorist organization. When the United States declared war on the Taliban in response to the 9/11 attacks, the IMU fought alongside the Taliban. The group suffered major casualties and ultimately split into different fractions, some of which merged with other groups, including the Central Asian branches of ISIS.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT)*

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a transnational, Islamist political movement seeking to unite Muslims in an Islamic caliphate. It was founded in reaction to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1953 and has followers in Middle Eastern countries and among Muslims in the West. The movement considers itself a non-violent political party, claiming its goal is to peacefully convert Muslim nations to Islamist political systems. It praises the concept of jihad, but publicly disavows the use of violence in order to achieve the establishment of a caliphate. The group is banned in many countries for its extremist, anti-democratic, and anti-Semitic rhetoric, but has so far not been tied to any violent actions.<sup>8</sup>

HT gained popularity in the Central Asian region in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. To a large extent, the group's popularity can be explained by its activist message that channels dissatisfaction with the political and moral order in the region. The themes HT stresses—the Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States, the economics of oil—appear, as pointed out by Abeed Khalid, to have limited resonance in Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> The group's main activities in the region include organizing study circles and distributing leaflets. In many Central Asian states, the state sponsored Ulema have denounced HT as an extremist organization and the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have blamed the group for various violent acts on their territory. The mere possession of HT literature in

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<sup>7</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 156–159. For an overview of the splinter factions of the IMU, see Anna Matveeva and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Central Asian Militants: Cannon Fodder of Global Jihadism or Revolutionary Vanguard?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 2 (2018): 193.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Matveeva, "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 1 (April 2018): 38; Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 160.

<sup>9</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 162–163.

all Central Asian states is grounds for arrest, and thousands of members have been detained, serving long prison sentences often under deplorable circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

To what extent groups such as the IMU, the IRPT, and HT are connected to a global jihadist network and to what extent they pose a security threat to the region (and beyond) is subjected to a politicized debate that falls outside the scope of this paper.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, as Khalid puts it, their emergence, against the background of the Islamic revival in the Central Asian states that had already begun during Glasnost and Perestroika and in combination with axiomatic claims about Islamization, radicalization, and violent extremism, put the struggle against religious extremism high on the security agenda of Central Asian states.<sup>12</sup> It effectively has translated into a deeply mistrustful attitude towards religious freedom and independent religious institutions that is still present today, resulting in accusations of extremism and repression of those seeking or offering spiritual guidance outside of the state-condoned religious structures.

### **Women's Involvement in Radical Islamist Groups in Central Asia**

Throughout history and around the world, women have been involved in jihadist groups in myriad ways. They have propagated the jihadist ideology; supported their jihadist husbands; recruited others; raised funds; transported messages, weapons and goods; and raised their children according to the jihadist ideology, ensuring the influx of new fighters and contributing to the continuity of the group.<sup>13</sup> Some jihadist groups specifically target women in their recruitment efforts. In Central Asia, the IMU encouraged women to marry IMU fighters, to raise their children according to the jihadist ideology, and to honor their children if they were "martyred." The group explicitly showed women and children in their propaganda videos, and, in some of them, women incited followers to carry out violent attacks.<sup>14</sup> While other jihadist groups, such as Boko Haram and those in Chechnya, specifically use women in suicide mission for tactical and strategic purposes, exploiting

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<sup>10</sup> Thibault, "Political Islam in Central Asia," in Akbarzadeh, *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam*, 145; Anna Matveeva, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," *International Crisis Group*, Asia Report No. 176 (September 3, 2009): 4; Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 161.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this discussion, see: Montgomery and Heathershaw, "Islam, secularism and danger"; Khalid, *Islam after Communism*; Tucker, "Domestic shapers of Eurasia's Islamic Futures."

<sup>12</sup> Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> I have explored this issue in more depth in previous writings, for example in: Seran de Leede, "Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague; Policy Brief*, (September 19, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 355 (October 2014): 7.

gender stereotypes about women and violence, the IMU engaged women on a limited scale in such attacks. In 2013, it released one martyrdom video featuring a female suicide bomber.<sup>15</sup>

Within HT, women play an important role in recruiting other women and in spreading the group's message. Through its women-only wing, the group caters specifically to women's needs, promoting motherhood as a way of empowerment for women. It offers guidance in life challenges such as finding a suitable husband, mediation in family issues, day-care and after-school programs, and financial support to women living without their husbands who are in financial need.<sup>16</sup> For women living in conservative areas who have little opportunity to engage outside the household, HT offers women-only Islamic study circles.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the group offers an alternative political vision in line with Islamic values to women who are politically engaged and who feel unrepresented by the exclusively secular women holding political positions of power.<sup>18</sup> Women members of HT actively proselytize for the group, exploiting the increased interest of women in Islam and the inadequate state-responses to this development.<sup>19</sup> In most Central Asian states, religious education for women is very limited. The IRPT also addressed this by promoting Arabic lessons and offering Muslim women a place where they could practice their religion, as women in Tajikistan were not allowed to attend services in mosques. The IRPT had a large female following, in 2011; 50% of the IRPT-members were women.<sup>20</sup>

The relevance of women within HT and their important role as proselytizers appears also to be recognized by Central Asian governments. Many women members of HT have been arrested on charges of extremism and sentenced to lengthy jail terms. In January 2006, for example, Tajik authorities arrested Moghadam Madaliyeva, the suspected leader of HT's women wing in northern Tajikistan.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the alleged leader of the female HT wing in Kyrgyzstan (whose name remains undisclosed) was arrested in March 2015.

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<sup>15</sup> As reported in Zenn and Kuehnast, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," 7.

<sup>16</sup> Zenn and Kuehnast, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan"; Matveeva, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," ii, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Matveeva, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," 10.

<sup>18</sup> Matveeva, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Matveeva, 17.

<sup>20</sup> "Kyrgyz detain alleged leader of female Hizb ut-Tahrir cell," *24 kg*, March 19, 2015, <https://24.kg/archive/en/bigtiraj/174963-news24.html/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Tajik authorities say female leader of banned Islamist group arrested," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty.

## Central Asian Nationals in Daesh

Since the rise of Daesh in Syria and Iraq, Central Asian nationals living abroad have increasingly engaged in attacks outside of the region.<sup>22</sup> On New Year's Day 2017, for example, Uzbek/Tajik national Abdulkadir Masharipov carried out an attack in the Reina Nightclub in Istanbul. The attack on the subway in St. Petersburg on April 3, 2017, killing fourteen, was attributed to Uzbek national Akbarzhon Jalilov. Four days later, on April 7, Uzbek national Rakhmat Akilov drove a truck into a crowd of shoppers in the streets of Stockholm killing four people, and, in October of 2017, Uzbek Sayfullo Saipov carried out an attack on pedestrians and cyclists near the World Trade Center in New York, killing eight people.<sup>23</sup>

It is hard to ascertain how many Central Asian nationals have travelled to Daesh-controlled territories. Numbers vary, but with estimates ranging from 5000 to 7000 men and women migrating to Syria and Iraq, the region ranks third in supplying members or supporters for jihadist groups active in the region.<sup>24</sup> Many of them reportedly were actively targeted by Daesh recruiters with messages in Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek.<sup>25</sup> For specific numbers on women leaving for Daesh, the updated ICSR dataset (2019) lists 620 Central Asian women affiliated with IS.<sup>26</sup> Estimates include between 150 and 250 women from Kazakhstan,<sup>27</sup> 188 women from Kyrgyzstan, and 279 women from Tajikistan.<sup>28</sup> With the technical defeat on the ground of the caliphate, many women (and children) have been repatriated by their governments.<sup>29</sup> However, dozens of women remain imprisoned in Iraq and Syria, many of them serving life sentences on the charges of membership of a terrorist organization. Others remain in camps like Al Hol or live as refugees in Turkey.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For an interesting read on Uzbek migrants' involvement in attacks outside of the region see Marlene Laruelle, "The Paradox of Uzbek Terror; Peace at Home, Violence Abroad," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 November 1, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Matveeva and Giustozzi, "The Central Asian Militants," 189–190.

<sup>24</sup> Drawing from the updated ICSR dataset in Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12, No. 6, (July 2019): 36.

<sup>25</sup> Nordik Soliev, "Counterterrorist Trends and Analysis Annual Threat Assessment, Central Asia," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)*, Vol 11, Issue 1 (January 2009): 65–70, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA\\_Annual\\_2019-1.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA_Annual_2019-1.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Soliev, "Counterterrorist Trends."

<sup>27</sup> Almadan Orozobekova, "Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors in Syria and Iraq," in *From Territorial Defeat to Global ISIS*, eds. Jack. A. Goldstone, Eitan Y. Alimi, Suleyman Ozeren, and Suat Cubukcu (Amsterdam; Berlin; Washington D.C.: IOS Press, 2021): 43; Tatyana Dronzina and Ilya Roubanis, "Central Asian Women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State," *Tactics Institute for Counterterrorism Studies* (London: to be released).

<sup>28</sup> Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II," 36; Orozobekova, "Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors."

<sup>29</sup> As also discussed by Jacob Zenn in this volume.

<sup>30</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, "Central Asian women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State;" as also pointed out by Noah Tucker in this volume.

## **Roles of Central Asian Women in Daesh**

Studies on the roles of women in jihadist groups show that women generally contribute to such groups in different capacities than their male counterparts. Women typically take on supportive roles, rather than militant and operational positions. They help raise funds for the group, smuggle weapons and money, transport goods, recruit others, proselytize, ensure the long-term continuity of the group by raising their children according to the doctrine, and incite men to engage in violence and support their husbands in their participation for jihad. Apart from women's increased involvement as suicide operatives, operational or militant roles and leadership positions are mostly reserved for men. Women's predominantly supportive and facilitative positions in jihadi groups does not mean that women or their roles are of secondary importance. Rather, they play a complementary role to the militant and operational roles of men that is imperative for the waging of militant jihad.<sup>31</sup>

What differentiated Daesh from other jihadist groups is that the group also engaged in an Islamic state-building project. As the group itself issued strict regulations regarding the separation of the opposing sexes, women were needed in professional roles such as in education, administration, health care, and law enforcement. In terms of the latter, women formed a female police unit, the Al Khansaa Brigade, that patrolled the streets and handed out corporal punishments to those women failing to observe the strict moral codes of conduct. Like in most jihadist groups, militant, operational, and leadership positions within Daesh have been predominantly reserved for men. However, the uncovered all-female cells in France and the United Kingdom in 2016 and 2018, respectively, the female shooter in the San Bernardino attack (2015), and the alleged female suicide bombers in the battle for Mosul demonstrate that women supporters of Daesh also engaged in violence themselves.

As for the roles of Central Asian women in Daesh, research so far suggests their roles have been like those described above. UN Women conducted studies about women and violent extremism in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and reports how in both countries, women have been known to recruit others. Two women in the Issyk-Kul region, for example, reportedly convinced their extended families, 25 people in total, to join them in Syria. A 34-year-old woman from Dushanbe travelled to Syria and returned to Tajikistan to recruit other women. In another case, two young women used the Internet to recruit others.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a Tajik kindergarten teacher created an account on Odnoklassniki, posting pictures of herself with a machine gun, calling for armed struggle, and

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<sup>31</sup> De Leede, "Women in Jihad."

<sup>32</sup> Anna Matveeva and Bahrom Faizullaev, "Women and Violent Extremism in Tajikistan," *UN Women* (June 2017); Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci, and Chinara Esengul, "Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia: The Role of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening In and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," *UN Women* (June 2017).

reaching out to other women to convince them to travel to Syria. She was arrested and is currently serving a 13-year sentence as the first convicted jihadist woman in Tajikistan.<sup>33</sup> The relevance of women as recruiters is underscored by the numerous statements of women who claim they were convinced by other women to join them in Syria. An Uzbek woman for example reported she was persuaded to travel to Syria by a colleague who promised her it was safe. When she arrived in Syria, she was “auctioned off” to a fighter who physically abused her. According to different studies, this peer-to-peer technique in which women use their personal networks to persuade other women with promises of safety, material gains, and spiritual righteousness has been a common recruitment strategy of Daesh to attract more women.<sup>34</sup>

To what extent Central Asian women have been involved in the planning or execution of violent acts is less clear. *The Diplomat* writes that at least two women from Central Asia were members of the Al Khansaa Brigade.<sup>35</sup> According to UN Women, two Central Asian women allegedly pledged to act as suicide bombers. Tatyana Dronzina and Ilya Roubanis for the *Tactics Institute for Counterterrorism Studies* write that since 2014, Uzbek women have actively engaged in terrorist attacks in northern Afghanistan and that Tajik women were reportedly fighting along the Syrian frontline.<sup>36</sup> Aside of these reports, Central Asian women appeared to have been first and foremost involved in Daesh as mothers and wives of jihadist fighters, oftentimes (coerced into) remarrying quickly after a husband’s death reportedly with little say in who they remarried.<sup>37</sup>

### **Central Asian Women in Daesh: Motivating Factors and Catalyzing Dynamics**

Studies on women supporters of Daesh from different parts of the world demonstrate that Daesh managed to appeal to a wide range of women: from teenage girls acting out to university students wanting to make a difference in the world; from women feeling excluded by mainstream society and searching for a place to belong to religious fundamentalists wanting to support their Muslim brothers and sisters in Islam in what they perceived as a global war against Islam; and from women trying to reclaim control over their lives by making their own life choices to women wanting

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<sup>33</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, “Central Asian Women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State.”

<sup>34</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, “Central Asian Women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State,”; see also Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci, and Chinara Esengul, “Analysis of the Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan, Including the Roles of Kyrgyz Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening In and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,” *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism* (August 2017); and Noah Tucker in this volume.

<sup>35</sup> Uran Botobekov, “The Central Asian Women on the Frontline of Jihad,” *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-central-asian-women-on-the-frontline-of-jihad/>

<sup>36</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, “Central Asian Women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State.”

<sup>37</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis; Botobekov, “The Central Asian Women on the Frontline of Jihad.”



to provide a better life for their children under the protective laws of Allah in the caliphate. In general, women supporters of Daesh also had different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, making it impossible to establish a workable profile. However, generally, many of the women leaving for Syria were relatively young, in their early to mid-twenties and, while having no predictive value, a significant number of them had a troubled background, ranging from a broken family to a history of substance abuse and experiences of domestic or sexual violence.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of demographic backgrounds, findings about Central Asian women supporting Daesh are comparable to the conclusions laid out above, underscoring the diversity among female supporters of Daesh. This diversity extends to the wide range of identified motivating and catalyzing factors driving Central Asian women towards Daesh. First of all, at least some women left for the caliphate out of ideological conviction. Some believed moving to the caliphate would increase their chance of entering paradise.<sup>39</sup> Others were convinced it was their religious duty to travel to the Islamic State, wanting to live a devout life close to God and to raise their families under the protective laws of Allah.<sup>40</sup> That some women left for Syria without their husbands reportedly because the “men could not match them in their religious devotion” underscores that at least some women were driven by religious convictions.<sup>41</sup> In some of these cases, the husbands were working abroad, unaware of their wives transition and continuing to send them bank transfers.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Patriarchal culture and the relevance of family ties*

What is particularly noteworthy for the Central Asian context is that women predominantly travelled with their entire families and that many (if not the majority) of the women leaving for Syria either had little knowledge of where they were going or a choice in their migration.<sup>43</sup> This, in part, can be explained by the focus of Daesh recruiters who encouraged Central Asian recruits to migrate with their families to the territory. Another explanatory factor is the patriarchal culture that dictates

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<sup>38</sup> Seran de Leede, “Western Women Supporting IS/Daesh in Syria and Iraq: An Exploration of Their Motivations,” *International Annals of Criminology* 56, 1–2 (Cambridge University Press: 2018), 43–54; Audrey Alexander, “Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America,” *Program on Extremism, The George Washington University* (November 2016); Nava Nuraniyah, “Not Just Brainwashed: Understanding the Radicalization of Indonesian Female Supporters of the Islamic State,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30 (July 2018):890–910.

<sup>39</sup> Matveeva, “Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,” 34.

<sup>40</sup> “Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia,” *International Crisis Group*, Europe and Central Asia Briefing, no. 72 (January 20, 2015): 8.

<sup>41</sup> Based on interviews conducted by the International Crisis Group reported in the Group’s Policy Briefing: “Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia,” 8.

<sup>42</sup> Matveeva, “Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,” 34.

<sup>43</sup> Orozobekova, “Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors in Syria and Iraq”; Tucker in “Terrorism without a God,”; Tucker in this volume.

traditional gender roles and fuels expectations of women to be obedient and submissive wives and mothers. Even in Kyrgyzstan, where legislation to increase gender equality is somewhat advanced, the progress on the ground is slow.<sup>44</sup> In many parts of Central Asia, customs including under-age marriage, the curtailing of the education of girls, the expectation of women to bear children immediately after marriage, the encouragement or coercion of women to stay at home, and domestic abuse remain widespread. In addition, in at least some parts of Central Asia, it is custom that (young) women move in with their in-laws. Isolated from the protection of their own families, some of these women face a life of domestic slavery and abuse.<sup>45</sup> These factors expose women to violent extremism in different ways.

The subjugated position of women in the family leaves them economically dependent on their husbands, often resulting in women having little say in family decisions. Different studies point to cases where women did not know where they were going or with what purpose until they arrived in Daesh territory.<sup>46</sup> Other studies uncovered that women, being groomed their entire lives to be passive and obedient, ended up joining Daesh because their husbands or another male relative told them to.<sup>47</sup> Refusing to obey could result in abandonment, causing not only severe economic consequences, but also social repercussions, as disobeying both contradicts religious beliefs and social customs. Some women reportedly followed their husbands to keep their families together and to avoid the social stigma from their communities against single mothers.<sup>48</sup> Other women were forced outright. One Kazakh woman was reportedly offered to a smuggler by her father as a “reward,” having to obey whatever she was dictated under the threat of corporal punishment.<sup>49</sup> Other women testified that they were physically abused into following their husbands to Syria.<sup>50</sup>

Fear of social stigma has also reportedly pushed women towards Daesh. In a report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Anna Matveeva reports on a 27-year-old Uzbek woman who found out that while she was working in Russia, her husband had started a new family. Fearing the social consequences of being abandoned by her husband, she joined Daesh in Syria as a way out.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, stigmatization by communities can push women to follow their husbands into joining

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<sup>44</sup> Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul, “Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia,” 4.

<sup>45</sup> Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, “Terrorism Without a God;” UN Women, “Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia, Executive Summary and Recommendations.”

<sup>47</sup> Matveeva, “Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan.”

<sup>48</sup> Tucker, “Terrorism Without a God;” UN Women, “Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia, Executive Summary and Recommendations;” Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul, “The Roles of Women in Supporting, Joining, Intervening In and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan,” 13.

<sup>49</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, “Central Asian Women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State.”

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Matveeva, “Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan.”

Daesh. UN Women writes, for example, that women have been known to follow their husbands fighting in Syria as they were deeply ostracized in their own communities for their husband's actions.<sup>52</sup> This is illustrated by the example of Humairo Mirova, wife of Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, the commander of the elite Special Purpose Mobility Unit (OMON) who defected to join Daesh in 2015. Mirova was a press officer of Tajikistan's Customs Service, living a secular life. After her husband defected, she reportedly was ostracized by her family and released from her job, which ultimately pushed her into joining him in Syria.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, for some women, joining Daesh offered an opportunity to escape abusive family situations.<sup>54</sup> An Uzbek widow reportedly fled with her four children from her abusive in-laws in search for a better life for her and her children in the caliphate.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, traditional gendered expectations of women create a vulnerability for those women past the marriageable age to become targeted by recruiters who promise them a suitable husband. Several women left their homes to marry their future husbands in Syria whom they met through social media.<sup>56</sup>

### *Political Factors*

Different studies point to existing regional political grievances centered around injustice, inequality, corruption, and discrimination as explanatory factors for understanding the appeal of extremist groups such as Daesh on both men and women. Harsh laws regulating religious activities, harassment, and severe punishment of (radical) Islamists and their family members, cruel conditions of detention for (alleged) extremists, as well as weak governance, increased economic inequalities, political and economic marginalization of ethnic minorities, widespread corruption, a political system that leaves little room for opposing voices, and a slow secular justice system aggravate these grievances and contribute to a decline in support for governments.<sup>57</sup> The state's inability to address these grievances provides groups such as Daesh with recruitment opportunities. As Noah Tucker points out, groups such as Daesh are oftentimes the sole actor to acknowledge these grievances and to offer solutions, providing a political alternative that resonates with many who feel marginalized and frustrated. In the case of Daesh, the caliphate was portrayed as a just and equal society, where

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul, "Analysis of the Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> Matveeva, "Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan," 35.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>57</sup> UN Women, "Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia, Executive Summary and Recommendations"; Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Esengul, "Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia," 8, n. 18; Thibault, "Political Islam in Central Asia."

everything was equally distributed, where there was no corruption and courts were fair.<sup>58</sup> In addition, as Daesh rejected ethno-nationalism as a criterium for full citizenship and emphasized that in the caliphate, Muslims of every race and ethnicity were welcome; Daesh appealed directly to those who felt excluded.<sup>59</sup> The relevance of political factors is also underscored in Tucker's contribution in this volume, for example through the case study of one Uzbek woman who fled Uzbekistan with her husband and children fearing her husband's arrest and possible imprisonment after he became a subject in a state investigation for his religious beliefs. Their search for protection, safety, belonging, and religious freedom ultimately led them to the caliphate.<sup>60</sup>

### *The Relevance of Religion*

Experts argue that the causal role of religion as a primary driving factor of violent extremism in the Central Asian context is often overestimated.<sup>61</sup> They claim that while violent extremism is often expressed through religious rhetoric, social and political grievances as well as personal networks have a much stronger explanatory value. The finding that women claiming to support Daesh out of religious convictions oftentimes had very little understanding of Islam strengthens this argument.<sup>62</sup> In his article, "Terrorism without a God," Noah Tucker convincingly demonstrates that most Central Asians supporting Daesh did so not out of religious convictions, but because the group responded to existing grievances and offered an alternative voice to those who felt unrepresented, marginalized, and frustrated, subsequently binding them through the construction of a shared identity in the form of radical Islam.<sup>63</sup>

While religion may be less important as a primary driver of violent extremism in the region, the issue of accessing religious education for women can lead to gender-specific grievances and drive women towards groups like Daesh. In most Central Asian states, religious education for women is not a priority and, while there are madrassas for young girls, the options for adult women seeking to expand their religious knowledge are few. Mosques are mostly considered male domains where women have no place and there are very few institutions catering to the religious needs of women.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Tucker, "Terrorism without a God," 19.

<sup>59</sup> UN Women, "Women and Violent Extremism in Europe and Central Asia, Executive Summary and Recommendations."

<sup>60</sup> Tucker, in this volume.

<sup>61</sup> Thibault, "Political Islam in Central Asia;" Tucker, "Domestic Shapers of Eurasia's Islamic Futures," 45.

<sup>62</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, "Central Asian Women as Agents of Political Violence in the Islamic State."

<sup>63</sup> Tucker, "Terrorism without a God," 19, 22.

<sup>64</sup> "Radicalization of the Population in Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken Oblasts: Factors, Types, and Risk Groups," *Search for Common Ground (SfCG)* Internal report, 2016; Matveeva and Faizullaev, "Women and Violent Extremism in Tajikistan."

The closing of the female department of the Muftiate in Kyrgyzstan underscores the government's stance on the relevance of female religious education.

This development is particularly troubling as women across the region have shown an increased interest in Islam, in part because young women feel being pious and knowledgeable in Islam may increase their chances of finding a suitable husband.<sup>65</sup> The International Crisis Group warns that government's failure to respond to this increased demand for female religious education leaves room for Islamist extremist groups to step in and to offer religious guidance in female-only prayer groups or study circles.<sup>66</sup> While regional experts hold different views as to what extent violent extremists actually target Central Asian women in such women-only study groups, it is both a recognized strategy of HT, at least in the UK context, as a known recruitment strategy of Daesh in the West.<sup>67</sup> In any case, allowing women the space to explore their religious interest would increase their Islamic knowledge, potentially making them more resilient to extremist narratives.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, people with concerns regarding radicalization and extremist recruitment in their networks reportedly prefer to talk to local imams rather than state officials.<sup>69</sup> In this light, allowing women access to religious institutions and enabling female Islamic leadership might optimize early warning and prevent efforts.

#### *Economic Drivers and Incentives*

Daesh recruiters attempted to persuade Central Asian nationals to move to the caliphate by means of financial incentives and the prospect of a house and a decent living.<sup>70</sup> Recruiters reportedly distributed flyers in the Uzbek language offering a \$27,000 annual salary for engineers, medics, and Islamic law experts willing to move to the caliphate with their families.<sup>71</sup> Such financial promises appear also to have been relevant for at least some women. A grandmother in Issyk-Kul, believing that ISIS would pay a \$3,000 signing bonus per family member upon arrival, convinced nine of her family members to travel with her. In another case, in 2015, an Uzbek woman from the Suzak district who was stopped while trying to leave with her four children reportedly said she was going to a holy

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<sup>65</sup> Matveeva, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," 7.

<sup>66</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalization," *International Crisis Group*, Europe and Central Asia Briefing no. 83 (October 3, 2016): 12; "Syria Calling," *International Crisis Group*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> "Radicalization of the Population in Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken Oblasts;" "Syria Calling;" "Kyrgyzstan: State Fragility and Radicalization," 12; Matveeva, "Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan."

<sup>68</sup> As also pointed out by Matveeva and Faizullaev in "Women and Violent Extremism in Tajikistan," 11.

<sup>69</sup> As pointed out by Noah Tucker in "What Happens When Your Town Becomes an ISIS Recruitment Ground? Lessons from Central Asia About Vulnerability, Resistance and the Danger of Ignoring Perceived Injustice," *Central Asia Program*, Paper 209 (July 2018): 7.

<sup>70</sup> As also underscored by the case studies in Tucker's contribution in this volume.

<sup>71</sup> Dronzina and Roubanis, "Central Asian women as agents of political violence in the Islamic State."

land where her husband was waiting for her and that she was promised \$1,000 upon arrival. She added that she was promised more money if she convinced others to join her and that she would be willing to stay in Kyrgyzstan if she could not find a job.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, high unemployment rates and financial hardship in many Central Asian states are often cited as either motivating or catalyzing factors in understanding the appeal of Daesh on Central Asian nationals. While poverty does not necessarily foster radicalization, feelings of injustice can. Furthermore, because of these extremely high unemployment rates, particularly among youth, many Central Asians go abroad to work. Most of them move to Russia or Turkey, where the men work as unskilled laborers in trade, transport, and construction and the women in hospitality, housekeeping, and childcare. Different reports warn of an increased risk of radicalization among migrant workers. They point to poor working and living conditions and low wages as well as experiences of discrimination in the host-country and of a life in isolation from extended families that could make migrant workers more susceptible to the rhetoric of extremists, or at least a life in the caliphate more appealing.<sup>73</sup> While other experts warn that more research is needed to fully support this claim<sup>74</sup>, reports do confirm that Daesh recruiters have been explicitly targeting Central Asians working abroad, visiting them in their dormitories; proselytizing for Daesh with promises of decent wages, a respectful, honorable and religious life in the caliphate, the option to join Daesh fighting forces or to live as a civilian; and promising a financial bonus ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000. They also reportedly encouraged the prospective recruits to migrate with their entire families, saying that their governments might otherwise use their families as a bargaining chip.<sup>75</sup> This is also underscored by Tucker in this volume, as in his case-study, an Uzbek woman describes how she, and others, were held to believe through online videos, that they would have a good living in the caliphate. That they would be provided with housing, jobs, an education for them and their children, equality, and social welfare.<sup>76</sup>

### **Final Observations**

The preceding discussion demonstrates that many women from Central Asian states were forced or coerced into travelling to Syria and Iraq or were taken there without prior knowledge of

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<sup>72</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: State fragility and radicalization,” *International Crisis Group*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Piotr Kazmierkiewicz, “Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia—Assessing migrants’ and community needs and managing risks,” *Sub-Regional Coordination Office for Central Asia, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Kazakhstan*, (2017): 67–69; Tucker, “Terrorism without a God,” 10.

<sup>74</sup> Speckhard, Shajkovci and Esengul, “women and violent extremism in Europe and Central Asia,” 9; Matveeva and Faizullaev, “Women and violent extremism in Tajikistan,” 8.

<sup>75</sup> Fainberg and Ezani, “Central Asia Jihadism: Home and Abroad,” 45.

<sup>76</sup> Tucker, in this volume.

where they were going. Others travelled to Syria and Iraq for different (overlapping) reasons, including religious convictions, searching for a better life and financial gains, and particularly the idea of living in an equal and just society, free from corruption and injustices, which taps into existing political grievances, proved appealing in the Central Asian context. In addition, the discussion shows Central Asian women have been involved in jihadist or Islamist groups in the past and the present for a variety of reasons and in different capacities. Aside from their predominant roles as mothers and wives of jihadist fighters and their occasional roles as militants, Central Asian women have been involved as proselytizers and as recruiters, oftentimes using their personal network to convince family-members, colleagues, and friends to travel to Syria with promises of safety, material gains, and spiritual righteousness. This dynamic corresponds with previous studies that underscore the relevance of personal networks both in recruitment strategies of extremist groups as in deterring individuals from joining such groups.<sup>77</sup> Recognition of these different roles and of the relevance of personal connections in terms of violent extremism may help optimize, prevent, and counter efforts.

The discussion shows furthermore that cultural norms regarding women shape the motivating factors and catalyzing dynamics that push them towards Daesh in different ways. First, in the various regions of Central Asia, women are subjugated to men and raised to be obedient and submissive wives. Disobeying a husband or another male relative telling them to migrate to Syria is not an option. Not only because disobedience contradicts cultural and religious norms, but also because women fear the culturally informed social stigma regarding divorced or abandoned women and the consequential risk of being rejected by their community. Additionally, women are often financially dependent on men, reducing their agency in decision-making with regards to their own lives including their religious life. Furthermore, cultural norms in terms of the acceptance of violence against women have shaped women's choice to join Daesh, as women reportedly travelled to Syria and Iraq to escape their lives of servitude, abuse, and hardship. Additionally, the cultural subordination of women and their subsequent denial of religious education and counselling contributes to women's lack of basic Islamic knowledge that could arguably increase their susceptibility to extremist narratives. Acknowledging and facilitating women's religious interest, for example through the reinstatement of the female departments of the Islamic spiritual boards

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<sup>77</sup> Tucker, "What Happens When Your Town Becomes an ISIS Recruitment Ground?"; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Orozobekova, "Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors in Syria and Iraq."

(Muftiates) or by allowing more space for NGOs working on religious guidance for women,<sup>78</sup> could help increase women's resilience to extremist narratives.

Recognition of the gendered dimensions laid out above can help increase the understanding of the overall dynamics of violent extremism in the Central Asia region. In addition, the integration of a gender perspective in preventive strategies and programs aimed to curtail violent extremism might help optimize such efforts. As a final reflection, the discussion above has laid forth that the structural subjugation of women, oftentimes deeply entrenched in the patriarchal culture of Central Asia, shapes women's choices and options in the context of violent extremism. While the criminalization of violence against women, the advancement of gender equality, and the protection of women's rights through legislation are key objectives, from a security perspective, this discussion suggests they could also contribute to the curtailing and prevention of violent extremism in the Central Asia region.

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<sup>78</sup> Such as the Kyrgyz initiative Mutakalim that offers training and Islamic courses for women, see "Radicalization of the Population in Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken Oblasts."



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# Uzbek Women in the Syrian Conflict: First-Person Narratives and Gendered Perspectives on Mobilization and De-Mobilization

*Noah Tucker*

*There were a lot of [other] Uzbek women there. Many came without knowing about the situation. They didn't even know about the bombing; they didn't even understand [...]. All the same, you don't know until you have seen it. There were a lot [of women] like that. Of course [it was very frightening for a lot of people to live in those conditions].*

—Respondent 7: Istanbul, Turkey, May 2019

*...I saw it all with my own eyes. Even if someone promises me a mountain of gold, I would never go [to a new "Caliphate"] for anything. Among a lot of the women here, there are claims about how in Afghanistan they will build the Caliphate, or in Yemen, they say "we'll go there," these women have a lot of ideas. I mean, the women who have not yet changed their minds, these women have a lot of fantasies [xayollar]. If you try to open their eyes, they will burn you [in your tent].*

– Zamira, Kurdish detention camp, northern Syria. June 2019.<sup>1</sup>

To date, the literature on Central Asian women who have left zones of conflict in Syria and Iraq has relied heavily on secondary sources—government accounts, interviews with family members or neighbors—or on interviews with women who have returned to their home country and are under observation by security services (and their home social networks into which they are attempting to re-integrate).<sup>2</sup> This paper provides the perspectives of women formerly involved in armed groups telling their own stories of mobilization and demobilization while still living in a third country. The respondents in this study were all given the opportunity to speak on the condition of anonymity, without the fear of potential retribution or repercussions for their families at home. While the sample is small and should be treated as anecdotal, it seeks to build an argument for depth and

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<sup>1</sup> Field interviews (Istanbul, Turkey and telephonic), May-June 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See de Leede, this volume, for a detailed bibliography and analysis of literature to date and Zenn, this volume, for the perspectives of returnees to Kazakhstan.

nuance in a literature dominated by short, often secondary, accounts of women's paths in and out of conflict and their experiences within armed groups.

This paper draws on five detailed first-person accounts of Uzbek women who demobilized from the conflict in Syria and Iraq, but did not return to their country of birth (four from Uzbekistan, one from southern Kyrgyzstan). Within these cases we find three basic types of personal narrative, describing (1) involuntary mobilization; (2) semi-voluntary mobilization; and (3) voluntary mobilization that reflects varying experiences and degrees of agency that the women describe for themselves in their path to armed groups in the Syrian war. One of each of these types is reproduced and discussed in detail. The analysis presented is complemented by 13 other detailed case studies with refugees and stateless women and those in their social circle and religious communities, including men and other figures within the Uzbek emigre community in Turkey where some of them mobilized from or returned to after demobilization. These case studies also include interviews with current and former Uzbek members of armed Islamist groups and their families and support networks, including a prominent recruiter/facilitator. All interviews for this project were conducted between May and July 2019, the majority in Istanbul, Turkey, along with telephone interviews with two women held in Kurdish-controlled camps in northern Syria and with one woman imprisoned in Baghdad, Iraq.

The interview structure in the larger study from which these cases were selected was designed not only to capture detailed personal narratives and life history, including previous exposure to violence (including domestic violence) or to armed conflict, but also to include specific sets of questions designed to elucidate how and where respondents were exposed to information about the conflict and the armed groups they joined, specific respected figures, or the authorities that may have influenced their decisions. Further consideration was given to how these women evaluate religious claims to authority and weigh claims about the ethics of the use of violence and how they choose one armed group over another. Individual interviews lasted anywhere between 30 minutes, when severely constrained, to three or more hours in some cases, including additional interactions and conversations as well as interviews with other family members and members of their support networks.

As Almadan Orozobekova argues, based on various case studies of women mobilized to the Syrian conflict from southern Kyrgyzstan and de Leede, greater nuance and evidenced-based analysis ought to be implemented when discussing how violent Islamist armed groups mobilise in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> The lives reflected in these case studies defy easy categorization into stereotypes of jihadi

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<sup>3</sup>Almadan Orozobekova, "Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors in Syria and Iraq: The Case

brides, “zombies,” radicals, or women whose agency is nullified by strictly defined gender roles even when the inequalities those gender roles create put severe constraints on their ability to freely make choices about their own lives.

One of the most significant things missing from all five of the life-history cases within this study is radicalization: none of them chose the groups they joined based on its ideology. While some were armed or supported a specific militant faction in the Syrian civil war, none of the female respondents in the sample (unlike some of their male counterparts) indicated support for a global or broader “jihadist” movement or ideology. This finding fits with other recent research among both women<sup>4</sup> and men<sup>5</sup> from Central Asia, which is that radicalization paradigms that focus primarily on ideology and individualized progression along a notional “pathway” to radicalization should not be the primary focus of analysis in explaining mobilization to armed Islamist groups or a central focus in disarmament, demobilization and re-integration (DDR) programming for returnees.<sup>6</sup> Instead, evidence-based approaches indicate that a complex combination of other factors on both the personal and, perhaps even more importantly, group or community level should be considered: both the similarities and differences in these complex stories and pathways of the women whose narratives are presented here support this approach.

The data and interviews gathered from Uzbek women who voluntarily or involuntarily demobilized from armed groups involved in the conflict in Syria and Iraq—as well as case study data shared with the author by organizations supporting a much larger group of women returnees to Uzbekistan—suggests that, in many cases, especially those of women, ideology or radicalization played little to no role at all in their mobilization to armed groups. Even within these cases, including one profiled in detail here, this does not mean that women had no agency in their own mobilization

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of Central Asia,” in *From Territorial Defeat to Global ISIS: Lessons Learned*, eds. J.A. Goldstone E.Y. Alimi, S. Ozeren, and S. Cubukcu, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2021), 41-58.

<sup>4</sup> Orozobekova, “Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors.”

<sup>5</sup> Noah Tucker, “Terrorism without a God; Reconsidering Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization Models in Central Asia,” Central Asia Program papers, no. 225 (George Washington University, September 2019).

<sup>6</sup> This is not meant to argue that women from Central Asia are never motivated by ideology in joining armed groups or don’t play an active role in recruiting or even participating in violence directly (one of the women in these interviews readily confirms that she was given a firearm to carry and that she did so, though she denies ever using it, and women living in female-only detention camps specifically discuss violence from other women along ideological lines). Cases like these, including female ideologues, recruiters and suicide bombers have been identified in the literature (de Leede, this volume; Zenn, this volume; Anna Matveeva and Bahrom Faizullaev, “Women and Violent Extremism in Tajikistan” UN Women (Almaty, 2017); and Tucker, *Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Uzbekistan: A Risk Assessment (USAID: 2013)*. [https://www.academia.edu/6992482/Violent\\_Extremism\\_and\\_Insurgency\\_in\\_Uzbekistan\\_A\\_Risk\\_Assessment\\_USAID\\_](https://www.academia.edu/6992482/Violent_Extremism_and_Insurgency_in_Uzbekistan_A_Risk_Assessment_USAID_)) including by this author. Rather, as Orozobekova argues, the evidence shows that our approach must be more nuanced: exclusive focus on ideology, “radical” religious beliefs and individual beliefs and attitudes in general create an inaccurate and potentially distorted or misleading picture if applied uniformly to all cases.

or that of others in their network. Rather, we see that women—like men—can make or support a voluntary decision to join an armed group or militant cause for a variety of non-ideological or pragmatic reasons. Some see it as an opportunity to gain agency; to uphold or enact specific sacred values, such as the defense of the oppressed; or to improve the lives of their own families and their children relative to their current circumstances. As is clear within these cases, these decisions often are taken with tragic consequences for them and their families when the reality of the conditions they experience within the armed group differs significantly from what they were led to expect.

At the other end of the spectrum, several of the women interviewed for this research were not included at all in the decision-making process that led to their mobilization to an armed group, including one who was taken by her family to join the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as a small child. In these cases, agency becomes critical in their demobilization, choosing to leave the armed group at great personal risk to themselves and their children.

In highlighting some common factors present in the interview set that shed light on gendered factors that informed both mobilization and demobilization, this research will also add insight on the role of disinformation or lack of information on gender roles and ethics—including gendered hierarchies of knowledge—in these decisions; gendered responses to personal prior experience with, or exposure to, violence and the role of Islam as an ethical and meaning-making system particularly in the lives of women and girls who have demobilized a conflict in which they experienced serious trauma.

These detailed personal narratives offer a unique contribution to the growing literature exploring the potential relationship between personal and collective experiences of trauma or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and vulnerability to violent extremist movements.<sup>7</sup> The third narrative detailed below, from Respondent 7, in particular offers a rich case study illustrating the complex way in which membership in an extremist movement may serve for some as both a maladaptive coping mechanism and meaning-making tool for responding to earlier trauma.<sup>8</sup> Several of the narratives—both presented in detail here and in the larger sample—also show a high degree of overlap between the experiences of some Central Asian women and children mobilized to

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example the research overview: James Lewis and Sarah Marsden. *Trauma, Adversity, And Violent Extremism*. Center for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (2021) <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/trauma-adversity-and-violent-extremism/>.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Koehler, 'Violent Extremism, Mental Health and Substance Abuse among Adolescents: Towards a Trauma Psychological Perspective on Violent Radicalization and Deradicalization'. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 31, no. 3 (May 2020): 455–72.

extremist groups with human trafficking, and suggests the some of the risk factors for human trafficking and VE mobilization may converge.<sup>9</sup>

Seeking to complement other contributions within this volume (particularly de Leede's excellent overview of women in conflict and opposition or armed groups) and make a contribution to the literature as a whole, this paper offers an emic ethnographic approach. It devotes an extended space to detailed personal narratives of demobilized women whose stories are often told only by others: family members, security officials, analysts, and "experts." Where possible, independently confirmed facts are indicated in the footnotes. But as with all first-person accounts, the reader must bear in mind that the data gathered here are from personal narratives from a specific moment in time: memories and emphases may differ at a later date or in a different context even within the same personal narrative.<sup>10</sup>

### **Zamira: Kurdish Detention Camp, Northern Syria**

My name is Zamira ... I am a citizen of Uzbekistan. I was born in the city of Tashkent in the Shayhontohir district. I have four children—four daughters. My girls and I were taken to Syria by deception.<sup>11</sup>

Zamira is a widow: her first husband died when she was very young after only five months of marriage. She was raised in a family of five children whose lives were marked by tragedy. Her only sister died, and her two brothers were imprisoned in the late 1990s or early 2000s after returning from spending time in Chechnya. Both were charged with terrorism for allegedly participating in the Chechen war and sentenced to 18 years in prison during the height of the Karimov government's extreme repressions. Speaking from a prison camp in northern Syria, she said she did not know if they had ever been released, and, by implication, if they were alive or dead, noting without irony how similar their fates had become despite how hard she says she had tried to avoid exactly that outcome.

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Weine, E. Erez and C. Polutnik, *Transnational Crimes among Somali-Americans: Convergences of Radicalization and Trafficking*. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs National Criminal Justice Reference Service (Washington, DC: 2019).

<sup>10</sup> First-person accounts have important limitations, even when recorded anonymously; humans have a tendency to downplay their own mistakes and portray themselves as the hero of their own story. Nonetheless, each of these narratives includes significant personal suffering, frank admissions of mistake or naivete. In spite of this, they must be treated as personal narratives rather the objective factual accounts.

<sup>11</sup> Zamira (name changed to protect the identity of the subject), interviewed by Barno Anvar, June 2019, Uzbek-language Distance Interview (telephonic). While the respondent waived anonymity and gave her full personal information at the time of the interview, because the author is no longer in contact and was not able to confirm her desire to share personally identifiable information, her name has been changed to protect her identity.



Following the death of her first husband and her brothers' imprisonment, she moved back home to live with her parents, who were already older and could not support their household. So, Zamira, who had only a 9th-grade education and a few months of madrasah training before she was married, and her mother did what hundreds of thousands of other Uzbekistani citizens did to survive: they went into labor migration, moving from city to city in Siberia working as traders on produce markets for several years, selling potatoes and tomatoes for an Azerbaijani wholesaler. Eventually, they settled in Azerbaijan.

The exporters of potatoes and tomatoes [in the markets where we worked in Russia] were all Azerbaijanis. They said if we would go to Azerbaijan, there would be work there, that is a store called "Muslim Shop".... a chain of Islamic stores. That's where I met my husband, then later we got married.

Here and in several other places in Zamira's narrative of her life, she describes a recurring pattern: when faced with danger, hardship, and the unknown, she turns to Islamic-identifying networks in the hope of finding shared identity, shared values, and safety for herself and her children. As a widow (and now an unmarried woman) working to support herself and her family far from the networks of community support she might have been able to rely on in her home neighborhood, she was attracted to the idea of working in a Muslim business in a Muslim-majority country. With similarly identifying religious backgrounds, the chance of experiencing similar values and ethics, and by extension, greater safety and predictability for her and her mother, were higher. Similarly, she hoped that her new husband—a Muslim Tatar originally from Russia—would be trustworthy and offer her increased stability based on those same shared values and ethics. It was promising enough that her mother returned home to Tashkent, and Zamira believed her new family and economic stability would be enough to provide for their own household and support her parents in Tashkent.

It was not to be, however. Before long, Zamira had three roughly consecutive pregnancies, and her husband began to fight with her often, annoyed over the children. Her passport had expired, making her residency in Azerbaijan illegal. Her children were born at home, since seeking medical care risked arrest and deportation. As Zamira's relationship with her husband continued to deteriorate, despite her own poor health, her mother boarded a plane in Tashkent to try to give support. Zamira's mother died on the plane mid-flight, and, instead of greeting her mother at the airport, Zamira was left to collect her body and make funeral arrangements.

Around this time, and while pregnant with their third child, her relationship with her husband reached a breaking point. Her voice brims with tears as she recounted that moment in the interview more than a decade later: “I left the house when I was pregnant. He beat me. I was so angry and hurt that I [took the children] and left the house. Nobody had ever beaten me before.... It only happened once [but] I knew I would never be able to forgive that, so I left.” Without a legal passport, birth certificate, or any other documentation for her children, the decision to walk away from an abusive relationship in a foreign country was fraught with new dangers. Once again, she turned to her faith community, hoping they would be a source of safety:

I left our house in Azerbaijan and went to the mosque to ask for help. There were women there. They apparently had come from the villages and said that they could help me. They said, “you have children,” and some people from the neighborhood came, [the women] said something about me to them, told them I was in a very difficult situation. Those people...asked “do you want to go to Iran and work there?” I said “I don't care where I go, I just want to work. I have to provide for my girls.” But then they saw that my passport was expired, and they took me illegally across the border to Iran between villages.

Desperate to leave, after being smuggled across the border, Zamira discovered that the women she had met at the mosque were “bad women” who had not in fact shared her values or helped guide her to safety. Instead, they connected her to a human trafficking network that fed the underground commercial sex industry in Iran. Her voice breaking again, she says that this, too, was another place she was forced to flee. Because her third daughter was still a newborn, she was not considered desirable for commercial sex herself, and was able to convince the women overseeing her to release her: “God forgive me, I wasn’t able to run away.” Once released by her traffickers, she and her children found a way to enter Turkey. There, she tried to seek asylum.

Eventually, Zamira reached the southeastern city of Gaziantep (which she calls by its colloquial name, “Antep”), where she was able to spend around four years of relative stability. Zamira says she worked as a cleaner, bringing her small children with her to work each day as she mopped floors and cleaned stairwells in apartment buildings. Although living as undocumented migrants with her children, she notes that she was aware of other threats like the ones she had encountered in Iran; she was able to navigate them and says that the Turkish people she met were kind. Eventually, in 2015 she met a woman who told her of bigger and better things—a city she had never heard of called

“Kulis,” further to the south where “rich people” would pay as much in a week as she earned in a month in Gaziantep.<sup>12</sup>

In August or September of 2016, Zamira and her girls traveled to the village with this woman, where she says the woman left her. Without adequate knowledge of Turkish geography, Zamira was surprised to discover that she was along the Syrian border:

How was I to know that? She left me there in that village. I look around and everyone is speaking in Arabic, some in Turkish. I asked—who are you people?...The Arabs heard that I was new—they had never seen me there before—they were looking [at me] because my face was uncovered. That's when they took me to Madafa [in Syria, partway between Raqqah and Mosul, Iraq].

This was the beginning of her life in what she describes as the “*Davla*,”—that is, the Islamic State. Though in her narrative she doesn't describe precisely whether she was taken at gunpoint by the Arabic-speaking men she met in Kilis or whether they promised her a job, she clarifies immediately that she was taken with many other women from a variety of other countries and shut inside a single room with no windows to the outside. They were not allowed outside again until they each agreed to marry one of the men who were brought to them.

...They threw me [in]...I couldn't get out. There, the only way you get out is if you marry someone, it's the only way.... There were 40 or 50 women, all together in one large room. We couldn't see the stars [at night] or the sun during the day.

The conditions she describes were “squalid,” with some women washing the dry noodles they were given as rations in the same bowls used as the toilets by small children. Zamira says that many of the other women were vulgar, rude, unhygienic, and ignorant—specifically noting the hypocrisy of residents of the self-declared Caliphate who didn't follow the basic rules for Islamic cleanliness and behavior. Throughout her interview, when she talks about life in the “*Davla*,” Zamira highlights these hypocrisies—from the humiliating experience of forced marriage to the strict rule that anyone who attempted to escape such conditions would be declared a traitor to Islam and executed.

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<sup>12</sup> NB—Zamira seems to have been referring to the Turkish city/district of Kilis just on the Syrian border, not far from A'zaz, but this was not clarified in the original interview.

After what she estimates was a month of imprisonment with her children, some of whom she says fell ill during that time, Zamira came to the decision that she had no other choice but to agree to marry one of the men who arrived to choose a wife, but also that her only priority after that was to escape with her children back to Turkey:

Because I had no other choice, I had to agree to marry someone. The soldiers came, but I didn't want to marry them. Later, one in plainclothes came— [and is] the father of my youngest daughter... [and a Turkish citizen].

I [decided to] trust him [because] I had told him “I am afraid of the men in military uniforms, and I only want to tell you one thing: you have to take care of me because they could kill me here. If you agree to take me to Turkey, then I will agree to marry you.” He said he would try, and that he had tried [to leave for Turkey] two times already and had been thrown in jail. If you take care of me too, then we can get out together, he said. That's how I came to get married, running away from the problems [there]. It was that way, and then [afterwards it was only]: run, run, run. They consider [running away] a crime in the Davla, they say you have turned against your religion. But in our religion, there's nothing like that—I have also read history, the history of the Islamic faith. When the Prophet came to Medina, he didn't kill [those] who wanted to go back to Mecca. I couldn't understand how they could distort [our] religion in this way here.

Although Zamira says her new husband was under surveillance because of his prior attempts to escape, for some time he was able to arrange for them to move to another city within the territory controlled by Daesh. The surveillance seems to have eased after this had occurred. At some point, however, men came and told Zamira that her husband was on a list of those who had attempted to escape. They took him away, leaving her and her children behind. She never saw him again, and only later learned that he had been executed by Daesh. Eventually, Zamira says she heard from others that some of the men inside Daesh would take bribes to facilitate an escape. She paid one of these men and escaped with her children, but was quickly captured by Kurdish forces: she believes that the man who took the bribe to help her escape was not only corrupt, but had also betrayed them.

For Zamira, having seen the “Caliphate” up close made it impossible to harbor any fantasies about another, better one somewhere else that she says many of the women in the detention camp still hold out hope for:

...I saw it all with my own eyes. Even if someone promises me a mountain of gold, I would never go there [to a new “Caliphate”] for anything. Among a lot of the women here, there are claims about how in Afghanistan they will build the Caliphate, or in Yemen, they say “we’ll go there,” these women have a lot of ideas. I mean, the women who have not yet changed their minds, these women have a lot of fantasies [*xayollar*]. If you try to open their eyes, they will burn you [in your tent].<sup>13</sup>

In Zamira’s narrative of her path to her current circumstances at the time of the interview—detained for being associated with Daesh but at the same time under threat from other women who refused to accept even military defeat—show examples from across the spectrum of women’s roles and experiences. While vastly unequal gender roles left Zamira vulnerable to abuse, trafficking, forced marriage, and the constant threat of violence, other women in her life played complex roles, seeking for themselves the money, power, and agency that human trafficking and armed militias could offer. At the same time, the most important takeaway from Zamira’s story is her own perspective—that of someone pulled into an armed group by her circumstances and personal networks without ever participating in its ideology or supporting its goals. Like any other armed group, militia, or organized form of violence, “members” enter and exit on a wide variety of paths, and remaining in the movement for many months or years does not necessarily indicate “radicalization” or support. As Zamira’s story shows, the pathway to leaving is often far more difficult than the pathway in, and the methods used to keep both women and children within an armed group like the Islamic State can include physical, psychological, and sexual violence even when these acts sharply contradict the group’s own ideology.

### **Iroda: Women’s prison, Baghdad, Iraq**

My husband and I, along with our children, left Uzbekistan for Dubai. From Dubai, we came to be in Iraq. You know what kind of situation there was earlier in Uzbekistan, so [you can

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<sup>13</sup> The report of women being threatened and their tents burned for speaking out against the Daesh was independently confirmed in a separate report from other Uzbek women. Варно Анвар, «Они поджигали палатки женщин, желающих вернуться в Узбекистан». История женщины и ее дочерей из сирийского лагеря. [They burned the tents of women who want to return to Uzbekistan: The story of women and their daughters from a Syrian Camp.] *RFE/RL Uzbek Service*, June 19, 2019, <https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/30008940.html>.

understand], it's because of that [situation] we decided to leave and came to Dubai. Then we arrived in the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup>

Iroda was born in 1979 in Tashkent, in what was then considered the Soviet Union. She is currently imprisoned in Baghdad on charges of supporting Daesh in a facility that she says also held around 30 other women from Uzbekistan at the time of her interview. One of her children is with her in prison, along with an informally adopted child. Two of her three natural children—her sons—are missing and presumed dead following the fall of Daesh-held territories in Iraq, although Iroda held out hope that they were alive at the time of the interview.

Iroda moved to what she calls the Islamic State in 2015, after moving to Dubai in 2011 from Tashkent. She says that neither her husband nor her sons fought for ISIS; her sons were “too young,” and her husband had a non-military occupation as a market trader before he was killed in an aerial bombing. The child she adopted is a boy she found alive in the wreckage after a bombing campaign. She believes he is Kurdish and around 9-years-old at the time of the interview, but has no documents or records. According to additional information offered in a separate interview with her father, who had arranged a telephone connection for her that made the interview possible, Iroda and her husband fled Uzbekistan when he became the subject of an investigation by the country's security services after he began to publicly practice Islam. Fearing arrest and a long-term imprisonment, the family relocated to Dubai, where they lived as undocumented immigrants.

According to Iroda, the years they spent in Dubai were positive in terms of their freedom to practice their faith and legally seek an Islamic education for her and her sons—something she stressed was an important benefit since religious education was and remains illegal in Uzbekistan for minors under the age of 18, with few legal opportunities for women in the current system. At the same time, she described their lives as consistently precarious because of their status as undocumented migrants who were forced to pay a bribe to remain in the UAE. Struggling to make ends meet, they could only afford to live in a neighborhood in Dubai in which, she says, they never felt safe. In 2015, Iroda says they flew from Dubai to Adana, Turkey, where her husband found someone who arranged their transit across the border. They went first to Raqqah, where they spent a few days before being assigned to live in the Mosul region in Iraq in the city of Tal-Afar. She and her

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<sup>14</sup> Fieldwork interview: Iroda (name changed), conducted by the author, Uzbek and Russian telephonic interview, Baghdad, Iraq, June 2019. Similar to the to the respondent above, while Iroda waived anonymity and gave personally identifiable information at the time of the interview, the author has been unable to reestablish contact with her to confirm continued permission to use her real name before publication, and it has been changed to protect her anonymity.

children were captured in the fall of Mosul in 2017, and in April 2018, she was sentenced to life in prison by Iraqi courts.

The following are translated excerpts from her interview, conducted by the author and Ulughbek Yuldashev in both Russian and Uzbek.

*Did you ask anyone for advice [before making your decision to travel to the Caliphate], and how did you reach the decision to go to Iraq?*

No, we didn't go to anyone for advice, we just watched videos on the Internet, they said that there is this state [an Islamic State]. I talked about it with my husband, about going to live in that state.

*On what kind of sites or channels did you see this information on the Internet?*

Those videos were shared on all the sites, on YouTube, Odnoklassniki, Google. On YouTube there were really a lot of videos about the Islamic State.

*When you watched those videos, did you get into contact with anyone from that group [ISIS]?*

No, we didn't talk to anyone [recruiters], when they published these advertisements under the video there were a lot of comments, and we read those comments. Usually there were comments from people who lived in Iraq, we communicated with them [through the comments] and they said that everything was great there and we could come and live freely. That's how we came here to live.

*What attracted you most in these "advertisements," what were you seeking?*

In both Dubai and in Uzbekistan there were a lot of problems with drugs...so this was what I liked the most—I mean that it was forbidden there in that state. That was for the sake of the safety of our children, that's how we decided to come to Iraq. We had really big problems with illegal drugs, I have older sons, and for things to be good for them we came to the Islamic State.

*Was there a lot of crime in Dubai, you were afraid because of that?*

In Uzbekistan there was a lot of drug addiction, I was really afraid because of that. For my children.

*And in Dubai was the situation the same?*

Yes, that was a problem that I encountered [there].

*Did that make you afraid?*

Yes, of course—there in Dubai they were producing and selling drugs. I was really afraid because of that.

*You thought it would be safer in the Islamic State?*

Yes, that's what I thought—but that was wrong. As it turns out, that's a problem in every state.

*Are your children alive and well?*

No—I mean that I lost both of my sons when we were captured. My older son is named Ali, he is missing one leg and one arm. My younger son is named Abdulloh. They were born in 1999 and 2001. I don't know where they are now. When they transported us out of the city, they separated the men and women, and that's when I lost them.

Thus, the decision to join the Islamic State—which she stresses in the first portion of her interview that she and her husband made together—in order to seek safety and social order cost Iroda her husband and her two sons and had little to do with ideology and theology and more to do with what they believed would be an opportunity for security and belonging. Like many other Central Asians who cite the trans-national identity and equal opportunities for all Muslims promised by the so-called Islamic State, Iroda recalled the bitter disappointment of discovering that instead of economic opportunity and belonging, what they found in the Daesh-held territory was war, constant bombardment, and death.



While it is perhaps difficult to imagine from a Western perspective, in which reports of violence and atrocities within the self-declared Caliphate are widespread, that Iroda and her husband could have truly believed they would be safer in Syria or Iraq, it is important to note that within the Uzbek-language media environment, the discussion of events in Syria and Iraq during this period were dominated by propaganda produced by Daesh and smaller Uzbek-led armed groups aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra and their sympathizers. The stark disparity between the narratives in this period and the reality that recruits and volunteers encountered is echoed across many other personal narratives in this dataset and other parallel projects. While there may be other motivations for portraying herself and her late husband as simply naïve, while not addressed in a confrontational way during the interview, it was clear as it unfolded that Iroda was accepting responsibility for a grave mistake that had cost most of her family their lives.

*When you arrived in the Islamic State, what did you make of it? Was it what you expected from the “advertisements” you had seen on the internet?*

No, it wasn't like the advertisements. The bombings were every day. They bombed houses, there wasn't even a school for the children. We saw how the Russian and American planes flew overhead. [...]

*Why did you choose the Islamic State over other groups and other places might have gone?*

In other countries, like in Dubai and in Russia, it's very difficult to live there. But when the Islamic State announced itself, they promised houses, a good life and that they would give money—these are all problems that a lot of Muslim people have. Sitting here [in the prison with other women from Central Asia], I have come to the conclusion that financial problems led most of these women and other people to the decision to come to the Islamic State....

...The Islamic State claimed about itself that it was a real state. They showed factories working, that people had educational institutions and mosques, madrasahs—everything there. They even showed that they had their own currency, and programs to feed everyone, they showed all this. [Seeing those videos], people who lived in far-off places thought that they could work, live, that everything here was cheap and that they give away houses. A lot of people considered the financial side of it.

*Did you receive citizenship and a passport when you arrived?*

In their advertisements, they announced they had their own passports and currency. But in reality, when we got here, I didn't ever see anything like that... there were absolutely no schools for children, no preschools. My daughter is nine years old, and she still doesn't know how to read or write.

*So, the "advertisements" were a lie?*

Yes.

*Did you regret that you went there, either leaving Uzbekistan or Dubai?*

...About Uzbekistan, I don't even know how to answer.

Yes, I did regret leaving Dubai. Because my children were able to study religion there, my younger son had almost become a *qori* [reciter of the Qur'an]. But then he lost so much.

*Did you immediately regret coming to Iraq, or only after you began to know more about what was happening there?*

No, I immediately began looking for a way to get out and go back, I even sought advice from elders... but there were no chances or opportunities. The border with Turkey was closed at that time.

*When you came to Mosul, did you try to run away?*

Yes, we tried to escape, there were local people there and a group that could bring people in and out. We negotiated with them, but they wanted \$10,000 per person.

*So, you didn't have enough money, and weren't able to get out?*

Yes, because of money we weren't able to get out. I had my family, my children and our daughter-in-law, we would have needed so much money. At first, they said \$10,000, but then they asked for \$13,000 from each person.

*Before you came to the Islamic State, did you support [them] or their "jihad?"*

I didn't support jihad. I thought this state was on the path of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him. I didn't think that there was war here.

*What reason then, or what goal did you have, to go to the Islamic State—did you believe that the state would defend those goals and expand them?*

The main reason for leaving Uzbekistan was to be able to freely wear hijab, perform our prayers and study Islam. When we came here, we thought that's how things would be here.

*Do you think that those are rights that should be fought for?*

I didn't know that there was war here, I didn't even imagine that things were like that here. When a person hasn't seen it with their own eyes [this kind of war], they can't wrap their heads around it....

While Iroda does not deny her own responsibility in making the decision to relocate to Iraq and described it in the beginning as a decision she and her husband made together, an important distinction emerges between sources of advice she sought among her own female networks and those prioritized by her husband. She describes her own network and the one she was able to create for herself and her children in Dubai this way, later explaining this is what they hoped they would also find in Iraq since "they are Arabs too:"

Alhamdulillah, the Arabs are very good people. They treated us with a lot of respect. My sons' teachers gave them gifts during Ramadan. We got so much good from [them] there. We learned a lot about Islam—if you are ever able to meet my sons, they could also tell you many good things about [the people in their religious school in Dubai]. There were teachers from

Afghanistan, from Egypt, they respected one another. During Ramadan we even all fasted [and broke the fast at common meals] together.

When asked directly if she had consulted with these teachers before making the choice to leave Dubai, she acknowledged that she had:

I can remember now one time, I talked with my teacher about Syria, Iraq. She said it was forbidden to go there, that was the wrong path ... I shared that [with my husband], but it was very difficult to live in Dubai. For a temporary residency permit we spent \$5,000 for one family, and that's only maybe for 1-2 years. He said we would be better off in Iraq....Because everything was so expensive, we had financial problems. That's why we decided to leave. In Iraq there are Arabs too, we thought it would be better there.

But when asked directly whether she disagreed with her husband about his decision, even in retrospect, she did not see this as a potential option:

*When you made the decision to go, did you and your husband decide together...?*

In the family, the husband decides everything and we listen to him. Whatever the husband says, that's what will be, and we obey.

*Did he ask your opinion?*

Yes, he asked, and he said he wanted to go to the Islamic State. If he had already decided, what can I say? I agreed and that was it.

*Did you think he was right?*

If I'm being honest, there were times when I didn't think he was right.

### **Respondent 7 (Female from Uzbekistan): Istanbul, Turkey**

Everything is from Allah, so it means that [going to Syria] was my destiny. I learned a lot, how to have patience, I saw death with my own eyes. It was a huge practical experience for me, and I don't regret it. But if I were given another chance, I wouldn't go.<sup>15</sup>

Respondent 7 met with the author and research partner Sirojiddin Tolibov in the home of a member of the study circle of an Uzbek female religious teacher in May 2019 in a newly constructed residential neighborhood on the Western outskirts of Istanbul two months after returning to Turkey after some three years in Syria. The neighborhood is home to a large number of both documented and undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers from Uzbekistan and is not far from one of the largest Uzbek-led mosques and Islamic charitable foundations in the city.

The stories of Zamira and Iroda and their pathways in and out of armed groups in Syria are representative of the largest proportion of other stories collected in this research and by others: that is, involuntary and semi-voluntary mobilization, or what Orozobekova<sup>16</sup> calls the “dependency model,” including women who followed their husbands to the conflict zone or were dependent on others in their social network, including other relatives. Their circumstances as detainees or prisoners (or eventual returnees to their country of birth) in the post-conflict situation, however, reflect a smaller minority of respondents sampled in this research. Respondent 7 is part of the larger group who voluntarily demobilized from the conflict (left their armed group of their own volition) and returned to Turkey, where, like many of the other respondents, she was living with her family as undocumented migrants, hoping to formalize their legal status and potentially seek asylum in Turkey or elsewhere.

Because this group is undocumented and entered or re-entered Turkey without crossing through official border controls, it is impossible to make any accurate estimate of how many were living in Turkey at the time of the research. Other respondents who were in regular touch with these “returnees” estimated there were at least several hundred ethnic Uzbeks from both Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan. Like Respondent 7, many of these in the sample were disillusioned by what they found in Syria or Iraq, prompting their voluntary demobilization, and described themselves as having no intention of returning or continuing to participate in or support armed groups in the future.

While Zamira and Iroda were comfortable with identifying themselves in the interview, Respondent 7 accepted the offer of full anonymity and chose not to share any name or other

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<sup>15</sup> Field interview: Respondent 7, Sirojiddin Tolibov and the author, (Uzbek), Istanbul, Turkey, May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Respondent 7, interview.

potentially identifiable personal details, including age/year of birth. The life details she did share would put her in an age range between 25–40 years old. She, her husband, and their three children are former members of the *Imom Bukhoriy Katiba*, an Uzbek-led independent “brigade” founded early in the Syrian civil war in the Aleppo area that remained aligned with the Jabhat al-Nusra (currently Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) and broader Ahrar al-Sham alliance and pledged allegiance to the Taliban when the schism between Daesh and other groups in the civil war occurred.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Respondent 7 also represents another important proportion of men and women in the research sample—those who condemn Daesh and made a deliberate choice to join other groups because they find the ideology and ethics of Daesh unacceptable. As respondents frequently noted, this was no small differentiation, since, following the schism between Daesh and other groups in 2014, Central Asian volunteers were at times faced with the prospect of fighting or being ordered to kill other Central Asians who had joined rival groups.<sup>18</sup> During the period in which Respondent 7 reports being in Syria with her family, Uzbeks from Daesh successfully assassinated the founder and leader of the *Imom Bukhoriy Katiba*,<sup>19</sup> and many respondents, who supported other groups or who had escaped from Daesh, repeatedly said in their interviews that they believed their lives were in danger, even in Istanbul, where examples of vendettas or attacks carried out by Daesh supporters were frequently cited.

The common thread running through Respondent 7’s self-narrative is not war or violence, schisms, recrimination, politics, or resentment; it is the attempt at each stage of life to pursue Islamic education for herself and other family members and to live according to the ethics of Islam (that is, to do good).

Born somewhere near Tashkent, Iroda attended high school in the Chilonzor district at a lyceum and grew up in a “non-religious” family of four girls that might be described as a lower middle-class: her father was a businessman, and her mother was a housewife. When she was 21, however, tragedy struck their family when her mother was diagnosed with brain cancer and rapidly succumbed to the illness, dying the same year. Like many other respondents who describe a tragic experience that leads to a kind of conversion, Respondent 7 says that the abrupt encounter with mortality at a young age drove her to seek a deeper meaning in life: “I understood then that as God has ordained, life passes, and it can pass so quickly, no matter what happens we need to pray [to have

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<sup>17</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Main Uzbek Militant Faction in Syria Swears Loyalty to Taliban,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. November 12, 2014, accessed January 24, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Noah Tucker, “The Evolution of the Uzbek Jihad,” in *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Minneapolis, MN: Lexington Books, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Caleb Weiss, “Al Qaeda affiliated Uzbek leader assassinated in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, April 30, 2017.

an active faith]. That's how it was, no one came to me and told me to pray, and nobody explained it to me, [I understood it for myself]."

As her mother was dying, Iroda's parents arranged a marriage between her and a young furniture-maker with a higher education, and Respondent 7 notes she was grateful that her mother was able to be at her wedding, although she did not survive to meet any of her children. For some time, she and her husband remained in Tashkent, but, after the birth of their first child, they both began to look for opportunities to freely pursue a religious education. She describes this as the primary motivating factor to leave Uzbekistan, stressing that, while they knew of others who had faced persecution for practicing Islam in the Karimov era, they never faced any such persecution or investigation firsthand.

When they moved to Turkey legally in 2015/16, her husband found work in a furniture factory, and she stayed home and tried to find religious education resources. She found Uzbeks who could teach her Arabic and began to take courses. She describes having little or no experience with the Internet before living in Turkey, and that, within six months, she and her husband began to "hear things about Syria, and then we felt bad for the people there, [that's when] we decided to go... they were suffering like the people in Uzbekistan, we wanted to help them." She says that "there was so much information about Syria, from a lot of people, and on the Internet. Everyone was talking about it."

While in other interviews like Iroda's above, women cite an obligation to defer to their husband's authority on decisions, Respondent 7 makes it clear that, already pregnant with their second child, she took an equal part in the planning for Syria, that they "both reached the decision together." From there, her description of the logistics is concise and matter-of-fact. Acting on information that was "all around" them,<sup>20</sup> they bought bus tickets to a border city, where they met with other Uzbeks who took them in a car across the border. She doesn't know who those people were, but they didn't accept any money for the journey.

The recruiters/facilitators who had made their journey possible assigned them to a group; according to Respondent 7 there was no decision made according to ideology or process for radicalization to the ideology of that group—just the desire to help and a clear idea that they did not want to join Daesh. As it happened, according to Respondent 7, the facilitators they had met were

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<sup>20</sup> While Respondent 7 was careful not to implicate anyone as the source of information about logistics and recruiting, other respondents spoke more directly about the open presence of outreach offices and foundations that directly or indirectly helped support Uzbek-led armed groups participating in the Syrian conflict, particularly those in the Ahror al-Sham alliance.

connected to Ahror al-Sham, specifically to the Imom Bukhoriy Katiba, and this was how they become members and residents of the city of Idlib in northern Syria for some three years.

Upon arrival, she says that they were warmly welcomed. Her husband was sent to military training for a bit more than a month, while she and her child lived together in the same house with other wives. Once her husband returned from training and they resumed living together, her second child was born in a hospital in Idlib, where free medical care was provided, but no legal birth certificate was issued. Her husband began to “study,” an opportunity he hadn’t had when he was in Istanbul. But the background to this straightforward-sounding life was “constant bombardment.”

...There were a lot of [other] Uzbek women there. Many came without knowing about the situation. They didn’t even know about the bombing; they didn’t even understand about that. All the same, you don’t know until you have seen it. There were a lot [of women] like that. Of course [it was very frightening for a lot of people to live in those conditions]. It was especially that way for the men.

*Did you get used to it after some time?*

No. How can you get used to that?

*Were they rockets, or bombs dropped from planes?*

They were MiGs [Russian fighter jets].

*Did you know whether it was the Syrian Army or Russia?*

No, I didn’t know. They don’t give military information to women.

...I could only think about the children [when the bombing was happening]. I had two children. When my husband wasn’t at home, I didn’t know which one I should look for when the bombing would start. ... [The children] were scared, I was scared myself, I was even afraid of the sound of cars...we saw so many parts from the bodies of those who were killed...

*Did it have an effect on you mentally?*



Yes. But it had an even bigger effect on my children.

*Your oldest is a son?*

No, a daughter

*How old is she now?*

She's five.

*Does she get scared now [in safety in Turkey]?*

There are a lot of things that make her afraid.

[...]

*[As you said earlier] you went there because you wanted to help people, do you feel you were able to do that?*

No, it was the other way around—we were the ones who needed help ourselves. Especially for me as a woman. We felt guilty because we had lived well, but [the Syrians] could not.

The primary fact of their life in the three years that Respondent 7 says she and her family spent in Idlib was that bombardment. She says that her husband would leave the house during the day, and she would be left with her children and two or three other families in the homes they shared collectively. Each time the bombing started again, any of the men who were home would gather the women and children together to shelter from the bombs without knowing where they came from. The constant threat came not only from above and from states, but from other groups as well, especially Daesh: "They moved secretly inside Syria and...it was difficult to tell them apart from everyone else. They even came into people's homes and killed them."

Before even the first year was over, Respondent 7 and her husband both began to look for a way back to Turkey. She says it was her husband who first broached the topic: "He saw for himself

that we had come to gain religious knowledge, but that was impossible. He tried to [take us] back, but it was impossible.” For two years, they waited for an opportunity to leave, giving birth to a third child as they waited. As difficult and dangerous as the conditions in Idlib were, leaving the city was even more dangerous, and she says it was a concern for the safety of their children rather than any pressure from the Bukhoriy brigade or Ahror al-Sham leadership that forced them to wait so long:

They didn’t interfere with us [leaving], but it was very difficult to get back. It was already too late for us to get out, because the road was closed on the Turkish side. We even tried to get out other ways, but it didn’t work out.

*What would have happened if you were caught when trying to get from Syria back into Turkey?*

The Turkish government would have put us in prison.

*You weren’t worried that you might be killed when trying to cross the border?*

No, the Turks don’t kill people. So far while the fighting hasn’t spread to Turkey, the soldiers [in the Turkish army] don’t get involved. But on the way back to Istanbul, if a person has a [red notice] from Uzbekistan they could be detained [and extradited to Uzbekistan].

In March 2019, they were able to find a contact who could smuggle them across the Turkish border safely for the \$800 they had managed to save from what she says was the \$100 monthly salary (\$50 per adult) they received from the Imom Buhkariy Katiba. Now living on the margins of Turkish society, afraid to go out or interact with the health or education system because of their lack of legal status and valid documents (including birth certificates) for her children, Respondent 7 describes the future that they hope for: to find a way to the Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia, where they hope to receive a scholarship for a legal Islamic education. Looking back at her experience in Syria, it became clear that she regretted going as a woman and especially bringing her children, and she drew a clear line between what was appropriate for women and what might be for men. The last portion of the interview attempted to clarify those conflicted feelings:

*Do you think it’s right that people go to fight in Syria, do you feel that it’s justified?*

The [people of Syria] have suffered because of Bashar [al Assad]'s government, and that's why they began the war: they were forced to do it because of persecution.

*As a person who has experienced [that war] directly because you lived in Syria, if someone else from Uzbekistan comes to you and says they want to go to Syria, what would you tell them, what advice would you give?*

I would try to convince them not to go, especially women.

*What about men?*

I don't know what men decide for themselves.

*If it was your younger brother, for example, who wanted to go, what would you tell him?*

I would tell him to get an education instead of going there.

*Do you regret that you went to Syria?*

Everything is from Allah, so it means that [going to Syria] was my destiny. I learned a lot, how to have patience, I saw death with my own eyes. It was a huge practical experience for me, and I don't regret it. But if I were given another chance, I wouldn't go.

*If your husband decided he wanted to return, would you agree to go back with him, or would you stay behind with the children and he could go on his own?*

My husband wouldn't say that, because we learned that before making a choice you must have knowledge. Our goal now is only to get that knowledge, and to give our children an education.

### **Disinformation/Lack of Information on Gender Roles and Ethics and Gendered Hierarchies of Knowledge**

Together, the three personal narratives reproduced here represent different levels of agency or dependency. The paths to mobilization to armed groups in some cases clearly reflect stark

inequalities in personal agency available to Central Asian women in terms of cultural norms, legal opportunities to pursue religious education, and a narrower field of social mobility and acceptance for women whose marriages have ended because of divorce or the death of a partner. The issue of dependence vs. agency (again to use Orozobekova's distinction) is particularly acute for the larger family groups within each of those stories: while the lives of three adult women are reflected in these narratives—only one of whom was able to exercise agency in her own decision to join an armed group—a total of ten children are deeply affected in just these three cases, none of whom had any agency in the events and choices that led to their implication in the conflict.

Feruza, an additional member of the same Istanbul study circle as Respondent 7, represents this younger group. Though now an adult with her own children, she was taken by her mother and step-father to join the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Afghanistan in the late 1990s at only seven-years-old (her detailed personal narrative will appear in a forthcoming publication that draws on the full fieldwork project). For both men and women, the data gathered in this set contributes evidence that pathways both in and out of armed groups in the Syrian conflict were extremely diverse, that many had little to do with ideology or traditional “pathways to radicalization,” and that vulnerability to mobilization to violent extremist groups is often similar to and coincides with vulnerabilities to and created by other social problems, including human trafficking, undocumented migration, domestic violence, and institutionalized inequalities. The critical steps taken by the governments of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to begin or even complete repatriation of women and children from the conflict zone and commit to supporting their successful reintegration represent an important commitment to this more nuanced understanding and stand as a strong example for the global community.

Beyond these initial findings, however, these detailed interviews are also a reminder that mobilization to armed Islamist groups remains a *complex* problem that has no clear or simple answers. While in cases like Respondent 7 that involve voluntary agency and affirmative choices, including for women, there are at least in a personal narrative some clear lines drawn by the subject between personal experience of inequality of opportunity or lack of religious freedom and the choice to join an insurrection; within that same group of asylum seekers in Istanbul were three other women whose direct experience of political and religious oppression from Uzbekistan's security services during the Karimov era included physical and sexual violence—experiences that directly informed their decision to flee Uzbekistan in that period and their fear of returning at the time of the interview—but who never seriously considered joining an armed group or participating in political violence.

This is not to downplay the importance of abuse at the hands of security services or limitations on religious freedom under the previous regime played in motivations of those interviewed through the full data set, but only to support an argument that the evidence shows mobilization to violent groups remains a complex dynamic that has no simple mathematical formula. At the same time, these findings also show that while discrimination, torture, or abuse at the hands of law enforcement do not always lead to mobilization to armed groups, it does consistently contribute to a range of other negative outcomes and social harms—many of which, including social marginalization and high-risk undocumented migration also present in the non-mobilized cases—and are also linked to vulnerability to mobilization to armed groups, human trafficking, and other negative outcomes on the individual and the social level. As above in its program to repatriate women and children and support their reintegration, the new Mirziyoyev government has adopted critical policy changes in these areas, and the Uzbekistani parliament has begun the painful work of investigating and prosecuting abuses of power by the security services;<sup>21</sup> this research underlines the importance of that work to ensure the fundamental rights of all citizens are protected.

Among the interviews in this dataset, there are some additional gendered elements that are shared among those cited here as well as the broader set that are worthy of attention. In each of these, disinformation or inaccurate/incomplete information is frequently cited by respondents who came to regret their mobilization.

Many, but not all, respondents who joined Daesh said they regretted the decision immediately when they discovered that the reality inside the caliphate was significantly different than what had been portrayed to them either directly by recruiters or by videos they had watched online. Iroda, the Uzbek women serving a life sentence in Baghdad and whose story is described above, explained elsewhere in her interview that she now understands that misinformation played a key role the process that led to the loss of her husband and two sons.

Although she had access to another source of authoritative knowledge on both the reality of the events in Syria and Iraq and an Islamic ethical response to the conflict that contradicted the information and knowledge that her husband used to make the decision to travel to the territory held by Daesh—and though he presumably would have accepted that *religious* authority or validity on the

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<sup>21</sup>“Svetlana Artykova: In 2019 16 People were Arrested for Torture, the Majority were Police and Security Service Officers,” Kun.uz, accessed January 27, 202, <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2020/06/01/svetlana-artykova-v-2019-godu-16-chelovek-byli-arestovany-za-primeneniye-pytok-bolshinstvo-iz-nix-sotrudniki-mvd-i-sgb>; “Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Uzbekistan,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, accessed 27 January 2022, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CAT/Shared%20Documents/UZB/CAT\\_C\\_UZB\\_CO\\_5\\_39781\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CAT/Shared%20Documents/UZB/CAT_C_UZB_CO_5_39781_E.pdf).

merits of textual arguments—because of the *gendered* hierarchy in decision making and knowledge this input was never considered. That is, in this particularly tragic case, information that could have saved Iroda’s husband’s own life was discounted at least in part because it came from Iroda, who had no authority over her husband’s final decision. His own firsthand knowledge based on what he saw as practical realities and his normative masculine role as the financial provider for his family seems to have led him to prioritize that knowledge within the hierarchy of information informing their decision, allowing him to dismiss even a religious authority and network that had brought direct benefit to their family in favor of another, conflicting authority (the so-called Islamic State) that promised greater gains. In Respondent 7’s personal narrative, the gendered hierarchy of knowledge obscures key data about the source and nature of the threat her family faced, leaving her unsure of what actors had threatened their lives through the constant aerial bombardment and leaving her unable to evaluate that threat that led to long term trauma for her and her children, possibly intensifying that long-term trauma and making it even more difficult to justify or rationalize.

In many of the stories, more straightforward disinformation or misinformation plays a recurring role. Deliberate deception or incomplete information led some female respondents to be trafficked to the conflict zone or forced into sex work. Some male respondents cited this reality of life in the Islamic State as an immediate source of disillusionment and of anger that they had been deceived. Two Kyrgyzstani Uzbek self-returnees in the larger dataset cited sex trafficking and the exploitation of Central Asian women that they witnessed in Daesh training camps when they were offered Uzbek and Tajik young women as “temporary wives” as the moment they realized they had fallen for misinformation.<sup>22</sup> These violations were so stark that one of the two—a former organized crime leader from southern Kyrgyzstan who was a new convert to Islam and responded to the promise of eternal redemption for his extended family—cited the code of criminal ethics among his *bratva* (a Central Asian incarnation of the Soviet “thieves code”): Daesh had promised an Islamic paradise on earth, but the reality failed to live up to even the moral standards of post-Soviet organized crime.

Several respondents who had demobilized from the HTS/Ahror al-Sham coalition were disillusioned in other ways: some cited smoking, temporary marriages, and other behaviors they believed violated Islamic ethics and law as signs that other groups did not live up to their advertising.<sup>23</sup> More broadly in these cases, though, was the sense that much of the effort in what they had believed was a noble cause was wasted on fratricidal conflict and endless infighting with other

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<sup>22</sup> Field interviews, Kyrgyzstan, July 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Field interview, Istanbul, Turkey, May 2019.

rebel groups, as Respondent 7 partially related in her narrative above. In one way or another, many respondents echoed variations of the same line: “what’s happening in Syria isn’t jihad, it’s just a bunch of Muslims killing each other.”

### **Gendered Responses to Personal Prior Experience with or Exposure to Violence and Trauma**

Prior experience of violence, particularly when it causes personal trauma, is a difficult factor to evaluate in part because it is difficult to gain access to case respondents, and, in a brief period of interaction, they may be reluctant to discuss trauma experienced in childhood or to speak ill of their parents or spouses. However, as can already be gleaned from the brief case histories presented above, personal experience of trauma or prior exposure to or participation in violence plays a role in enough of the cases within the study to merit inclusion as a factor within a complex of other causal factors.

For many female respondents who were forced into migration or effectively trafficked into the conflict zone, physical, emotional, and sexual violence play a role in many of the stories. Tragically, as in Zamira’s and Iroda’s stories, fear of violence and promises of safety in a network of people who claimed to represent Islamic values played a direct role in making them vulnerable to misinformation. In other cases, direct experience of violence—including torture and other forms of abuse—at the hands of security services prompted both the original outmigration from Uzbekistan and created enhanced vulnerability living as undocumented migrants abroad. In other cases, including Feruza, the additional Istanbul interview respondent cited above who was taken as a child to join the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Afghanistan, the experience of involuntary mobilization included two forced marriages, and was initiated by a male family member who took the initiative to join the VE movement (a stepfather, in this case) and was able to exert that power over her and her mother not only through gender norms or parental authority, but also through physical and emotional abuse.

### **Additional Findings: The Role of Islam as an Ethical and Meaning-Making System**

As noted in the introduction, the interviews and additional fieldwork contain hours of questions and answers about the role of Islam in specific ethical decisions and about how respondents evaluate claims of religious authority in choosing which group to join or which leaders to trust. Detailed analysis of this data will be published separately as a forthcoming study.

Among the key takeaways that might help inform P/CVE policy and development programming, perhaps the first is that, regardless of how negative or traumatic the experience of

conflict was, even for women like Zamira and Feruza who felt deceived and betrayed by both the movements they became a part of and the people in their social networks who pulled them into them, Islam as a faith and as a system of values remained utterly central to their lives. None of the respondents interviewed felt they were betrayed by Islam or lost their faith; on the contrary, it remained in all cases integral to their lives and to their ability to find meaning and comfort in their everyday experiences.

Most of the women who demobilized, voluntarily or involuntarily, continued to wear *hijab* and in many cases *niqob*, the veil that covers the full face. Without having to ask the question directly, it is not difficult to understand that for several of these women who had experienced sexual abuse and other violence, the *niqob* was a source of comfort and protection that created a barrier between them others and allowed them a sense of increased control over the integrity of their bodies. This is potentially an important finding in designing DDR programming to support women who voluntarily return home, given social pressure and in some cases institutional or government regulations that limit women's freedom of religious expression especially as concerns clothing.

In a similar way, neither those who had suffered severe trauma as a result of their experiences nor those who had voluntarily demobilized ever discussed a sense in which they had been deceived by or exposed to a "the wrong kind of Islam" or an "incorrect interpretation," "radical movement," or "extremism." For each of those who retained a strong faith as an integral part of their personhood and identity, there is only one Islam, just as there is only one God. This suggests that messaging campaigns that prioritize "Hanafi" or "Central Asian" Islam over "foreign" or "Salafi" movements may find less success than on approaches that focus on broadly shared Islamic ethics and the ways in which groups like the Islamic State violate those strong ethics and core values.

## **Conclusion**

As Almadan Orozobekova<sup>24</sup> found in her case studies of women mobilized to the Syrian conflict from southern Kyrgyzstan and de Leede (this volume) argues based on her overview of women in armed Islamist and opposition groups in Central Asia, the personal narratives presented here support an argument that evidence-based analysis of mobilization to armed groups from Central Asia must reflect more nuance than it has up to now. The lives detailed above defy easy categorization based on stereotypes of jihadi brides, "zombie" radicals or women whose agency is nullified by strictly defined gender roles even when the inequalities those create put severe constraints on their ability to freely make choices about their own lives.

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<sup>24</sup> Orozobekova, "Women Joining Violent Islamist Non-State Actors in Syria and Iraq."



Among both men and women, the data gathered for the wider project from which these interviews are drawn provide evidence that pathways both in and out of armed groups were extremely diverse. Many of these lifepaths had little to do with ideology or traditional “pathways to radicalization.” The factors that contribute to vulnerability involvement with an armed group were often similar to or coincided with vulnerabilities to other social problems, including human trafficking, undocumented migration, domestic violence, and institutionalized inequalities. Many interviewed for this project were disillusioned by what they found in Syria or Iraq, which led to their voluntary demobilization, and described themselves as having no intention of returning to a conflict zone or continuing to participate in or support armed groups in the future. These findings then also provide evidence in support of the programs developed by the governments of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to begin or even complete repatriation of women and children from the conflict zone. These groundbreaking programs deserve support from the full international community as each government commits to supporting successful reintegration. The evidence in this study strongly supports arguments that trauma-informed approaches should be a key component of re-integration programs for all returnees,<sup>25</sup> and that trauma-informed care should include not only the suffering or adversity repatriates may have experienced during conflict or as a part of an extremist organization, but also earlier trauma and adversity that may have been a contributing factor to their vulnerability to recruitment to that conflict in the first place.

Finally, the evidence gathered for this study suggests that radicalization paradigms that focus primarily on ideology and individualized progression along a notional “pathway” to radicalization should not be the primary focus of analysis in explaining mobilization to armed Islamist groups or a central focus in rehabilitation or prevention programs. The evidence indicates that a more wholistic approach that includes a combination of other potential factors on both the personal—perhaps even more importantly—on the group or community level should be considered. The complex narratives and lifepaths of the women presented in this study further support this approach.

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<sup>25</sup> Heidi Ellis, Emma Cardeli, Mia Bloom, Zachary Brahmhatt, and Stevan Weine ‘Understanding the Needs Children Returning from Formerly ISIS-Controlled Territories through an Emotional Security Theory Lens: Implications for Practice’. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 109 (November 2020): 104754–104754; Stevan Wein, David P. Eisenman, Janni Kinsler, Deborah C. Glik, and Chloe Polutnik. ‘Addressing Violent Extremism as Public Health Policy and Practice’. *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* Volume 9, Issue 3 (September 2017): 208–21.

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# From Family Jihad in Syria to Operation Jusan: Gender, Public Relations, and Security in Kazakhstan's Foreign Fighter Repatriation Program

*Jacob Zenn*

Kazakhstan was among dozens of countries around the world whose citizens traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other jihadist movements. However, when the Islamic State's "caliphate" collapsed, Kazakhstan was among the only countries to fully repatriate its foreign fighters. The country's repatriation program, Operation Jusan ("wormwood," referring to the scent of the steppe), has featured gendered approaches, public relations campaigns, and rehabilitation efforts, which make it a model for other countries to follow, especially as Kazakhstan has not seen violence or blowback for the program's implementation. This article describes and analyzes Operation Jusan and examines the extent to which its precedent may be applicable to other countries, especially in the West, that are considering any large-scale foreign-fighter repatriation programs comparable to Operation Jusan.

## **Introduction**

In 2013, Kazakh citizens made headlines for "family jihad." This occurred after nearly 150 Kazakh men, women, and children appeared leisurely dining and playing games in a video recorded in Syria, which subsequently surfaced on jihadist web forums and was reported on in mainstream media.<sup>1</sup> Over the next half-decade, dozens of Kazakh men as well as several Kazakh children were seen in jihadist videos from Syria and Iraq engaging in combat and various brutalities. Although Kazakhs were not as numerous in those two countries as jihadists from neighboring Central Asian regions, including Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, China ("East Turkistan"), Kazakhs were still regulars in Islamic State (IS) ranks.<sup>2</sup>

With the demise of IS's "territorial caliphate" starting in 2019, the Kazakh government faced a choice. On one hand, there were Kazakh children who, through no fault of their own, were brought to the territory of the world's most lethal insurgent group, where some became child soldiers and virtually all received an IS "education." On the other hand, there were the children's parents who

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<sup>1</sup> "Astana Probes Video Allegedly Showing Kazakh 'Jihad' Family in Syria," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, October 21, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-jihad-video/25143704.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Azamat Sakiev, "Guest warriors: The phenomenon of post-soviet fighters in the Syrian conflict," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11, no.2 (2020), 188-200.

often consciously chose to join IS and, in some cases, committed brutalities, particularly the fathers. However, there were also women, including many of those children's mothers or male fighters' wives, who may have contributed to IS and sought to live in a utopian caliphate, but mostly performed domestic tasks, did not participate in combat, and, at most, registered for weapons training, which they reported never actually took place.

Ultimately, in 2018, in a globally unprecedented move, Kazakhstan became the first country in the world to engage in wholesale repatriation of its citizens from Syria, including men, women, and children. More than two years since this repatriation, known in Kazakh as "Operation Jusan," referring to "wormwood" or the scent of the steppe, Kazakhstan has not suffered any attacks by IS returnees or IS generally. Moreover, there has been little public backlash against the government for bringing home "radicalized jihadis." Operation Jusan, in sum, has proven successful.

This article recounts the history and composition of Kazakhs fighting with jihadist groups in the post-9/11 era, particularly with IS in Syria and Iraq, and examines how the Kazakh-jihadist experience in Syria and Iraq differed from previous cases in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or the Caucasus. For the first time, jihadism was not only about fighting, but also about family resettlement. This article utilizes an exclusive dataset of IS recruitment documents to examine the demographic backgrounds of Kazakh fighters in Syria, as well as videos of Kazakhs with IS to examine their familial, combat, and propaganda roles in IS.

Further, based on media reports about Kazakhs in Syria and Iraq and an interview this author conducted with a Kazakh civil society organization (CSO) member involved in Operation Jusan, the article also discusses the reasons why Kazakh women traveled to Syria, their activities under IS rule, and the Kazakh government's reintegration approach, including treating women differently than men and a public relations campaign to win approval from Kazakh society for Operation Jusan. The article concludes by explaining why Kazakhstan repatriated Kazakh foreign fighters and their families when most other countries in the world did not. It also argues that the Kazakhstan case may be exceptional and unlikely to be replicated in other countries, especially in the West. This is because of the way Kazakhs uniquely perceive their obligations towards "their own" brethren, including Kazakh foreign fighters, and the lack of a conducive environment for jihadist disengagement in Western countries like there is in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, despite Operation Jusan's possibly limited transnational applicability, certain aspects can still be adopted by other countries facing similar issues as those of Kazakhstan.

### **History of Kazakhs in Jihadism: Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and Syria**

Although Central Asians' involvement in jihadist groups dates to their joining the al-Qaeda-aligned factions in Afghanistan in the late 1980s that fought the Soviets and their Communist-Afghan allies, Kazakhs were few among those jihadists, or even among jihadists in Afghanistan, in the years after 9/11. The only two jihadists connected to Kazakhstan who emerged from martyrdom reports or memoirs in the years after 9/11 seem to be Shawkat (alias Abu Abdullah al-Turkistani) and Faris Kashgar (alias Abd al-Salam al-Turkistani). The former was born in Almaty but left because of Kazakhstan's "ignorance and atheism" and joined al-Qaeda near Bagram, Afghanistan after 9/11. Ultimately, however, he died in a Pakistani raid near Angur Ada on the Pakistani side of the border with Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Faris Kashgar, was from Xinjiang, but traveled to Afghanistan through Kazakhstan and fought with unspecified Kazakh fighters in Afghanistan before his death. Both Shawkat and Faris Kashgar were memorialized by al-Qaeda in 2008 after their deaths.<sup>4</sup>

By the late 2000s, there was also a stream of approximately one or two dozen Kazakh citizens fighting with the Caucasus Emirate against Russia, several of whom died there.<sup>5</sup> They included Russian converts to Islam and ethnic Kazakhs from Kazakhstan whose main inspiration was the half-ethnic Russian, half-Buryat jihadist in the Caucasus, Said Buryatskiy, who was killed in 2009.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, the first formally declared Kazakh jihadist group, Jund al-Khilafah, also emerged. It was comprised of several Kazakhs in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region who were trained by an experienced Belgian-Tunisian jihadist and coordinated with several Kazakhs remaining in-country.<sup>7</sup> Jund al-Khilafah's media campaign, which involved several combat videos and statements condemning President Nursultan Nazarbayev and calling for implementing Islamic law in Kazakhstan, was more significant than their actual attacks, however, which involved only several failed or low-scale bombings in the country. Eventually, Jund al-Khilafah faded away, and its remaining few members traveled to Syria after its civil war started in 2011 or were arrested or killed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Kazakhstan.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abdullah al-Adam (alias Abu Ubaydah al-Maqdisi), "Martyrs in a Time of Alienation," *Al-Fajr* (January 31, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Igor Rotar, "The Influence of North Caucasus Islamic Radicals on the Situation in Central Asia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 9, No. 154 (August 13, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Gordon M. Hahn, "Sheik Said Abu Saad Buryatskii: New Basaev of the Caucasus," *Islam, Islamism, and Politics in Eurasia Report* 1 (November 3, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Erlan Karin, *The Soldiers of the Caliphate: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Group*, (Astana: The Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Karin, *The Soldiers of the Caliphate*.

Thus, on the cusp of the 2011 Syrian Civil War, there were two main trends in Kazakh jihadism and militancy abroad: virtually all participants were men traveling alone or in small groups to fight, and the proclaimed grievances were that Kazakhstan was not an Islamic state and that practicing Muslims in Kazakhstan were suppressed. This all changed with the Syrian Civil War, however, when two new trends emerged: Kazakhs participating in jihadism were now men, women, and, involuntarily, children, who often traveled together as families, and the proclaimed grievances involved not only Kazakhstan not being an Islamic state, but also the desire to assist fellow Muslims elsewhere in the world to establish an Islamic state in which any Muslim, including Kazakhs, could find haven. Kazakhstan's society and government, for their part, were not fully prepared for the unprecedented new trends that the Syrian Civil War brought, with hundreds of Kazakhs participating in "family jihad" and dozens of others depicted in IS and other jihadi factions' videos conducting ambushes, executions, and suicide bombings, among other attacks.

### **Who Were the Kazakhs in Syria?**

Estimates from Kazakhstan's National Security Committee (KNB) indicate that in 2018, there were 800 Kazakhs who traveled to Syria to fight with IS and other jihadist factions and 100 who had returned to Kazakhstan from Syria by then.<sup>9</sup> This was more than three times the 250 Kazakh foreign fighters estimated by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR).<sup>10</sup> However, ICSR's estimate was made in 2015, as opposed to 2018, and more Kazakhs may have arrived in Syria and Iraq over those three years. Further, ICSR may not have accounted for "non-fighters," such as women and children, which the KNB did. In addition, KNB estimates may be more accurate than ICSR's simply because KNB specialized in only tracking Kazakhs in Syria, whereas ICSR had no specialized focus on Kazakhstan or Central Asia and covered foreign fighters globally. A more recent study in 2020 by Cook and Vale was more consistent with the KNB and estimated 1,136–1,236 Kazakhs in Syria, including men, women, and children.<sup>11</sup>

The first time Kazakhs were seen in Syria was in a 2013 video called "The Muslim Family of 150 People Who Moved to Sham [Syria]" that featured around 150 men, women, and children from

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<sup>9</sup> Zhanagul Zhursin and Ron Synovitz, "How Can We Stay Silent? Kazakh Mother Mourns Daughter Killed After Joining Islamic State," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, November 11, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-can-we-stay-silent-kazakh-mother-mourns-daughter-killed-after-joining-islamic-state/29594384.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," ICSR, January 26, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *West Point Combatting Terrorism Center Sentinel* 12, no.6 (July 2019): 41..

Kazakhstan claiming to be in Syria for jihad and relaxing together.<sup>12</sup> The video was released by the media wing of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which one year later became IS upon Abubakar al-Baghdadi's declaration of a "caliphate" in an Iraqi mosque on June 2014. After the release of this video, it became clear not only that Kazakhs were in Syria, but also that their motivations were no longer simply related to Kazakhstan not being an Islamic state. Now they additionally expressed willingness to live in another "Islamic state," namely ISIS/IS's in Syria, and to help fellow Muslims in Syria establish an Islamic state.

Subsequent videos from Syria further confirmed that Kazakhs families were in Syria and Iraq. For example, Abu Aisha al-Kazakhi (Artom Andreyev) became one of the most visible Kazakhs online in 2014 for publishing various photos of himself and his children in Iraq, including visiting parks and juice bars and engaging in recreational activities, on the Russian-language social media platform, Vkontakte.<sup>13</sup> Also, in 2014, one of IS's most disturbing videos featured Kazakh youths in a classroom engaging in Islamic studies and then conducting military drills outside.<sup>14</sup> The following year, one of those students was featured in an IS execution video shooting a captive in the head.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, files uncovered from IS's registration of new fighters entering Syria and provided to the author through a contact at a research center at George Washington University in Washington D.C revealed that 30 Kazakhs entered Syria in 2013–2014 (See Table 1). However, this was a fraction of the overall number of Kazakhs to enter Syria during that period; other registration files likely exist, but have not been uncovered, and some Kazakhs may have entered Syria, but were not formally registered by IS. These 30 Kazakhs generally ranged from their 20s to 30s in age, came from diverse parts of Kazakhstan, and were often married. Some were possibly among the "family jihad" participants seen in the 2013 ISIS video. The files included the following Kazakh IS members:

**Table 1: Kazakhs in Islamic State Registration Documents in Syria**

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<sup>12</sup> "Astana Probes Video Allegedly Showing Kazakh 'Jihad' Family in Syria," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, October 21, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, "'Next Generation' Stars in IS Terror-Training Video Of 'Caliphate Cub'," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, October 18, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Kazakhstan Reacts to Video of Children with Islamic State," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, No. 224 (December 16, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Casey Michel, "Kazakhstan Responds to Horrifying – and Strange – ISIS Video," *The Diplomat*, January 19, 2015.



| Name (Given Name)                                 | Birthyear         | Marital Status, Number of Children | Hometown     |
|---|-------------------|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Abdullah al-Kazakhi (Khayrudeen Bakhtiyar)        | 1994              | Single                             | Sulu         |
| Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Kazakhi (Arman Ibjam)        | 1992              | Single                             | Almaty       |
| Abd al-Rahman al-Kazakhi (Mansoor Shimblath)      | 1997              | Married                            | Kurdee       |
| Abd al-Rahman al-Kazakhi (Nurlan Tadjikov)        | 1977              | Married                            | Almaty       |
| Abd al-Shakur al-Kazakhi (Jilman Aybetkulov)      | 1991              | Married, 1 child                   | Uralsk       |
| Abu Abdullah al-Kazakhi (Islam Ahmedov)           | 1990              | Single                             | Telde Kurdan |
| Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Kazakhi (Nursultanov Nurlan) | Married (1 child) | Unknown                            | Ayfooz       |
| Abu Aisha al-Kazakhi (Adil Qua)                   | 1990              | Married                            | Atyrau       |
| Abu Ammara al-Kazakhi (Daniyar)                   | 1970              | Married, 6 children                | Unknown      |
| Abu Ammara al-Kazakhstanian (Thinor)              | 1969              | Married, 6 children                | Unknown      |
| Abu Hamza al-Kazakhi (Abd al-Rahman Uslan)        | 1986              | Married                            | Unknown      |
| Abu Ibrahim al-Kazakhi (Nurlan)                   | 1981              | Married, 2 children                | Unknown      |
| Abu Miriam al-Kazakhi (Satkhinov Azmat)           | 1981              | Single                             | Unknown      |
| Abu Miriam al-Kazakhstanian (Bekeyjam Kaneybutov) | 1987              | Single                             | Almaty       |
| Abu Saheel al-Kazakhi (Aybek Qubaydan)            | 1988              | Married (2 children)               | Uralsk       |
| Abu Hamza al-Zubeir al-Kazakhstanian (Nurlan)     | 1981              | Married (2 children)               | Unknown      |
| Abu Suleiman al-Kazakhi (Abd al-Hamood Zitkeen)   | 1987              | Married (1 child)                  | Almaty       |

|  |      |                      |   |
|--|------|----------------------|---|
| Abu Suleiman al-Kazakhstani (Ghazi Nur bin Geeran) | 1969 | Married (7 children) | Unknown                                 |
| Uthman al-Kazakhstani (Daniyar)                    | 1995 | Single               | Karaganda                               |
| Musa al-Kazakhi (Artoog Satkhinov)                 | 1989 | Single               | Unknown                                 |
| Qasim Bikamat al-Kazakhstani (Qasim)               | 1987 | Married              | Shu                                     |
| Abu Ahmed Taleesh (Zurqan Taleesh)                 | 1965 | Married (2 children) | Unknown (Lived in Germany and Turkey)   |
| Abu al-Hassan al-Kazakhi (Turgubek Ruqan)          | 1989 | Single               | Almaty (Lived in Russia and Kyrgyzstan) |
| Abu Asma al-Kazakhi (Muhsin Bakhtiyar)             | 1988 | Married (2 children) | Astana                                  |
| Abu Hamza al-Zubayr (Nurlan)                       | 1981 | Married (2 children) | Unknown                                 |
| Abu Hudhaya al-Kazakhi (Izaamudeem Saiporov)       | 1990 | Single               | Unknown (Lived in Zahedan)              |
| Abu Islam (Rinat Arjunov)                          | 1975 | Married (3 children) | Unknown (Lived in Ufa)                  |
| Abu Saeed al-Kazakhi (Iskander Feodor)             | 1993 | Single               | Karaganda                               |
| Adam al-Kazakhi (Seyd Kurashov)                    | 1983 | Married (3 children) | Karaganda                               |
| Ibrahim al-Kazakhi (Islambek bin Ahmed)            | 1997 | Single               | Unknown (Lived in Waziristan)           |

The fact that Kazakh families were virtually unseen in ISIS or IS propaganda videos after 2014 implies that the “family jihad” phenomenon largely petered out, with few new Kazakh families arriving in Syria and other Kazakh families in Syria after rejecting IS and remaining largely housebound. There are several reasons for this. First, the video of the 150 Kazakh family members spurred Kazakhstan’s government to take action to prevent more families from traveling to Syria. Second, transit countries, especially Turkey, began cracking down on travel to Syria. And, third, reports of IS atrocities may have deterred some prospective Kazakh families from traveling to Syria to experience the supposed utopian caliphate.

Indeed, after 2014, videos from Syria and Iraq only confirmed that Kazakh males, and not families, were fighting for IS in those two countries. In August 2016, for example, IS released a “martyrdom photo” of the bearded elder, Abu Umar al-Kazakhi, sticking his index finger in the air, which symbolizes monotheism, or “one God,” and claiming that he conducted a suicide attack against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Syria (See Figure 1). Nearly one year later, in July 2017, IS featured Abu Khalid al-Kazakhi in another “martyrdom photo” with an accompanying video showing that he conducted a suicide bombing in al-Raqqa, Syria.<sup>16</sup> A video in January 2018 from Syria focused on Kazakhs in Syria and demonstrated that at towards the end of IS’s “caliphate,” Kazakhs were still fighting with IS. That video would be among the last videographic or photographic evidence of Kazakhs in Syria and Iraq before the fall of IS’s “territorial caliphate” in March 2019, with IS’s last stand in Baghuz, Syria and the repatriation of Kazakhs under Operation Jusan occurring only months later.

**Figure 1: Kazakh Islamic State “Martyr,” Abu Omar al-Kazakhi**



### **Gendered Repatriation of Kazakh Jihadists in Syria**

Considering that Kazakh women and children were seen in Syria in the 2013 ISIS video, but virtually unseen in the several years afterwards, including on women’s *hisba* (Islamic law enforcement) patrols, the question emerges as to what happened to them by the time of the fall of

<sup>16</sup> Paraszczuk, “Next Generation’ Stars.”

IS's "territorial caliphate" in 2019. This was a mystery to outsiders until the launch of Operation Jusan, and subsequent images and stories emerged from the operation. When Kazakhstan sought to repatriate its civilians from Syria, it found that there were, in fact, more women and children than men, with approximately 187 women and 490 children being repatriated and only around 100 men.<sup>17</sup> One possible explanation is that roughly equal numbers of women and men traveled to Syria, but more men than women died in combat there, which led to nearly twice as many women and men being identified by the Kazakh government upon the launch of Operation Jusan. Another possibility is that more Kazakh women and children were willing to be repatriated through Operation Jusan, while more Kazakh men remained in hiding in Syria with IS, especially if they were aware that they were more likely to face imprisonment than women were once repatriated.

As of 2021, Kazakhstan had convicted 43 nationals for participation in "activities of terrorist organizations" in Syria, including 31 men and 12 women, with 14 others under investigation. However, all repatriated women were placed in specialized rehabilitation centers established in the regions where they were from, with the purpose of "socially adapting" them back into the lifestyle of Kazakhstan and providing them with qualifications to gain employment. The convicted men, in contrast, were given prison sentences, usually amounting to ten years with the possibility of release if they could demonstrate their rehabilitation.<sup>18</sup>

One of the reasons for the disparate treatment of men and women was that, while not all women's experiences in Syria were the same, several of them shared the experience of being deceived, either by their real husbands or the future IS husbands whom they met through the internet, into thinking that they would live in Turkey; however, once in Turkey they were transported to Syria. Other women claimed to have been deceived by news of Muslim "suffering," traveled on their own to Syria, and then either married an IS member there or met a man on the internet, had a "virtual marriage," then met the man in the Middle East, and traveled to Syria with him.<sup>19</sup> That said, women who were generally above the average age of marriage sometimes left alone with their children for Syria to live in the "caliphate;" but a number of them returned to Kazakhstan and left their children with IS in Syria. Further demonstrating that women's experiences were not uniform is the fact that Kazakh CSO's monitoring of the rehabilitation programs found that, in some cases, Kazakh women encouraged their husbands to travel to Syria along with their children and then invited other women

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<sup>17</sup> Asim Kashgarian, "Could Kazakhstan Efforts to Repatriate Foreign Fighters Be a Model?" *VOA News*, (January 15, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview of Nursultan-based civil society activist, online, (December 20, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Nursultan-based civil society activist interview.

to Syria through social media. Indeed, a CSO participant involved in monitoring Operation Jusan-related rehabilitation programs noted that:

Large-scale Internet propaganda became one of the main reasons for the departure of Kazakh families to Syria and Iraq. It was on the internet that many young and single women found guides and husbands to travel to the Caliphate.<sup>20</sup>

Although the CSO participant involved in monitoring the rehabilitation did not explain *why* only men who were repatriated were given prison terms up to ten years, the gendered record of Kazakh jihadists played a role. Prior to the Syrian Civil War, as mentioned above, there were virtually only male Kazakh jihadists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Caucasus, or Kazakhstan itself. Further, in Syria itself, only Kazakh men were depicted in videos engaging in combat and brutalities. Moreover, Kazakhstan's intentional homicide rate indicates that 4.8 out of 100,000 men engage in intentional homicide while a much lesser 2.7 out of 100,000 women do the same.<sup>21</sup> Further, according to the same CSO participant:

In the course of their interviews, the women repeatedly stressed that they spent most of their time at home doing daily chores, and emphasized that they tried generally not to socialize with anyone, especially with compatriots. However, some women, especially enterprising ones, opened kindergartens, sold items, and did sewing. But some also mentioned that there was a *muaskar*—a special training camp, for women in particular—in the Syrian city of Mayadin. One of the interviewees reported that they intended to organize training for women to teach them how to handle weapons, allegedly for self-defense, but for some reason that never happened. During conversations with us, children said there were weapons in every house. Some girls were also taught to handle them by their fathers and brothers. Many of the interviewed women knew about the existence of a Kazakh *Jamaat* and spoke about how big it was, but could not or did not want to provide precise numbers. According to them, many Kazakhstanis lived in the city of al-Shaddadah in al-Hasakah Province in northeast Syria, now controlled by the Kurdish military.

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<sup>20</sup> Nursultan-based civil society activist interview.

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, "Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people) - Kazakhstan," 2017, [accessed November 5, 2021], <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=KZ>.

Although women were not completely inactive from militant activity, they rarely participated in direct combat. Therefore, the assessed risk of women returning from Syria carrying out attacks back in Kazakhstan and tarnishing public trust in Operation Jusan were lower than those of men. The stakes were also high for Operation Jusan. In Europe and the United States, for example, there was significant public opposition to repatriating IS foreign fighters. If any returnees from Operation Jusan would commit an attack back in Kazakhstan, it could derail support for the mission altogether and potentially halt the world's largest repatriation program. Even though no such attacks occurred, it was necessary for Kazakhstan to portray that Operation Jusan would not pose a risk to Kazakhstan's security to the country's population.

### **Public Relations and Operation Jusan**

Amid popular opposition to repatriating foreign fighters, especially in Western countries, Kazakhstan had to “market” Operation Jusan to its domestic citizenry in order to win their approval for the project. One way the government did this was through an initial three-part documentary of Operation Jusan released on January 9, May 10, and May 31, 2019 on the YouTube channel of Erlan Karin, who was then working in the Office of the Presidency of Kazakhstan and was the former Director of Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies (KazISS). The videos were viewed more than 150,000 times altogether, were made with Hollywood-style “action music,” and, in some ways, resembled the high-quality, professionalized IS videography, albeit covering a starkly opposite theme: rescue, not killings, brutalities, or torture.<sup>22</sup>

Besides these documentaries, Kazakhstan's KNB released at least seven similarly-styled video documentaries of subsequent phases of Operation Jusan on YouTube in 2020 and 2021.<sup>23</sup> Notably, these videos focused on women and children, especially revealing the playfulness and naivete of children and the seeming openness of the women to being repatriated through their interviews with officials. Meanwhile, the men were portrayed as potentially dangerous, with Kazakh special forces placing hoods on their heads as they were transported on airplanes back to Kazakhstan. Kazakh special forces, at the same time, were depicted in uniform and operating professionally and in a

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Erlan Karin, “Операция «Жусан»,” YouTube, January 9, 2019, access date November 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJzuym1LyVU>; Erlan Karin, “Операция «Жусан-2»,” YouTube, January 9, 2019, access date November 5, 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V49Ps4cmHc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V49Ps4cmHc); Erlan Karin, “Операция «Жусан-3»,” YouTube, January 9, 2019, access date November 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2FjKDbWHjI>.

<sup>23</sup> See “КНБ РК,” YouTube, various dates in 2020-2021, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjI6Y-wVWt\\_lvPElzLoTegg/search?query=%D0%96%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BD%20](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjI6Y-wVWt_lvPElzLoTegg/search?query=%D0%96%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B0%D0%BD%20).

mission-oriented fashion. This reflected a desire to show the Kazakh citizenry that Operation Jusan would not allow men who traveled to Syria, who were also presumed to be the most dangerous, to be treated lightly and become a threat, while women, especially mothers, and children, would be granted sympathy. This played to Kazakhs' expectations of men being more violent than women and, of course, children based on cultural understandings of masculinity, if not also the empirical record of Kazakh men engaging in terrorism and intentional homicide at greater rates than women.

Karin's book from April 2021, called *Operation: Jusan: A story of rescue and repatriation from Islamic State*, detailed the five missions that comprised Operation Jusan and led to the repatriation, according to the book, of 33 men and around 570 women and children. The book, first and foremost, detailed the various videos and photos of Kazakh IS members in Syria and told behind-the-scenes stories of some of them. For example, one blind Kazakh masseuse for wounded IS fighters had originally worked near a local mosque in Kazakhstan, but, upon struggling to find work and at the recommendation of a friend, he traveled to Syria, where he joined IS.<sup>24</sup> The book, however, mostly explained the challenges behind carrying out Operation Jusan, whose first phase was initially intended to repatriate women and children, but still included six men among the eleven women and children; other men were repatriated in the subsequent phases.

The book also emphasized that, although Kazakhstan intended for Operation Jusan to be clandestine, a public relations campaign was forced on the Kazakh government after leaks surfaced about the first phase. For example, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) issued a statement about the operation, and then journalists, who learned about the operation, tweeted and reported on it. The Kazakh government, therefore, had to "consider the risk of fostering distorted information and avoiding speculation among the general public" and made an official announcement about Operation Jusan. The government's main points were that:

- Children were "led into this crisis-stricken country [Syria] by deceit and remained there as hostages of terrorists of the international terrorist organization ISIS."
- "When they arrived in Kazakhstan, the women and children were given all manner of state support," were "happy about their salvation," and will "undergo adaptation and to receive all necessary medical help in the coming month."
- "Kazakhstan always supports its citizens, no matter where they find themselves" and "will continue this work of returning children who remain in the active combat zone against their will."

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<sup>24</sup> Erlan Karin, *Operation: Jusan: A story of rescue and repatriation*, (Nusultan, Kazakhstan: Momentum Books LLC, June 21, 2021).

It would be difficult for any Kazakh to oppose Operation Jusan based on the government's statement, whose focus was on women and children, as opposed to men, who would be perceived to be more dangerous. Even if well-intentioned, a CNN reporter's tweet that Kazakhstan repatriated "foreign terrorist fighters" from the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF)-run camps in Syria with U.S. military support could otherwise have caused alarm in Kazakhstan.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the government's statement killed two birds with one stone: assuaging domestic concerns about repatriation while also clarifying the record for international audiences.

Overall, it seems this government public relations campaign was successful. The CSO representative involved with monitoring rehabilitation programs, for example, stated:

In the [Kazakh] public arena, there were different points of view [on Operation Jusan], including those who perceived the return of Kazakhstanis from the Middle East very negatively because of the risk of spreading radical ideas and carrying out terrorist attacks. However, certain steps by the authorities, in particular the release of videos about the phases of the Jusan special operation, interviews with returning women who regretted their departure, and documentaries about children, to some extent reduced the anxieties in public discourse. In general, this operation was perceived in a positive way because a large number of underage children, including orphans, were returned.<sup>26</sup>

Kazakhstan continued this public relations messaging after Operation Jusan's second phase, which, according to the government's statement, involved the following: "231 Kazakhstani citizens were evacuated from Syria, including 156 children, mostly of preschool age, and eighteen of whom are orphans." The statement further added that:

The women who returned in January this year [2019] have rejected their radical past, found work, and reconnected with their relatives. The children have been accepted into schools and kindergartens. The citizens of Kazakhstan who left for active combat zones made such a rash decision under the influence of the destructive and in fact false propaganda spread by terrorists. Now, they are voluntarily returning to Kazakhstan in the hopes of beginning a new

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<sup>25</sup> Karin, *Operation: Jusan*.

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview of Nursultan-based civil society activist, online, December 20, 2021.



life. Their children should not suffer in a foreign land or be held responsible for the mistakes of their parents.

Notably, the government statement did not mention men, which would assuage any concerns among the public that repatriated men who joined IS in Syria could be a threat. Nevertheless, it seems men were among the 231 Kazakhs repatriated in Operation Jusan's second phase because Karin's book notes that a first flight included "secret service agents" with the passengers, whose gender was not mentioned, before a second flight "brought a second group of women and children." In addition, the video of Operation Jusan's second phase posted on Karin's YouTube page showed a clip of man in a red prisoner suit and handcuffs being escorted onto an Air Force plane by Kazakh security officers in military attire.<sup>27</sup>

After the third phase of Operation Jusan, another angle of Kazakhstan's public relations surfaced. This statement emphasized that it was a "Special Humanitarian Operation" and, like the previous two phases, was coordinated up to the level of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. In other words, this was not simply a bureaucratic or administrative-level operation, but one under the oversight of the president himself. This would not only calm any Kazakhs' nerves about the operation being conducted whimsically so as to endanger the population, but also added gravitas to the operation. Indeed, if any IS returnees from Syria as part of Operation Jusan committed a terrorist attack in Kazakhstan, the president would have to answer for it.

The statement after the third phase further referred to the returnees as a "group of our compatriots repatriated from Syria" involving "close collaboration with foreign partners," such as the U.S., and "171 children evacuated from active combat zones," who, "upon returning to Kazakhstan, were housed in the special adaptation center where they are currently being rehabilitated and receiving all necessary help." Further, the statement confirmed that "ensuring the safety of children has become the main goal of Operation Jusan." Once again, support for children was emphasized as well as the fact that Kazakhstan was not undergoing the operation alone, but in coordination with international partners. As such, there was little any Kazakh citizen could object to when it came to Operation Jusan.

Overall, Karin asserts the public relations campaign was successful and the "public generally welcomed reports about the repatriation of citizens from Syria." Besides achieving that objective, the government's public relations had an unintended, but positive, side-effect: it dispelled any "fake

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<sup>27</sup> See 2:23 of Erlan Karin, "«Жусан-2» операциясы," *YouTube*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPdJ5xPEQsQ>.

news” surrounding Operation Jusan. For example, a domestic political analyst alleged that the Russian military, not Kazakh military, brought the Kazakh women and children from for Operation Jusan. Others on the internet alleged Operation Jusan was fake. However, with the KNB’s videos, Karin’s videos and book, and the government’s statements, the reality of Operation Jusan could not be denied. Meanwhile, the fact that no IS returnees to Kazakhstan have carried out any attacks attests to the short-term success of the operation, while in the longer term the reintegration of IS returnees, including imprisoned men, into society will determine the operation’s comprehensive success.

### **Conclusion**

Kazakhstan’s success in planning and implementing Operations Jusan would ostensibly serve as a model for other countries around the world that are grappling with the issues of repatriating their own citizens from Syria, especially in the West. Despite this, there has been relatively little impact of Kazakhstan’s experience on such countries. Rather, the vast majority of IS foreign fighters in Syrian or Iraqi camps or prisons are yet to be repatriated.

There are several reasons for this. First, Kazakhstan is a comparatively “isolated” country insofar as a Kazakh IS returnee from Iraq or Syria cannot easily travel to another country out of the sight of Kazakh authorities. The Kazakh borders with Russia and Uzbekistan are long, but well-guarded and do not allow for easy escape of security surveillance or unauthorized access.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the Kazakh border with Turkmenistan is extremely remote, and the border with Kyrgyzstan is also well-guarded. Either way, it is less likely a Kazakh returnee could leave the country whereas a returnee to, for example, France or Germany, could more easily escape the country by taking advantage of comparatively loosed border controls and jihadist networks in neighboring countries to hide out, establish new networks, and launch attacks again. Thus, there are structurally greater security threats in returning IS members from Syria and Iraq to Europe than to Kazakhstan.

Second, Kazakhstan carried a legacy from the Soviet era in having a strong security apparatus that, while respecting the country’s increasing shift towards democratization, is less encumbered by civil rights’ protocols than European countries.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Kazakh security can engage in forms of surveillance, travel curbing, and other restrictive measures to prevent IS returnees from networking or listening to propaganda once they are reintegrated into society. Likewise, Kazakhstan exerts control over religious institutions in the country as well as the internet to block “pro-jihadist”

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<sup>28</sup> Sergey V. Golunov and Roger N. McDermott, “Border Security in Kazakhstan: Threats, Policies and Future Challenges,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 18, no.1, (2005): 31-58.

<sup>29</sup> Mordechai de Haas, “Kazakhstan’s Security Policy: Steady as She Goes?” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 4 (October 2015): 621-645.

websites, which mitigates the amount of Islamism or potential pro-jihadist rhetoric coming from mosques or the internet. It is, therefore, less likely that upon their arrival the returnee would become exposed again to the type of propaganda that led them to go to Syria and Iraq in the first place.

Third, IS has never carried out any attacks in Kazakhstan. As a result, Kazakh society is less traumatized by IS and less concerned about “another” attack compared to European countries, like France, for example. Moreover, there are no significant pre-existing IS networks in Kazakhstan with which IS returnees could connect. This again reveals that there is less risk of Kazakh IS returnees carrying over or reviving their militancy once they return to Kazakhstan.

Fourth, and lastly, Kazakh citizens and their government view the Kazakhs who were in Syria and Iraq as “their own” as most of the foreign fighters there were ethnic Kazakhs of the same Muslim religion. However, European countries tend to view their foreign fighters as of “other” ethnicities, such as Middle Eastern or South Asian, and of “another” religion, Islam. There is arguably, therefore, less compassion for those returning who are not “their own.” Even non-ethnic Kazakhs in Syria or Iraq were generally considered Kazakhstan’s “own” due to the inclusive nature of post-Soviet Kazakhstani identity that purposely sought to include not only the majority ethnic Kazakhs, but also Russians, Chechens, Uighurs, Tatars, Armenians, and others under the country’s umbrella.<sup>30</sup> As a result, there was a demand, as reflected in the country’s public relations policy, to rescue Kazakhstan’s own brethren. Despite the mistakes and immoral acts many of them committed, Kazakh society felt some level of responsibility to remedy these acts by returning those citizens to Kazakhstan for the appropriate punishment or other treatment.

Notwithstanding differences in the national situations between Kazakhstan and European or other states, lessons can be learned, shared, and adapted. As a result, dialogue between Kazakhstan and other countries on repatriating foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, including gendered approaches, should be held. While this may not be a panacea, it can only be considered an advantage given the urgency of the situation.

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<sup>30</sup> William Fierman, “Language and Identity in Kazakhstan, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 1998): 171-186.

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Tatyana Zelenskaya

# Negotiating Gender in Central Asia

The Effect of  
Gender Structures  
and Dynamics on  
Violent Extremism

Illustration: "Self-Portrait," by Tatyana Zelenskaya. On International Women's Day, celebrated on March 8, a women's march is held annually in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. During the 2020 march, a group of masked right-wing radical men attacked the march participants, including the artist. The police officers who arrived on the scene detained only the participants in the march. The artist's impression was that the police were working together with the attackers. She drew this picture immediately after the events and posted it on social networks in order to somehow speak out about what had happened.

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ISBN: 978-0-578-38582-2



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PROGRAM**

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