

# **Radicalization as a Threat to the Belt and Road Initiative**

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The immense Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which encompasses various major projects in Central Asia, forms an integral part of China's foreign policy strategy. These projects include significant Chinese investment in infrastructure and construction in Kyrgyzstan, China's western neighbor, which has endured longstanding political instability and social and ethnic unrest. These conditions have led to a situation in which around 10% of the country's youth are under the influence of radicalization, and thus Kyrgyzstan provides an excellent case study for exploring radicalization as a threat to the BRI, given the potential of radicalization for fostering extremism and terrorism across Central Asia. In this article, I explain the radicalization process and examine its enabling factors in Kyrgyzstan, and conclude by proposing a conceptual framework for deradicalization efforts using an innovative media approach.

## **Radicalization as a Pathway to Extremism and Terrorism**

Radicalization is a prominent threat to the security and stability of societies and governments around the globe. Largely viewed as a product of the post-9/11 era, the roots of Islamic radicalization can be traced to the "Islamic revival" in Central Asia from the early 1990s onward, and especially following ISIS's rise to power and international influence in 2014. Over this period, jihadist terrorist organizations and numerous other militant groups have increasingly exploited the Internet and social media platforms, along with real-world ties and connections, to promote radicalization—that is, to persuade, inspire, and motivate audiences to adopt their worldview (without using physical force), with the aim of recruiting supporters, instigating terror attacks, and inciting extreme violent acts.

In the research literature, "radicalization" is often described as a complex, non-linear, and dynamic process influenced by a combination of personal and contextual factors, leading to terrorism, extremism or fundamentalism, or even more generally, toward an extremist worldview that justifies and promotes the use of violence. One example of such a worldview is jihadism—the extremist religious mobilizing ideology led by ISIS and al-Qaeda which calls for radical change to the social and political order<sup>1</sup>.

For the purposes of this article, *radicalization* refers to a transformative process by which individuals adopt extremist worldviews and radical ideas that deviate sharply from (and refute the legitimacy of) those of mainstream society, and that justify and encourage the use of violent extremism and terrorism to achieve political goals. Conversely, *deradicalization* refers to the process of countering and undermining the worldviews or approaches related to violent extremism and suggesting alternative ideologies, thus shifting individuals away from extreme beliefs and values toward

moderate-mainstream belief systems. Identifying the contexts, discourse, and methods via which people's perceptions and ideas are influenced and altered in radicalization processes is a critical precondition for any deradicalization efforts, with the aim of halting the spread of violent extremism and terrorism.

### **Kyrgyzstan—A Hotbed of Radicalization**

A small, landlocked country of 6.5 million people with a Muslim majority, Kyrgyzstan has in recent years experienced a steady growth in the number of individuals radicalized and recruited by extremist or terrorist groups such as ISIS. As of March 2020,<sup>2</sup> 10% of its youth population are estimated to be under the influence of radicalization, with 6% engaged in radicalization processes, and 4% already classed as violent extremists, terrorists, former foreign fighters, or would-be jihadists. While the overall number of active jihadists in Kyrgyzstan may be small, the country has ranked first in Central Asia in per capita terms,<sup>3</sup> with more than a thousand individuals volunteering to serve abroad as jihadist fighters in 2017, and with current widespread support for (and active recruitment into) "IS Khorasan" in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan's economic instability and socio-ethnic conflicts have helped transform it into a hotspot for radicalization and jihadism, making it a potential threat to the security and stability of the entire region, and thus also to BRI projects in the area.

Though there have been relatively few jihadist terrorist attacks within Central Asia, and in Kyrgyzstan in particular (with the suicide car bombing at the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek in August 2016 being a prominent exception<sup>4</sup>), radicalization efforts have been successful in reaching individuals from very diverse social, ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds, including people with relatively educated, stable, and well-off upbringings. Many of these individuals have proceeded to participate in terrorist activities in other regions; for example, between 2016 and 2018, jihadists from Central Asia were involved in instigating, planning, or carrying out terror attacks in Istanbul, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, New York, and Tajikistan.

Due to its geographic location at the very heart of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has long been home to a variety of militants with regional and global connections. The close ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties between Central Asian people and the porous borders between states in the region pose a serious security challenge, as these conditions facilitate illicit trafficking, terrorist activities, and the spreading of extremist ideologies. Kyrgyzstan has seen a growth in violent jihadist-Salafist groups with ideological ties and operational links to ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliate organizations operating in nearby Afghanistan and in different locations such as the Northern Caucasus and Turkey<sup>5</sup>. These radical Islamic groups have successfully created and expanded a large network of sympathizers in the region that provides a pool of potential recruits. The proliferation of militant groups and operational cells throughout Central Asia, especially in the ungoverned Fergana Valley portion of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

and Uzbekistan, has greatly contributed to widespread radicalization and thereby increased the risk of future violence and terrorism<sup>6</sup>.

### **The Process of Radicalization**

In seeking to understand *how* radicalization happens, it is important to dig down into the question of *why* it happens, as both violent extremism and radicalization are rooted in people's lived experiences within the various societies and cultures they inhabit. Of course, the radicalization trajectories of any given individual are influenced by multiple factors—political, security, religious, ideological, psychological, and social, as well as other contextual circumstances such as international relations and the role of media and the Internet. Thus, when considering radicalization in a particular location, it is important to examine these contextual factors as much as possible.

With regards to Kyrgyzstan, there are four main elements of the complex and multifaceted radicalization process that I believe are worthy of focus: the *grievances* that drive individuals to be open to extremist ideas; the *socialization process* that fosters radicalization; the *individual vulnerabilities* or “psychological qualities” of people who are more prone to radicalization; and the *ideology* and ideological discourse that justify extremism and violence. All four of these help us better understand the cognitive transformation undergone by radicalized individuals.

- **Grievances.** Since gaining its independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has suffered decades of political and economic instability, corruption and poor governance, high levels of poverty and economic inequality, and extensive socio-ethnic tensions. The internal divisions and conflicts along ethnic and socioeconomic lines, combined with weak political governance, serve to undermine the authority and power of central government, and have resulted in a fractured state lacking a consolidated national identity and coherent national policy<sup>7</sup>. This situation, with large sections of the fragmented population nurturing political, ethnic, and socioeconomic grievances, provides a fertile ground for extremism and radicalization.
- **Socialization.** In Kyrgyzstan, as in many other countries, radicalization has been greatly facilitated by the dissemination of militant ideologies and messages via the Internet and social media. These platforms are complemented by close interpersonal ties and interactions in small cells of family members, friends, and radical individuals. Together, these online and real-world interactions and bonds create a radical milieu into which people can be indoctrinated and made to feel at home, as a step toward active recruitment into terrorist groups such as ISIS and its affiliates. This process was helped by moves within Kyrgyzstan toward greater political and religious freedoms and freedom of expression, which have enabled the spread of more extremist religious ideas and the proliferation of

radical groups and movements, often supported by foreign Islamic organizations and international donors<sup>8</sup>.

- **Individual vulnerabilities.** Many Kyrgyzstanis, especially those from ethnic and religious minorities, have come of age during a period characterized by socio-political instability and have suffered from social marginalization and exclusion, unemployment, poverty, family breakdown, and a lack of formal religious education. Consequently, many have internalized feelings of humiliation, injustice, discrimination, and marginalization, leading some of them to embrace extremist ideas in their search for identity, acceptance, and purpose. Moreover, the lack of socio-economic opportunities within Kyrgyzstan has driven many people to seek work abroad, mainly in Russia or Kazakhstan<sup>9</sup>, where they often found themselves once more on the margins of society as labor immigrants, making them even more vulnerable to the teachings of extremist ideologies such as jihadism.
- **Ideology.** Based on an extremist religious interpretation of Islam as it existed in the 7th century, the ideology of global jihad (or “jihadism”) is a relatively new phenomenon founded and consolidated in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Combining Salafist traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries with practical concepts rooted in the political culture of the 20th and 21st centuries, the jihadist doctrine calls for a radical revolution in Muslim consciousness in order to purge Islam of foreign influences, overthrow the existing political-religious world order, and establish an Islamic state<sup>10</sup>. In its radical interpretation of the idea of jihad (a concept traditionally understood within Islam as referring to the individual’s struggle to master impulses and bring good to the world), this doctrine justifies and demands total war to defend its “pure” version of Islam from any influences of other religious or secular ideologies and values.

### **Ideological Struggle as a Pathway to Radicalization**

Jihadist ideology is based on a harsh interpretation of Sharia law, along with two core religious values and guiding principles: The first is the concept of *ummah*, a utopian conception of the ideal Muslim collective and society which has been at the heart of Muslim consciousness for centuries, but which ISIS has retooled as an imperative to create a real-world Islamic state run according to its extremist version of Sharia law. The second is *jihad*, which ISIS posits as a holistic struggle to be waged physically and virtually on multiple fronts, including a “war of ideas” against non-Muslim principles such as democracy, secularism, and atheism, and a struggle for the perception and recognition of what it holds to be the authentic, “pure” Muslim identity<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, it negates any “infidel” identity or loyalty that is not Islamic, and forbids any alternative interpretations of Islam, such as Kyrgyzstan’s tolerant Hanafi school.

Being fundamentally opposed to any form of compromise, the leaders of ISIS seek to impose their jihadist doctrine on all Muslims. In waging their multidimensional battle to achieve political power and influence Kyrgyz public consciousness, they seek to exploit the underlying socioeconomic and political conditions in Kyrgyzstan—social fragmentation, the breakdown of the traditional society, the lack of a strong Kyrgyz national identity—as well as the individual vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz nationals to radicalization processes, as described above.

Thus, Kyrgyzstan is currently a battleground in a war of ideas—a fierce political-ideological discursive struggle over Kyrgyz public consciousness between those who embrace moderate mainstream interpretations of Islam, such as that of the local Hanafi school, and followers extremist interpretations of Islam such as jihadism<sup>12</sup> (many of them subject to foreign influences from organizations such as ISIS). This war is mainly being waged in what we can consider the marketing arena, especially on social media platforms. The media tool of framing is a key weapon in this struggle, one being used to promote radicalization, but which can also be used to counter it, as I explain below.

### **Framing as a Media Tool for Radicalization**

“Framing” refers to the way in which information is organized and presented in media and to the significant role these activities play in the creation and dissemination of values and ideologies. The framing process involves selecting some aspects of information and making them more prominent and more meaningful to the audience. This involves assembling textual and/or visual narratives in a way that magnifies the effect of particular elements, ideas, and messages and highlights connections among them, in order to promote a particular interpretation and strengthen its appeal and impact<sup>13</sup>.

Terrorist organizations such as ISIS use framing as a strategic tool for influencing public opinion. Indeed, ISIS has been immensely successful in this regard, developing sophisticated media strategies and framing techniques to promote its vision and ideology, disseminate radical values and ideological narratives, and encourage target audiences to think, feel, behave, or act in a particular manner in order to further its jihadist doctrine, including the use of violence. The framing techniques deployed by ISIS include militant/peaceful framing, threat framing, and gain/loss framing. Together with other manipulative methods, these strategies have enabled the organization to shift public discourse in the direction of its own fanatic ideology and increase worldwide public identification with and support for its doctrine. In practical terms, framing has enabled ISIS to promote radicalization, recruit new members, justify its actions, and consolidate base support for its values, beliefs and goals.

In this light, ISIS’s media strategy of building and maintaining a massive online presence can be understood to be ultimately more crucial to its long-term success than military victories or terrorist attacks. How ISIS brands itself, packages its vision, and

above all, frames its jihadist ideology, using multilingual audio-visual media campaigns across various digital media platforms, is far more important than its military operations, as these are the means by which it shapes people's perceptions and ideas, and thus fosters radicalization and incite violence.

There is no room here for an in-depth explanation of ISIS's framing strategies, but it is sufficient for our purposes to note that ISIS offers Kyrgyzstani people an alternative perspective on world events based on an extreme, dichotomous ideology that divides the world into "good" and "evil" camps. This ideology rejects Kyrgyzstan's local tolerant, mainstream Hanafi school of Islam, which cherishes local cultures and traditions, painting it as belonging firmly in the "evil" camp. Based on its conviction in the exclusive truth of its own radical interpretation of Islam, ISIS not only rejects the Hanafi doctrine, which it presents as an enemy of "true" Islam, but also challenges the legitimacy and authority of the Kyrgyz state itself. These narratives accord with ISIS's unique and innovative global messaging strategy, which I refer to as its "black-and-white" framing strategy. This strategy acts as the lens through which ISIS shapes its audience's beliefs and perceptions, polarizes their support, and drives their radicalization.

### **A Conceptual Framework for Deradicalization**

Efforts at deradicalization—undermining ISIS's doctrine and shifting its target audience away from extreme values and beliefs and toward more tolerant, moderate-mainstream perceptions—will therefore need to address each of these elements, and should apply alternative framing techniques in order to counter the appeal of ISIS's powerful messaging. In this section, then, I present a short example of an alternative to ISIS's framing of Islamic values and of current realities, particularly regarding Kyrgyzstan, and suggest a framing approach that may be effective in promoting these alternative interpretations and combatting ISIS's jihadist messages.

#### ***ISIS's framing of the concept of global jihad***

In Central Asia, as elsewhere, ISIS presents jihad as a total, long-term defensive struggle for Islamic principles and ideas and against foreign ideologies and values that are contrary to its jihadist interpretation. In this context, it uses the "white" side of its framing strategy, employing positive Islamic symbols and metaphors, to present itself as the sole protector of Islam, contrasting with the "black" side that comprises all its adversaries, including the tolerant, moderate Hanafi Muslims, the corrupt political leaders, and all other militant groups. In its visual marketing campaign, ISIS uses doomsday themes and terms, such as "apocalyptic struggle," to create a sense of anxiety, urgency, and inevitable confrontation between the "true" Muslims and all apostates. Moreover, it has not hesitated to display and disseminate the most extreme and horrifying images (such as video of a Kazakh child soldier, aged ten or eleven, executing two Russians<sup>14</sup>) as a way of stimulating the strongest possible emotional response—whether bloodlust and delight in violence or fear and horror—among its followers and opponents alike. The positive framing given by ISIS to the benefits of

supporting jihad and its doctrine, including gaining personal significance, purpose, and respect, was specifically designed to promote radicalization and encourage identification with its rigid, extremist ideology.

### ***An alternative framing of the concept of jihad***

In contrast to ISIS's extreme interpretation of the concept of jihad and its destructive, militant orientation, it is possible to highlight the harmful aspects of this approach and position it not only as illegitimate but as a direct threat to Islam and to Muslims everywhere. Moreover, in the context of Kyrgyzstan, we can use a tolerance approach along with positive language to emphasize and promote the non-violent understanding of jihad as the individual's struggle for welfare, justice, and equality. Similarly, we can explain that ISIS has not only undermined tenets of the Islamic faith, but also recruited to its ranks (and given prominent roles to) novices in Islam who have no real knowledge and understanding of jihad as an Islamic value, and falsely portrayed them as faithful Muslims. Moreover, we should warn Kyrgyz Muslims that when they support and join jihadist groups such as ISIS, they are required to renounce their original identities and sever all their prior family and friendship ties. In short, choosing the path of radicalization leads them away from mainstream Islamic values and from their communities, and toward isolation, terrorism, and ultimately, death.

### **Conclusion**

Radicalization is a complex transformative process, which at its core involves the adoption of extremist worldviews and radical ideas that justify and encourage the use of violence and terrorism. Thus, effectively confronting radicalization and extremist ideologies requires that we engage in an ideological struggle—a war of ideas fought to gain influence over public consciousness.

Kyrgyzstan offers a useful case study for exploring the major enabling factors for radicalization, and these factors are likewise relevant in other countries facing similar challenges, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Azerbaijan, despite their different socio-political circumstances. These factors include the existence of a moderate Muslim population; socialization processes; individual vulnerabilities; and exposure to “black-and-white” extremist ideologies. In addition, framing is also a critical element in the radicalization process, and thus is also a critical element of deradicalization efforts. In practice, framing has to be tailored for each region, country, and/or ethnic group.

The multifaceted nature of radicalization means that it is not merely a social or religious issue, reflecting a personal crisis of identity and ideology, but can also pose a significant threat to worldwide security and stability, including to the BRI. Consequently, it is important for all countries, especially those with global aspirations and responsibilities, to invest resources in deradicalization. In this context, the use of targeted counter-framing strategies has potential for containing and even reducing the spread and influence of radicalization, in Central Asia and in other regions.

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