Media Strategies for Deradicalization in Kyrgyzstan

Anat Hochberg-Marom, PhD

Department of Political Science, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Word Count: 11,200

Abstract

The main focus in the terrorism literature is the direct threat derived from terrorist ideology and activity. However, terrorism is the end result of a process of radicalization, which by itself is a highly prominent threat to the security and stability of societies and governments around the globe. In this article, I examine the factors that have enabled and nurtured radicalization in Kyrgyzstan, making it a radicalization hotbed. I argue that media strategies, and particularly the use of framing, are critical elements in both radicalization and deradicalization processes. Thus, I propose a conceptual framework for effective deradicalization which incorporates an innovative framing approach, one which is applicable in Kyrgyzstan but could also be implemented in various other countries.

Key words: Kyrgyzstan, radicalization, deradicalization, extremism, ISIS, jihadism, terrorism, framing strategy, counter-framing strategy

Media Strategies for Deradicalization in Kyrgyzstan

1. Introduction

The main focus in the research literature and in political and media discourse regarding terrorism is on the direct threat posed by terrorist activity. However, terrorist actions are the end result of a much broader and more widespread process of radicalization, and as such, are merely the tip of the iceberg. In this article, I examine the characteristics and contributing factors of this process as it plays out in the Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan—a small, landlocked, mountainous country bordering China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, with a population of 6.5 million, most of them Muslim[1]—has in recent years experienced a steady annual growth in the number of individuals radicalized and recruited by extremist or terrorist groups such as ISIS (Ibraimova and Toktosunov 2019). As of March 2020, 10% of its young people were estimated to be under the influence of radicalization (Pierobon 2020), with 6% engaged in radicalization processes and 4% already classed as extremist and jihadists (Matveeva 2018). Despite being the most liberal country in Central Asia, in terms of its policies governing Internet use and communications as well as its predominant religious practices and beliefs, the level of recruitment to jihadist groups in Kyrgyzstan is relatively high.

Militant extremists from Kyrgyzstan were involved in the bombing of the Ataturk airport in Istanbul in June 2016, the suicide car bombing at the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek in August 2016, and the metro bombing in Saint Petersburg in April 2017, while in 2013, two Kyrgyzstani brothers carried out the Boston Marathon bombing in United States.

While the overall number of active jihadists in Kyrgyzstan is small, the country has ranked first in Central Asia in per capita terms, with a rate of 150 people per million volunteering to serve as jihadist fighters in Iraq and Syria in 2017 (Matveeva and Giustozzi 2018), and with current widespread support for and active recruitment into IS Khorasan in Afghanistan (Osman 2020). Longstanding political and economic instability and socio-ethnic conflicts, and particularly the spread of jihadism, have

facilitated extremism and made Kyrgyzstan into a radicalization hotspot, posing a potential threat to the security and stability of the entire region.

In this article, I analyze the elements of the radicalization process, and explain how these have been implemented in Kyrgyzstan by ISIS and its affiliates. In particular, I highlight the importance of their use of media strategies, particularly framing, which has been central to their success. I also propose specific strategies, based on counter-framing, for combatting radicalization in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere.

2. Radicalization—A General Overview

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, with the aim of recruiting supporters, instigating terror attacks, and inciting extreme violence.

This article examines the role of media strategies in this process, and particularly the use of framing to promote radicalization, and offers a strategic framework for deradicalization efforts. It is based on soft-power and discourse approaches that aim at intervention before violence occurs, undermining the ideology related to violent extremism and suggesting an alternative worldview (Search for Common Ground 2019) for countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) (O'Farrell and Street 2019). Understanding radicalization is critical for creating this framework, and requires exploring the underlying ideology as an inter-related system of beliefs. In other words, 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.

A key element of this approach is the differentiation between the cognitive and the behavioral dimensions of radicalization (Schmid 2013; Hafez and Mullins 2015;

Kruglanski et al. 2019). Cognitive radicalization entails the adoption of an extremist worldview that challenges the status quo, though not necessarily via violence and terrorism, whereas behavioral radicalization involves de facto participation in a range of radical activities, including non-violent activities such as fundraising and recruiting new members, with the aim of achieving ideological-political goals. Only a tiny portion of these behavioral radicals actually engage in violent extremism and terrorism. While cognitive radicalization is sometimes perceived as less of a threat than behavioral radicalization, the fact that it is much more widespread, is much more difficult to identify and monitor, and provides fertile ground for behavioral radicalization over time means that it can be more dangerous in the long term, due to the propensity and inclination toward extremism and violence that it fosters.

Although radicalization can pertain to a large number of violent and non-violent organizations operating in Kyrgyzstan, where 20 groups have been banned (including various religious and nationalist extremist organizations) (Larionov 2018; Matveeva 2018), I focus here primarily on the ideology of global jihad (jihadism) employed by ISIS[2] and its local affiliates. This is because ISIS is not only a brutal terrorist organization with a Salafist-jihadist orientation, but also a radical social movement.

In social-science and terrorism literature, "radicalization" is often described as a complex, non-linear, and dynamic process influenced by a combination of personal and contextual factors (Newman, 2013; Hafez and Mullins 2015), leading to terrorism, extremism, or fundamentalism, or even more generally, toward an extreme worldview that justifies 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 in Muslim countries and throughout the world (Zelin, 2014; Richards 2015). It is often depicted through its radical interpretation of the Islamic idea of jihad, via which it justifies and demands a total war against the influences of other religious or secular ideologies, loyalties, and values—referred to as the "war of ideas."

Although the main focus in the research literature on terrorism, extremism and radicalization, as in the political, media, and public discourse, concerns this ultimate phase of the radicalization process (violent terrorist activity), I believe that in the long run, the greater threat comes from the cognitive dimension of radicalization. When

large portions of a given population undergo cognitive radicalization, this becomes a critical enabling factor for groups pursuing radical change to the current social order and political status quo.

For the purposes of this article, then, *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 (Schmid, 2013; Search for Common Ground 2019), thus shifting individuals away from extreme beliefs and values and toward moderate-mainstream belief systems. Given the variety of frameworks and perspectives through which this shifting is addressed, the *counter-radicalization* process relates to the specific measures taken to prevent moderate individuals from becoming radicalized or recruited by violent, extremist or terrorist groups,[3] while *disengagement* is the process of shifting radical individuals away from their violent activities or from a violent/extremist group without necessarily deradicalizing them or changing their views. Though there are differences between them, all three processes share common ideas and methodologies, and I will refer to all of them as *deradicalization*.

2.1 Radicalization Factors

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 thoroughly examine these contextual factors.

With regards to Kyrgyzstan, there are three main elements of the complex and multifaceted radicalization process: *socialization processes* that foster radicalization; the *individual vulnerabilities* of people who are more prone to radicalization; and the *ideology* and ideological discourse that justify extremism and violence. Examining all

three of these can help us better understand the cognitive and behavioral transformation undergone by radicalized individuals.

2.1.1 Socialization

Group dynamics and interpersonal relations are at the core of the process that can lead susceptible individuals to engage in extremism and radicalization (Sageman 2008). Studies of radical Muslim communities have shown that radicalization entails a combination of extremist ideas and beliefs with strong ties with a group of like-minded friends or colleagues (Hafez and Mullins 2015). Indeed, while it is commonly believed that individuals enlist in ISIS (or other jihadist organizations) solely because they identify with its ideology and actions, it is in fact the individual's strong sense of identification with and belonging to circles of family, friends, tribes, and clans that are linked with the jihadist community (or a particular jihadist group) which forms the decisive factor in their engagement with jihadi ideology and their radicalization. These social bonds and interpersonal ties afford individuals a sense of empowerment and significance, develop solidarity and trust, and thus help create a radical milieu that facilitates recruitment into terrorist and extremist groups (Kruglanski et al. 2019).

In this context, there is no substantial difference between physical and virtual socialization groups. The online activities of ISIS and the like merely exploited mechanisms that already existed in the physical world—interpersonal communication, sharing ideas and values, and forging group identity and belonging. However, the global proliferation of social networks and their reach and immediacy has meant that they have come to play an increasingly important role in supporting real-world radicalization.

2.1.2 Individual Vulnerabilities

The tendency of any individual to embrace extreme ideology is strongly affected by their particular set of vulnerabilities—their personal attributes, emotional makeup, and lived experiences. Empirical studies in psychology and sociology have found that people who have suffered harsh circumstances of discrimination, marginalization, and disenfranchisement tend to search for routes by which they can repair these negative states and restore their feelings of significance.[4] This inclination makes them more vulnerable and more receptive to the militant messages of extremist groups

that, among other things, call for radical personal and societal change and for restoring lost pride and status. Moreover, susceptible individuals from such backgrounds—especially those who experienced social isolation, substandard education, and personal discrimination—are more cognitively open to being influenced by like-minded radicals and violent groups (Kruglanski et al. 2019).

There is widespread consensus in the research literature that a person's decision to engage in extremism is nearly always preceded by a so-called "tipping-point" event—a major life transition or personal crisis or trauma (such as immigration or experience of war) that is critical in facilitating their transition into violent extremism. These tipping-point events prompt a reassessment of the individual's place in society, political and religious attitudes, and even their sense of self. Likewise, they produce cognitive openings in which the individual's certainty in previously accepted beliefs is shaken and they are rendered more receptive to the possibility of alternative views and perspectives (Wiktorowicz 2005; Schmid, 2013).

Young people are particularly vulnerable to radicalization, being at a stage in life when they are striving to establish their identity. When struggling with feelings of rejection, uncertainty, and personal crisis, they can easily be attracted by the ideas and beliefs offered by extremist groups which offer them a strong sense of purpose and belonging, as well as a clear identity and worldview, promising a radical alternative path to a better life and society. Thus, the radicalization of young people has become one of the most important threats posed by international terrorism (Bizina and Gray 2014).

2.1.3 Ideology and Ideological Discourse

In the context of radicalization, ideology refers to an extremist belief system that justifies violence and encourages individuals to adopt radical views and values and engage in violent activity and terrorism. As such, ideology provides the socio-cognitive foundations and the embodied values, beliefs, and methods that form the basis for the discourse and practices of the extremist social group. It fuels the cognitive and communication processes via which the group's members evaluate and interpret events and experiences, thereby creating a common ideological discourse that in turn influences members' views and behaviors (Van Dijk 2006).

Radical groups usually promote their ideology to encourage people to see existing situations as problematic, and use sacred values and narratives as tools through which they legitimize violence as offering a potential solution. They also use these values and narratives to establish distinct identities for themselves and for their opponents, thereby creating group solidarity and a sense of collective purpose and identity, and providing normative moral guidelines for personal and collective actions (Wiktorowicz 2005; Schmid 2013;). They apply their ideology to shape interpretations of conflicts in which they are involved (using framing techniques, as discussed later in this article), and thereby to mobilize people to their cause.

Radical groups' engagement with individuals over their ideology not only justifies and encourages violent acts and terrorism, but also provides a social experience (even if online), and offers recruits a sense of personal reward and prestige for carrying out extremist actions. This involves forging local and global links (both real-world and online) between different organizations and networks, and thereby expanding opportunities for radicalization by making it easier for potential recruits to contact like-minded individuals and groups.

To sum up, then, *radicalization* is a transformative process by which individuals adopt extremist ideologies that deviate sharply from those of mainstream society, and that justify and eventually encourage the use of violent extremism and terrorism to achieve political goals. Individuals who are prone to radicalization adopt radical views as a result of socialization processes and exposure to recruitment efforts by extremist/terrorist groups, such as ISIS. A portion of them become militant activists (that is, behavioral radicals) who facilitate dissemination of radical ideas, including by recruiting new supporters and fundraising. Recent research shows that many of the militant activists of this kind are from relatively well-educated and affluent backgrounds (Matveeva and Giustozzi 2018; Osman 2020). The ultimate phase of the radicalization process—engaging in extremist violence and terrorism—is adopted by only a tiny portion of these militants.

In the following section, I illustrate the first two elements of the radicalization process—socialization and individual vulnerabilities—as they relate to Kyrgyzstan. In the case of ISIS, the element of ideology requires a much more in-depth examination, and this is provided in section 4, on ISIS's jihadist ideology.

3. Kyrgyzstan—A Hotbed of Radicalization

Kyrgyzstan is a Muslim-dominated country[5] in which 72% of the population are ethnic Kyrgyz. It contains a mosaic of ethnic groups, religions, and cultures, with a rich fabric of traditional tribal and clan-based loyalties and identities.[6] Since gaining its independence in 1991, and especially since the "Tulip Revolution" of 2005 (Akiner 2016) and the political crisis and ethnic clashes of 2010,[7] this multifaceted society has been riven by a host of socio-political and ethnic grievances that have fed violent extremism and radicalization. This process was given further momentum by the emergence of ISIS in 2014, which promoted radicalization among young Kyrgyzstanis, successfully recruiting a number of them into its ranks in the Syrian civil war.

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. This situation poses a serious security challenge, as these conditions facilitate spreading of extremist ideologies, illicit trafficking, and terrorist activities. In recent years, 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 (Gunaratna 2019).

The key factors that have helped facilitate radicalization efforts in Kyrgyzstan have included: longstanding political and economic instability and corruption;[8] poor governance; high levels of poverty and stark economic inequality; harsh political and cultural divisions; and extensive socio-ethnic tensions between the Kyrgyz majority and the Uzbek minority, who have consistently suffered from a policy of exclusion from positions of influence in politics and public institutions. Together, these features have combined 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 (Esenaliev and Steiner 2014 Akiner 2016).

Alongside these socioeconomic, political, and ethnic factors, radicalization in Kyrgyzstan has also been driven by growing tensions between secular and religious groups, and particularly by a schism within the Islamic community, nurtured by extremist religious ideologies imported from abroad.

Consequently, by the beginning of 2015, there were some 250 Kyrgyzstani fighters with ISIS, rising to over 1,000 by 2017, including women and families (Larionov 2018; Ibraimova and Toktosunov 2019;). In addition, militant extremists from Kyrgyzstan were involved in multiple terrorist attacks, as mentioned above.

3.1 Socialization

The “Islamic revival” in Central Asia from the early 1990s on, coupled with political liberalization and especially growing freedom of expression, led to the emergence of conflicts between multiple different interpretations of Islam within Kyrgyzstan. This Islamic revival has seen a proliferation of new, “non-traditional” religious interpretations (Zhussipbek 2013), movements, and organizations, particularly those promoting the radical and extremist ideologies of Salafist jihadism, supported by foreign Islamic organizations and international donors mainly from the Arab world (particularly Saudi Arabia).[9] The close ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties between Central Asian people and the long and porous borders between states in the region have made it relatively easy for these groups, such as ISIS and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),[10] to disseminate their radical ideas among different populations throughout the region, including the Uzbek minority within Kyrgyzstan (especially in the ungoverned Fergana Valley area spanning Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).[11] Consequently, these radical Islamic groups have successfully created and expanded a large network of sympathizers in the region including operational links to ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliate organizations operating in nearby Afghanistan and in different locations such as the Northern Caucasus and Turkey, providing a pool of potential recruits (Seifert 2016; Gunaratna, 2019).

These groups’ radicalization efforts have been strongly supported by the pre-existing social and religious real-world networks, along with the emergence of the Internet[12] and social media platforms[13] as tools for disseminating ideological material and recruiting followers. These platforms are complemented by close interpersonal ties and interactions among small cells of family members, friends, and radical individuals (Sikorskaya, 2017; Matveeva 2018). 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.

These groups have facilitated the expansion of their digital marketing and media efforts by, among other things, creating multilingual content that has been further disseminated offline and online throughout Russia,[14] the Caucasus, and Central Asia, often with help of sheiks with significant online popularity (Matveeva and Giustozzi 2018). This visual and textual content, mostly in Uzbek or Russian, is distributed through both real-world and online interactions between the groups' supporters and members (Sikorskaya 2017). However, in contrast with Western jihadists, who are recruited mainly online via social media platforms, most of the Kyrgyzstani recruits undergo radicalization via small cells and personal contacts that are characterized by a high involvement of relatives and local community members. This radicalization process makes extensive use of informal methods and one-on-one meetings, such as family gatherings and religious studies groups.

The prevalence of offline recruitment in Kyrgyzstan can be attributed to the country's strong jihadist background coupled with strong social ties and family pressure, as well as to its harsh censorship of online communications and restrictions on religious practices. Thus, most recruits to ISIS (some 80%) are young ethnic Uzbeks from the south of the country (Matveeva 2018)—particularly from the Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken provinces in the region of the Fergana Valley—who were recruited via people they already knew and who formed part of their social and/or familial networks.

Local jihadist cells[15] and other extremist and terrorist groups throughout Kyrgyzstan—affiliated to international jihadist organizations including ISIS and al-Qaeda—collaborate and transmit ideological and operational information over the Internet and social media platforms as well as via physical networks across the Central Asia region. Consequently, as of March 2020, 10% of the Kyrgyz youth population were estimated to be under the influence of radicalization (Pierobon 2020), and according to official Kyrgyz government reports, the number of people convicted of extremism and terrorism has increased five-fold since 2012, and is growing each year (Ibraimova and Toktosunov 2019). These extremists, and particularly those who joined or supported jihadist groups, are not members of a separate marginal cohort; rather, they are deeply embedded in Kyrgyz society.

3.2 Individual Vulnerabilities

Kyrgyzstanis born after 1991 grew up in a period characterized by a lack of a firm national identity and ideology; weak and ineffective central government; the decline of traditional religious education; growing unemployment, poverty, and inequality; and family breakdown. Added into the mix were increasing tensions between different ethnic and religious groups, and growing disaffection of many minority groups with their place in Kyrgyz society.

Consequently, among ethnic minorities—particularly ethnic Uzbeks—personal experiences of economic hardship, family crisis, and socio-political alienation led disenchanted young people to embrace extremist ideas in a search for identity, acceptance, and purpose. Suffering from strong feelings of loneliness and disconnection from their surroundings and traditional society, these youngsters were also influenced by their parents' sense of failure and deep frustration at being unable to integrate into Kyrgyz society, despite their continued hard work and efforts to fit in.

Similar to the second- or third-generation European Muslims who feel disenfranchised in countries that do not fully accept them, and who are struggling to reconcile two opposing identities (national and religious) without really owning either, the youth of Kyrgyzstan's ethnic minorities did not feel part of the Kyrgyz society in which they grew up, and yet were detached from the local traditional religious Muslim culture of their parents and their own ethno-national identity. In many respects, they were novices in Islam, without a real understanding of the different interpretations of Islamic religious values, leaving them even more open to radicalization (Matveeva 2018; Matveeva and Giustozzi 2018).

In addition, the lack of economic opportunities in the country, often accompanied by personal conflict and emotional chaos, drove large numbers of these minority groups to seek work abroad, mainly in Russia. Here, they suffered even further dislocation and marginalization, isolated and detached from their familiar communities and networks, and yet largely rejected by the host society, suffering economic uncertainty, racial discrimination and abuse, and even physical attacks (Elshimi et al. 2018). These Kyrgyz migrants thus proved to be even more vulnerable to radicalization by jihadist groups such as ISIS. For these recruits, ISIS's ideology offered the promise of change to their desperate situation and a path to "salvation," by means of a new transnational religious Islamic identity. This identity, which transcends ethnic and

national origins, was proffered equally to those who had never been religious Muslims back home.

In line with the trend mentioned above, in which the more militant activists are often more affluent and better educated, a large proportion of recruits to ISIS from within Kyrgyzstan (some 85%) have been from stable, normative, middle-class families, with women constituting approximately 25% of these recruits.[16] It is highly possible that ISIS targeted educated individuals in Kyrgyzstan because it needs cadres able to organize underground at this stage, rather than simple foot soldiers. These recruits were drawn to its ranks for a variety of reasons, chief among them a search for identity and adventure, a desire for belonging and in-group connection, frustration with the status quo, and the attractive "purity" of jihadist ideology.

A lesser noted factor in individual inclinations to radicalization is the idea of "seeking adventure." This is connected to young people feeling bored with their lives and desiring stimulation, and/or a desire to be glorified as "heroes"; at core, it represents the hope for change in their lives. And for many, ISIS's ideology also offered an opportunity to express their masculinity and live out their most violent fantasies.

It is important to note that these forms of cognitive radicalization and non-violent behavioral radicalization, while less visible than the radicalization of those Kyrgyzstanis who have traveled to join the ranks of ISIS or have carried out violent attacks, is far more widespread, and thus poses a much more serious long-term threat, as it serves as an incubator for violent extremism in the long run. Furthermore, the social and economic turmoil being inflicted by the coronavirus epidemic may well serve as a catalyst to this process, as indeed may the recent unrest following the disputed results of the October 2020 elections.

4. ISIS's Jihadist Ideology and the War of Ideas

The ideology of global jihad, or jihadism, is a relatively new phenomenon dating back to al-Qaeda's struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It is based on an extremist religious interpretation of Islam as it existed in the 7th century, combining Salafist traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries with practical concepts rooted in the political culture of the 20th and 21st centuries (Esposito 2002; Lia 2008; Zelin, 2014).

The jihadist doctrine calls for a radical revolution in Muslim consciousness to purge Islam of foreign influences and values, overthrow the existing political-religious world order, and establish an Islamic state comprising a community of "true believers", or *ummah* (Roy, 2004; Wiktorowicz 2006). Its two core religious values are *ummah* and *jihad*, and it demands total adherence to its interpretation of Islam; rejects any concepts, ideas and identities it considers to be non-Islamic;[17] and justifies the use of total armed struggle to advance its system of belief. Indeed, it redefines the traditional Islamic concept of *jihad* as a holistic struggle involving a battle over values and ideologies, a "war of ideas" against non-Muslim principles[18] such as secularism, democracy, and nationalism. Moreover, jihad is seen as a struggle for "hearts and minds," for perception and recognition of what jihadists hold to be the authentic, "pure" Muslim identity of the world's Muslims (Phares 2008; Maher 2016). This struggle is fought on multiple fronts, both physically in the international arena, and virtually in cyberspace and social media.

In the context of this article, jihadism can be viewed as part of an ideological-political struggle between moderate and harsh interpretations of Islam. ISIS's leaders adhere to the doctrine of *takfir*—the most radical of the "non-traditional" interpretations—according to which they accuse all other Muslims of being unbelievers (*kafir*) who must be exterminated. In this manner, they negate all alternative "infidel" identities and conceptions that contradict jihadist ideology—including various combinations of Islamic values with nomadic beliefs and local traditional customs, such as the tolerant and moderate Hanafi school—all of which are designated as enemies of Islam (Maher 2016; Zhussipbek 2013).

4.1 Jihadism and the War of Ideas in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is neither the cradle nor the destination of jihadist groups, nor has it produced any original jihadist theologians. However, it has made a place for itself within the existing Salafi-jihadist milieu with the emergence of the local and international radical and jihadist organizations and groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the Fergana Valley during the chaos of 1990s, and with the spread of their values and ideas through international networks including those operating in the Northern Caucasus and Russia (Gunaratna 2019).

Although Kyrgyzstan has experienced relatively few jihadist terror attacks, young Kyrgyzstanis have played a significant role in various jihadist organizations, including serving as ISIS and al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq and Syria, and as active members of their affiliated groups and cells,[19] including their mobilization networks in the Northern Caucusus and Turkey. Moreover, despite ISIS's military defeat in Syria, the organization's jihadist ideology (which led to these young Kyrgyzstanis going abroad to fight) continues to be spread via cyberspace and via real-world contacts by a pool of radical individuals and sympathizers in Kyrgyzstan and throughout Central Asia. Indeed, there is now an even greater risk from the infiltration and proliferation of ISIS's ideology, due to the organization's strategic shift toward this region and to its intensified struggle with al-Qaeda for doctrinal domination (Soliev 2020).

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 the Kyrgyz public consciousness, they seek to exploit the country's underlying socioeconomic and political conditions—social fragmentation, the breakdown of traditional society, the lack of a strong Kyrgyz national identity—as well as the individual vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz nationals to radicalization, in order to disseminate their jihadist beliefs and values.

ISIS recognized Kyrgyzstani Muslims as being ripe for recruitment, and offered them its version of Islam not so much as a set of religious beliefs, but more as an entire way of life, encompassing a clear, strong, and unequivocal religious identity and practical ideology. This entailed a radical shift from the traditional Kyrgyz ethno-national notion of Muslimness, to a new religious identity that is primarily a "faith-oriented identity" and more focused on action (Van de Kamp 2018). Accepting jihadist ideology eliminated confusion and doubt, and provided hope, a sense of security, and the promise of freedom from oppression.

Jihadist ideology was able to flourish within Kyrgyzstan due to several conditions, including insufficient supervision by Kyrgyz authorities of the activities of "non-traditional" Islamic movements and radical religious groups; low levels of religious knowledge among the populace; and an inability of local religious leaders to present well-reasoned counter-arguments against it. Thus, jihadism (as disseminated via translated books, Islamic institutions, and digital media) not only attracted Kyrgyz

people to embrace "foreign" interpretations of Islam, but simultaneously diminished the standing of local moderate versions of Islam, and consequently challenged traditional Kyrgyz Muslim identity, undermining the most basic notion of Kyrgyz ethno-national identity.

As a result, Kyrgyzstan is currently a battleground in a war of ideas—a fierce ideological struggle over Kyrgyz public consciousness between those who embrace moderate mainstream interpretations of Islam, such as that of the Hanafi school, and followers of extremist interpretations of Islam such as jihadism (many of them subject to foreign influences from organizations such as ISIS[20]). In turn, this ideological struggle not only creates serious cleavages within the Muslim community, but also contributes to the disintegration of Kyrgyz society, thereby facilitating further radicalization.

Within the context of this article, I relate to jihadism in this form, as a discursive struggle, which I analyze through the prism of framing.

5. Framing as a Media Tool for Radicalization

"Framing" refers to the way in which information is organized and presented in various 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 perceived reality and making them more prominent and more meaningful to an audience. This means assembling textual/visual narratives in a way that magnifies the effect of particular elements, ideas, and messages and highlights connections between them, in order to promote a particular interpretation and strengthen its appeal and impact (Entmann 1993).

As a strategic tool for influencing public opinion, framing encompasses a set of techniques that not only affect *what people think about* an event/situation, but also *how they perceive* it. In this light, presenting ideological narratives via visual content (video, images, infographics, etc.) is a powerful way to construct meanings and shape public consciousness (Fahmy 2020).

Terrorist organizations use a variety of framing techniques (as well as other media strategies) to promote their vision and ideology, disseminate their radical values, and encourage their target audiences to think, feel, behave, or act in a particular manner,

including the use of violence. In this manner, they are able to influence public discourse, recruit new members, and consolidate support for their values, beliefs, and goals.

5.1 Framing and the Struggle Over Discourse

ISIS has deployed framing in a sophisticated and skillful way, using a combination of mainstream media, innovative multilingual audio-visual media, and online platforms to disseminate its ideology and promote acts of violence. Indeed, it has been immensely successful in this regard, having radicalized and encouraged millions of followers and supporters to create a global, digital jihadist community, founded on the tenets of its jihadist doctrine. It has achieved this success with the help of an extensive combination of textual and visual content, including high-quality illustrations, videos, and infographics—an innovative media approach that distinguishes it from every other terrorist group in history.

ISIS's ideological struggle over public discourse is based on two core religious values: *ummah* and *jihad*. Today, this struggle is mainly being conducted in the marketing arena, via large-scale campaigns centered on audio-visual content. ISIS's strategy of building and maintaining a massive online presence is ultimately more crucial to its long-term success than military victories or terrorist attacks. The way it brands itself, packages its vision, and above all, frames its jihadist ideology, using tailor-made messages for each target audience, is far more important than its military operations, as they are the means to shape people's perceptions and ideas and thus to foster further radicalization throughout the world.[21]

5.1.1 ISIS's Unique "Black-and-White" Strategy

ISIS offers the Kyrgyzstani people an alternative perspective based on an extreme, dichotomous ideology that divides the world into "good" and "evil" camps.[22] This ideology rejects the teachings of the tolerant, mainstream Hanafi school, which cherishes local cultures and traditions and emphasizes mutual understanding among different groups of people (Zhussipbek 2013). Moreover, ISIS's radical discourse challenges the notion of Muslim-by-birth, asserting that "Muslimness" is not a primordial, inborn quality but rather a state of being that must be constructed and reconstructed through action (Van de Kamp 2018). Thus, those who do not follow its

doctrine in practice—including not only the Hanafi school but also the Kyrgyz state itself—are not to be considered "true" Muslims.

Accordingly, I refer to this unique and innovative messaging approach used by ISIS as its "black-and-white" marketing strategy. This strategy (pursued throughout Kyrgyzstan in the Uzbek, Russian, and Kyrgyz languages) acts as the lens through which ISIS affects the emotions and feelings of its audiences, shapes their beliefs and perceptions, polarizes their support, and drives their radicalization. It encompasses a combination of framing techniques (Author, forthcoming):

- **Militant/peaceful framing**—The use of metaphors, images, and phrases to portray events and situations in either a militaristic, violent way (e.g., "killing," "injury," or "destruction") or a peaceful way (e.g., "trust," "hope," or "construction"), and thereby to either foster militant discourse and promote violent actions (for example, calling for terrorist attacks to be carried out) or alternatively, to foster peaceful discourse and actions (such as calling to refrain from violence).
- **Threat framing**—The use of visual and textual phrases to convey a sense of threat and deterrence (e.g., apocalyptic themes or graphic visuals of atrocities such as beheadings and other executions), in order to promote and achieve various goals among different target audiences. Threat framing is designed to persuade individuals and/or collectives to alter their beliefs or positions for fear of negative consequences, and can also engender conceptual or practical support for a political-ideological agenda.
- **Gain/loss framing**—The use of positive/negative phrases to portray the outcomes of certain policies or actions in either a positive way (e.g., "strength," "happiness," or "love") or a negative way (e.g., "weakness," "sorrow," or "hatred"), which can lead to biases and/or false perceptions of the "objective" reality, thus tilting public opinion in a favorable direction. Research shows that purposely framing undesirable results of actions in negative terms has greater impact than using positive terms to describe desirable outcomes (Tversky and Kahneman 1981).

ISIS's framing strategy also contains several recurring political and religious narratives and themes, including the depiction of Islam as a conquering force; references to

historical events, such as the wars against the Crusaders; and psychological and emotional motifs, such as contrasting humiliation and suffering with love and security.

5.2 The Two Core Religious Values in ISIS's War of Ideas

5.2.1 The Utopian Ideal of the Ummah

The idea of the *ummah* has been part of the very DNA of Islam and Islamic consciousness since the 7th century, as a utopian ideal of the Muslim collective. However, ISIS has striven to impose its own radical interpretation of this ideal, according to which *ummah* is to be an authentic Islamic caliphate with a "pure" Islamic identity governed solely by Sharia law (Roy 2004). It presented the Islamic caliphate as a real-world embodiment of the *ummah*, a "community of true believers" and a multi-national and multi-generational movement within which all are equal, and all ethnic, national and geographical boundaries melt away, as "there are no borders but Islam."

In line with its utopian vision and the "white" side of its framing strategy, ISIS used a combination of *gain framing* and *peaceful framing* to portray daily life in the caliphate. For example, it produced videos showing workers in the caliphate paving roads, providing medical care, and even running a five-star hotel in Mosul, with the aim of inspiring its followers and giving them a sense of belonging, solidarity, and participation in a meaningful real-world project. It used vivid colors and bright lighting effects to reinforce its presentation of the Islamic state as a smoothly functioning society with effective governance—the only correct and just state system in today's world, far removed from the images of war and brutality projected by its enemies. In doing so, it sought to project strength, and gain confidence and legitimacy for its doctrine.

In contrast with this positive portrayal of the caliphate as a successful entity, ISIS used *loss framing* to delegitimize the secular democratic Kyrgyz regime, highlighting its repressive nature and the corruption of its leaders. To stress this contrast, it portrayed in dark hues the negative aspects of life in secular nation-states, such as socio-political exclusion, humiliation, and marginalization, and particularly the ethno-national identity of Kyrgyzstan, the very existence of which it considered heresy. It deliberately used negative lighting effects and gloomy colors to depict the lives of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan and other such countries, and made repeated use of loaded terms such as the

“oppression” and “disenfranchisement” of Muslim peoples, while highlighting the corruption and corrupting influence of their political leaders.

ISIS also used a combination of *gain framing* and *peaceful framing*, in various ways, to heavily promote the caliphate as a place where Muslims of every race and ethnicity would be included and given significant roles. These promises of equality and inclusiveness were designed to be particularly attractive to ethnic Uzbeks, who have felt themselves subject to injustices, discrimination, and marginalization as Kyrgyzstani citizens. ISIS highlighted the social-communal aspect of the Islamic caliphate, portraying it as a unifying force that brought together true Muslims believers from diverse countries, cultures, and ethnic communities, and in which “ISIS Islam” acted as the glue that bonded them together. Indeed, this focus on the unifying character of the caliphate enabled ISIS to create an in-group identity and portray it as a “home” (albeit virtual) for its members and followers around the world, one providing a sense of meaning, belonging, and solidarity and in which they felt accepted, loved, and protected.

This was sharply contrasted with the “black” side, on which ISIS used a combination of *loss framing* and *threat framing* to highlight divisions within the Muslim world, specifically the socio-ethnic rivalries in Kyrgyzstan, and to present a dystopian portrayal of their current lives as well as of the other Muslims in Arab and Western countries, enduring alienation and oppression and living as “strangers in their own land.” These scenes were of course shown in dark colors, with gloomy lighting and downbeat music, reinforcing the message that these poor unfortunate souls were helpless and victims of their circumstances—in stark contrast to the strong, active heroes of the caliphate.

5.2.2 The Concept of Global Jihad

Jihad is viewed by ISIS as a total, long-term, and uncompromising global military struggle waged to destroy the existing political and religious world order and establish a global Islamic state. In this scheme, Islam’s strength and status can only be restored by pursuing a radical change in Muslim public consciousness, a total negation and rejection of all foreign influences, ideologies, beliefs, and values, and total adherence to ISIS’s “pure” interpretation of Sharia law.

In line with its black-and white strategy, ISIS frequently uses *gain framing* along with Islamic symbols and metaphors to explain that jihad is a defensive struggle for Islamic principles and ideas and against foreign ideologies. In this light, it presents itself in “white” as the sole protector of Islam and the true bearer of the most genuine form of Sunni Islam, contrasting with the “black” side of the tolerant and moderate Hanafi Muslims and all other groups.

ISIS deliberately uses a combination of *loss framin*g and *militant framing* to emphasize the scope of injustices and failures of secular regimes, such as the one in Kyrgyzstan. It employs stark images and inflammatory negative language (such as “oppression” and “destruction”) in order not only to condemn its adversaries—including both the government for its corruption and oppression, and Hanafi leaders for implementing a corrupt version of Islam that blends religious law and local secular culture—but also to encourage people to identify with and join their cause.

Indeed, ISIS’s black-and-white messages have been carefully tailored to justify its call to global jihad. It has used *threat framing* along with theological terms such as “judgment day” to describe the confrontation between religion and secularism, and has purposefully presented its struggles as ultimate battles of good against evil. By implanting apocalyptic/eschatological Islamic themes such as “Crusaders” and “apocalyptic struggle” with regard to the Syrian civil war, and stressing the imminent arrival of the end of days and the inevitable confrontation between the “true” Muslims and the infidels, ISIS created an apocalyptic atmosphere, thereby fostering a sense of anxiety, urgency, and panic.

ISIS also used framing to speak to its audiences’ most intimate fears and desires. Thus, it used *gain framing* to portray its doctrine as a means of gaining personal significance, purpose, and respect. In addition, it employed *threat framing* and made sophisticated use of the most extreme, shocking, and horrifying images possible (including graphic visuals of beheadings and executions) to tap into its audiences’ deepest possible emotional responses—whether fear and horror among its enemies, or bloodlust and delight in violence among its supporters.

6. Deradicalization Against ISIS Using the Framing Approach

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 need to address each of its core religious values and to apply alternative framing techniques in order to counter the appeal of ISIS's powerful messaging.

The logic underlying this alternative framing approach is the assumption that ideology and messaging plays a primary role in drawing individuals toward violent extremism and terrorism, and that the attraction of militant messages, values, and ideas can be undermined by fostering alternative ways of thinking which are rooted in the value of diversity (as opposed to extremist orientations, which tolerate no diversity and accept no compromise) (Eka et al. 2018). Thus, the transformation from supporting/engaging in terrorism to fighting terrorism occurs through adoption of a more open-minded approach and complex thinking (Conway et al. 2011), instead of simplistic, black-and-white thinking.[23]

Presenting a strong, alternative framework of values such as community, solidarity, peace, and tolerance, along with well-founded and persuasive moderate-mainstream interpretations of religious and ideological tenets, is the bases for promoting a rich discourse that can counter radical values and beliefs (Arifin 2016). Such a discourse counteracts the hatred and polarization inherent in extremist narratives, and strengthens the ability of audiences to resist the attraction of extremist messages.

In this section, then, I present alternatives to ISIS's interpretations of Islamic values and current realities, particularly with respect to Kyrgyzstan, and suggest a framing approach that may be effective in promoting these interpretations and combatting ISIS's jihadist message. To do so, I use a new conceptual framework that incorporates the three main framing techniques described above, along with a new and innovative framing technique that I introduce here.

I call this **traditional/revolutionary framing**, referring to the use of a variety of images, symbols, metaphors, and phrases such as "old-fashioned," "nostalgic," and "continuity" to describe a traditional orientation in relation to a range of situations, perceptions, and behaviors; or alternatively, the use of terms such as "novelty," "futuristic," and "reform"

to describe a revolutionary orientation. This form of framing can be used to promote identification with the Hanafi version of Islam.

6.1 Alternative Perceptions to the Jihadist Ideology

Islam has been split since its earliest days by an internal struggle between two main camps: Sunni Islam, to which most of the Muslim world belongs (about 85–90% of Muslims), and the minority Shi'ite camp (around 10–15%). There is also an internal Sunni conflict, between radical Sunni Muslims (led by the global Salafist-jihadist movement comprising ISIS and its precursor, al-Qaeda, among others) and moderate-mainstream Sunni Muslims (influenced by democratic and Western values). The absence of a structured, monolithic religious authority and the co-existence of multiple interpretations of Islam has resulted in contested ideologies and perceptions (a war of ideas) about which interpretation is correct, fostering debates and conflicts over authority, legitimacy, and the leadership of "pure" Islam (Phares 2007; Maher 2016). Arguably, such debates—with positions ranging from moderate-mainstream perceptions to extreme-fanatic ideologies such as jihadism and *takfirism*—have existed since the earliest generation of Muslims (Roy 2004; Wiktorowicz 2006; Zelin 2014).

Given that this multiplicity of perceptions and interpretations of Islam is a common characteristic of the vast majority of the Muslim world—and particularly of Kyrgyzstan, where the Hanafi school's tolerant, moderate approach has traditionally dominated—there are many moderate alternatives to ISIS's extremist messages. For the purposes of this article, I will present one of these mainstream interpretations (the "pluralistic approach") and demonstrate how various framing techniques can be used to promote deradicalization. As above, the focus will be on the two core religious values of ISIS's doctrine.

6.2 Reframing the Two Core Religious Values in the War of Ideas

6.2.1 The Utopian Ideal of the Ummah

ISIS's interpretation of the religious ideal of the *ummah* contradicts common Islamic beliefs, according to which the foundation of the caliphate is a future utopian goal that is dependent on the will of Allah alone, and which cannot be hastened by man. In addition, there is no single legitimate authority or universal political entity that unites

the world's 1.8 billion Muslims, nor is there any consensus about the religious-political identity of the *ummah* as a real-world structure of governance (Esposito 2002; Maher 2016). This situation coexists with broad acceptance of the national and regional characters of different Muslim populations around the world, and particularly in Kyrgyzstan, which form the basis for the entities currently governed by various democracies, monarchies, republics, and dictatorships.

Promoting an alternative interpretation of the *ummah* ideal via framing:

Loss framing can be used to accuse ISIS's leaders of misleading and betraying their immigrant jihadist brethren from Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia who have already been recruited to the organization, and *threat framing* can be used to emphasize the negative side of the jihadist doctrine and warn Kyrgyz Muslims that once they join a jihadist group, they will have to relinquish their original familial, ethnic, and tribal identities and lose all their prior kinship and friendship ties.

In addition, *revolutionary framing* can be employed to highlight the possibilities for developing and experiencing the *ummah* as a welcoming and vibrant transnational community via social media, online platforms, and virtual communities. (This tactic has been a feature of attempts by Muslim communities worldwide to overcome the limitations of social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic.) These positive portrayals of the moderate-mainstream Islamic version of *ummah*, as accepted by the vast majority of the Muslim world, can counteract ISIS's extremist interpretation of this ideal.

In a similar vein, *traditional framing* can be used to emphasize the fact that according to orthodox understandings of Islam, Islam does not prioritize the establishment of an Islamic state and does not provide a detailed blueprint for a particular type of "Islamic" political system or regime. Moreover, the idea of the *ummah* has been a futuristic utopian goal of Islam since its inception some 1400 years ago, and was never realized as a real-world political entity throughout Islamic history. In respect to Kyrgyzstan, this technique can also be used to stress the long history of the classical Hanafi school in Central Asia, as one of the leading intellectual and spiritual centers of Islamic civilization, and thus, to emphasize the benefits of the traditional way of life and local practices of Islam.

By contrast, *loss framing* can be employed to present the real, actual dystopian nature of life in the Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, thus emphasizing ISIS's lies and manipulations and debunking its interpretation and implementation of the ideal of *ummah*. This same technique can also be used to present the collapse of the caliphate as proof that it was not established by a divine order, but rather was a result of its leaders' materialistic desires and their passion for political and religious authority and power. In this way, *loss framing* can be used to present ISIS's interpretation of *ummah* as illegitimate, and to denounce the organization itself as un-Islamic, corrupt, and overly brutal.

6.2.2 The Concept of Global Jihad

Despite an enormous quantity of published literature on jihad, no solid consensus has ever been reached regarding the precise meaning of this multifaceted religious creed, which literally means "to strive" or "to fight" for God, and this meaning remains a matter of context. ISIS's interpretation of jihad as solely an armed struggle is strongly opposed by the vast majority of Muslims, who alternatively claim that jihad is an internal struggle against one's own inner weaknesses, aimed at strengthening faith (Esposito 2002; Wiktorowicz 2006; Lia 2008).

Promoting an alternative interpretation of jihad via framing:

In contrast to ISIS's approach, *peaceful framing* and *traditional framing* can be used to present an alternative open-minded and tolerant approach, and to emphasize and promote the non-violent understanding of jihad as the individual's struggle for welfare, justice, and equality. This approach can also be used to present Islam as a peaceful religion that uses peaceful means to achieve political and social change rather than coercion and force.

The mainstream approach in Islam explains that faith is a virtue, a precious foundation for all individuals and all aspects of life, and a key component of being a "good Muslim." *Gain framing* can be used to emphasize the benefits derived from strong belief, namely self-fulfillment, strength, and peace of mind. *Traditional framing* can be used to emphasize the significance attributed to faith throughout the history of Islam.

Loss framing can be applied to ISIS's interpretation of the concept of jihad, to emphasize the harmful aspect of its destructive militant orientation and highlight its

preference for violent action over faith. Alongside this, *threat framing* can be used to position ISIS's approach not only as illegitimate but as a direct threat to Islam and to Muslims everywhere. This technique would involve warning 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.

By deploying a combination of the above framing techniques, it is possible to explain that ISIS has not only undermined key 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 (in the personal, religious sense), and falsely portrayed them as faithful Muslims.

ISIS's militant approach is framed by its leaders as a defensive struggle aimed at protecting Sharia law. This can be countered by maintaining this idea of defending Islam against external threats but presenting it in a very different light. *Peaceful framing* can be used to emphasize the importance of strong faith in Islam as the most effective way to protect and guarantee Islam's continuity. In addition, *loss framing* can be deployed to delegitimize ISIS and emphasize the gap between how it frames the concept of jihad on a declarative level, and how it actually implements it in practice.

7. Conclusion

Radicalization is a transformative complex process, which is focused on the propagation of extremist worldviews and radical ideas that justify and encourage the use of violence and terrorism. Thus, effectively confronting radicalization—in particular, cognitive radicalization—and its associated extremist ideologies requires that we engage in an ideological struggle, a war of ideas over public consciousness. In this article, I have shown how framing is a critical element in the radicalization process, and how it must also therefore be a critical element in deradicalization efforts.

Kyrgyzstan offers a useful case study for exploring the major enabling factors for radicalization, and these 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. The use of framing as a counter-radicalization measure has potential in all these regions, though of course in practice, its use must be tailored for each country, region and/or ethnic group.

The multifaceted nature of radicalization means that it is not merely a social or religious issue, reflecting personal or communal crises of identity and ideology, but also poses a significant threat to worldwide security and stability. Consequently, it is vital for all countries to invest resources in deradicalization. In this context, the use of targeted counter-framing strategies has significant potential for containing and even reducing the spread and influence of radicalization, in Central Asia and in other regions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

[1] Kyrgyzstan is one of the smallest post-Soviet Central Asian nations, both in geographical size (around 190,000 km^2) and population (just over 6.5 million) in which 88% are Muslims (World Population Review 2020).

[2] Most foreign recruits joined ISIS, with smaller numbers joining the Taliban, al-Qa’ida, and its affiliate Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra), as well as Jannat Oshiklari, renamed Tawhid Wal-Jihad.

[3] These measures can include both dialogical interventions such as conflict prevention, engaging with communities, and empowering youth, and coercive interventions such as arrest, prosecution, and even imprisonment.

[4] Suffering a loss of significance can augment the tendency to fight (Kruglanski et al. 2014).

[5] One the four main schools (madhhabs) in Sunni Islam, the Hanafi school—the most popular in Kyrgyzstan—is known for its rationalistic approach and tolerance of pre-Islamic traditions. In this way, local norms and values of the Kyrgyz tribes were incorporated into the Islamic tradition and became an inseparable element of the localized form of Islam in Kyrgyzstan (Zhussipbek, 2013).

[6] Kyrgyzstan is characterized by ethnic diversity, with some 60 ethnic groups in its southern regions, including Kyrgyz (72%), Uzbeks (14.5%), and Russians (9%), with all other ethnicities, including Dungans, Turks, Uigurs, and Tajiks, accounting for marginal shares of around one percent each or less. There are also multiple religious groups in the country besides Sunni Islam, including Shia Islam, Ismaili Islam, Tengriism, Christianity, and Buddhism (World Population Review 2020).

[7] The events of 2010 triggered violent clashes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities, which resulted in the deaths of some 450 people, mostly Uzbeks, and thousands of internally displaced (Akiner 2016).

[8] In 2016, some 25.4% of the population (or 1.5 million people) were in poverty (Larionov 2018). Poverty is still a challenge for the country, affecting nearly 30% of people living in rural areas and 20% of those in cities (France 2019).

[9] The number of mosques in the country grew from 39 in 1990 to 2,362 in 2014 (Van de Kamp 2018).

[10] Religious movements came from Uzbekistan in the 1990s and their ideas were spread through ethnic Uzbek networks.

[11] The Fergana Valley, which covers an area of 22,000 km^2 and has a population of 11 million people, is a complex region marred by crisis and conflict that covers the borders between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. It is home to cells of ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Hizb u-Tahrir, and others (Seifert 2016).

[12] Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan stood at 47% in January 2020 with 3.06 million internet users, while there are 2.5 million social media users in the country with social media penetration of 39% (Kemp 2020). The affordability, freedom, and almost complete coverage of the country by mobile communications and Internet serve have facilitated the increasing involvement of young people in various groups in social networks and instant messaging services. See Sikorskaya (2017).

[13] For the purposes of this article, the term “social media” refers not only to Internet platforms, but also to mobile phone technologies where various mobile applications (including messaging apps) are actively used to exchange content and disseminate information. These various outlets offer great opportunities for radical and extremist groups to create a sense of community, radicalize, foment hatred toward an opposing group, romanticize Sharia law, idolize terrorist groups (e.g., ISIS, IMU) which are banned in Kyrgyzstan, disseminate recommendations about travelling to combat zones, and create networks for new recruits.

[14] The major social media platforms used in Russia were YouTube and Facebook, and the Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte (Sikorskaya 2017).

[15] Examples include Jund al-Khilafah and the Kyrgyz group of Jaishul Mahdi (Karin 2016).

[16] According to state police reports, by mid-2016, 88% of the 605 people who left Osh to participate in foreign conflicts were aged 20-40, and the majority were ethnic Uzbeks (Matveeva 2018; Matveeva and Giustozzi 2018). This corresponds to patterns in Europe, where most recruits come from urban areas or metropolitan suburbs.

[17] Historically, the ancestors of modern Kyrgyzstan were nomads, and Islam did not sink deep roots among Kyrgyz tribes that preserved nomadic traditions and lifestyle. This nomadic nature led to the formation of a domestic Islamic tradition which is somewhat detached from the generally accepted canonical teachings and which includes some pre-Islamic pagan, animistic, or shamanistic elements. Kyrgyz Muslim sometimes do not understand the most elementary norms of Islam, and this religious illiteracy plays into the hands of the jihadists, such as ISIS (Fainberg and Azani 2017).

[18] For ISIS, Islam is not merely a set of beliefs, but a way of life ordained by God. As such, secularism is equated with atheism and condemned as a sin, while secular society is portrayed as being full of moral evils brought in by the West, such as consumerism and corruption.

[19] Such as the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the Kyrgyzstani branch of Islamic State, and the Islamic Movement of Turkmenistan (Matveeva and Giustozzi 2018).

[20] Other examples include al-Qaida, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Sipohi Kyrgyzstan (Zenn and Kuehnast 2014).

[21] In addition to its sophisticated use of digital marketing and framing techniques over social networks, ISIS has also deployed traditional marketing methods, such as lectures in religion and sermons in mosques, and uses social and tribal connections to recruit new supporters and increase its global influence (Author, *forthcoming*).

[22] This division into rigid categories is based on the Islamic concepts of Dar al-harb (the world of nonbelievers, not yet under Muslim subjugation) and Dar al-Islam (the world of Islam). However, these terms do not appear in the Quran or the Sunnah, and they do not reflect real-life conventional Islamic worldviews (Zhussipbek 2013).

[23] Social psychology studies have found that aggressive and violent behaviors are associated with simplistic, closed thinking, in which people tend to stick to their own strict perceptions. See Monroe, McCann, and Harvey (1991).

References

Akiner, Shirin. 2016. *Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

Arifin, Syamsul. 2016. “Islamic Religious education and Radicalism in Indonesia: Strategy of De-radicalization Through Strengthening the living values education.” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6 (1): 93–126.

Bizina, Margarita, and David H. Gray. 2014. “Radicalization of Youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy.” *Global Security Studies* 5 (1).

Conway, Lucian Gideon, Laura Janelle Gornick, Shannon Houck, Kirsten Hands Towgood, and Kathrene R. Conway. 2011. “The Hidden Implications of Radical Group Rhetoric: Integrative Complexity and Terrorism.” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 4 (2): 155–165.

Eka, Putra Idhamsyah, Erikha Fajar, Arimbi Reisa Suci, and Rufaedah Any. 2018. “Increasing Integrative Complexity on Convicted Terrorists in Indonesia.” *Social Psychology and Society* 9 (2): 35–45.

Elshimi, Mohammed S., Pantucci, Raffaello, Lain, Sarah, and Nadine L. Salman. 2018. *Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia*. Royal United Services Institute for defence and Security Studies.

Entmann, Robert. 1993. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication* 43 (4): 51–58.

Esenaliev, Damir, and Susan Steiner. 2014. “Ethnicity and Distribution of Welfare: Evidence from Southern Kyrgyzstan.” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 42 (4): 970–982.

Esposito, John L. 2002. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fahmy, Shahira S. 2020. “The Age of Terrorism Media: The Visual Narratives of the Islamic State Group’s Dabiq Magazine.” *International Communication Gazette* 82 (3): 260–88.

Fainberg, Alisa, and Eitan Azani. 2017. "Central Asian Jihadism: Home and Abroad." *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, October.

France, Guilherme. 2019. "Kyrgyzstan: Overview of Corruption and Anti-corruption." *Transparency International*, July.

Gunaratna, Rohan. 2019. "Global Threat Forecast 2019." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11 (1): 1–5.

Hafez, Mohammed, and Creighton Mullins. 2015. "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38 (11): 958–975.

Author. Forthcoming. *The Art of Marketing Terror 2019*.

Ibraimova, Elima, and Baitur Toktosunov. 2019. "The Influence of Kyrgyzstan's Media Strategies on Preventing the Spread of the Ideology of Violent Extremism. (Policy Brief)." *International Alert*.

Karin, Erlan. 2016. *The Soldiers of the Caliphate: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Group*. Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies.

Kemp, Simon. 2020. Digital 2020: Kyrgyzstan. *DataReportal*, February 18.

Kruglanski, Arie W., Jessica R. Fernandez, Adam R. Factor, and Ewa Szumowska. 2019. "Cognitive Mechanisms in Violent Extremism." *Cognition* 188: 116–123.

Larionov, Konstantin. 2018. "Socio-Economic Reasons for the Religious Radicalization of Youth in Kyrgyzstan." *Center for Political and Legal Studies*, July 28 [Russian].

Lia, Brynjar. 2008. *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Matveeva, Anna. 2018. "Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: On the Way to the Caliphate?" *The RUSI Journal* 163 (1): 30–46.

Matveeva, Anna, and Antonio Giustozzi. 2018. "The Central Asian Militants: Cannon Fodder of Global Jihadism or Revolutionary Vanguard?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29 (2): 189–206.

Monroe A. Bruch, Michael McCann, and Carol Harvey. 1991. “Type A Behavior and Processing of Social Conflict Information.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 25 (4): 434–444.

Neuman, Peter R. 2013. “The Trouble with Radicalization.” *International Affairs* 89 (4): 873–893.

O’Farrell, Kloé Tricot , and Jordan Street. 2019. “A Threat Inflated? Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism Agenda in Kyrgyzstan.” *Saferworld*, March.

Osman, Borhan. 2020. “Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle Class Afghans Join the Islamic State.” *United States Institute of Peace*, June 1.

Phares, Walid. 2008. *The War of Ideas: Jihadism Against Democracy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pierobon, Chiara. 2020. *Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: The Role of the International Donor Community (Policy Brief 56)*. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

Richards, Anthony. 2015. “From Terrorism to ‘Radicalization’ to ‘Extremism’: Counterterrorism Imperative or Loss of Focus.” *International Affairs* 91 (2): 371–380.

Roy, Olivier. 2004. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sageman, Marc. 2008. *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schmid, Alex. P. 2013. *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

Search for Common Ground. 2019. *Countering Violent Extremism: An Introductory Guide to Concepts, Programming, and Best Practices*. https://www.sfcg.org/countering-violent-extremism/SFCG-Countering_Violent_Extremism-An_Introductory_Guide_CA_English.pdf.

Seifert, Arne C. 2016. “Preventing the ‘Islamic State’ in Central Asia Conditions, Risks and Peace Policy Requirements.” *Federal Academy for Security Policy*, Working Paper No. 7.

Sikorskaya, Inga. 2017. “Messages, Images and Media Channels Promoting Youth Radicalization in Kyrgyzstan: Analytical Report on Action Research.” *Search for Common Ground*, January.

Soliev, Nodirbek. 2020. “Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12 (1): 70-76.

Tversky, Amos, and Daniel Kahneman. 1981. “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice.” *Science* 211: 453–458.

Van Dijk, Teun, A. 2007. “Ideology and Discourse Analysis.” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11 (2): 115–140.

Van de Kamp, Michiel. 2018. “Reconstructing an Islamic Identity in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Understanding the Interplay Between State-Created National Identity and Islamization Among Kyrgyz Students in Bishkek.” Master’s thesis, University of Leiden, July.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2005. “A Genealogy of Radical Islam.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28: 75–97.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2006. “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (3): 207–239.

World Population Review. 2020. “Kyrgyzstan Population 2020 (Live).” https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kyrgyzstan-population.

Zelin, Aaron Y. 2014. “The War between Isis and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement.” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy* 20 (1): 1–11.

Zenn, Jacob and Kathleen Kuehnast. 2014. “Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan: Special Report 355.” *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 355, October 1.

Zhussipbek, Galym. 2013. “Religious Radicalism in Central Asia.” *Rethink Institute*, Rethink Paper No. 12, October 4.