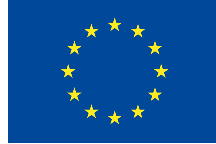

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WHY WE WENT TO FIGHT AND WHY WE RETURNED

Radicalisation and Deradicalisation – Learning from Foreign Terrorist Fighters

OUTLINE

Features interviews with 38 Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Kyrgyzstan's prisons and with some family members of prisoners

by Afzal Ashraf, Indira Aslanova

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

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Research Team

Afzal Ashraf, principal investigator, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom.
Indira Aslanova, investigator and research manager, Research Center for Religious Studies, KRSU, Kyrgyzstan.
Elnura Kazakbaeva, anthropologist and data specialist, Research Center for Religious Studies, KRSU, Kyrgyzstan.
Olga Korjova – psychologist expert, Research Center for Religious Studies, KRSU, Kyrgyzstan.
Begimai Maratova, research assistant, Research Center for Religious Studies, KRSU, Kyrgyzstan.

Reviewers:

Michael Clark, specialist in defense studies, visiting professor at King's College London, Associate Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies, University of Exeter.

John Horgan, specialist in the study of the psychology of terrorism and violent extremism, professor of the Department of Psychology at Georgia State University.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

CIS – Central Asia and Commonwealth of Independent States

CSO – Civil Society Organizations

CVE – Countering Violent Extremism

FTF – Foreign Terrorist Fighter

HT – Hizbut-Tahrir

HTS – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

ISIS/IS – Islamic State

JN – Jabhat an-Nusra

KR Criminal Code – Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic

KRSU – Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University

RCRS – Research Centre for Religious Studies

SCRA – State Commission on Religious Affairs

SPS – State Penal Service (Ministerial Responsibility for Prisons)

Ahl-Sunnah, term for Sunni Islam.

Ahlus-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'ah, term for Sunni Islam and name of an organisation.

Akyidah, Islamic creed or articles of faith.

Caliphate, means the period in office of a Caliph (literally a religious successor) and is increasingly being used to mean a form of alternative government.

Fiqh, Islamic jurisprudence.

Hadith, a narrative record of the sayings or customs of the prophet Muhammad.

Hawarijs, 'seceders' or "those who exit the community." Kharijites declare those who disagreed with their position to be apostates.

Jamaat, group, congregation or council.

Kafir (pl. kufr), infidel or unbeliever.

Madrasah, an educational institution, particularly for Islamic religious instruction.

Manhaj, 'a clear path' the path leading to ideology.

Mazhab, a division of thought or fiqah in Islam.

Murjeets, Murji'as, Murjites, one of the earliest Islamic sects to believe in the postponement (irjā') of judgment on committers of serious sins.

Qudura, natural ability.

Quran, the Holy Book in Islam.

Sharia, religious law

Shirk, idolatry, polytheism, and the association of God with other deities.

Takfir, the action or practice of declaring a fellow Muslim an apostate and therefore no longer a Muslim.

Tawhid, monotheism.

Zikr, remembrance, ritual prayer or litany practiced by Muslim.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was based on interviews with 38 foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) who are alleged to have gone to fight in Syria, mainly with the Al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat an Nusra (JN), and, to a lesser extent with ISIS and other terrorist groups. These interviews were supplemented by interviews with families of FTF and analysed in consultation with civil society experts. The use of a rapport building style of interviewing by trained and experienced research staff, who had previously gained the confidence of prison officials, allowed researchers to sit alone with prisoners resulting in candid responses to questions. The research found that:

- There was virtually no evidence of self-radicalisation. Almost all FTF were radicalised and mobilised into violence through contact with others, though there was significant evidence that social media was used in that process.
- Family influence was significant in both radicalisation and in disengagement.
- Radicalisation hotspots appear to exist in certain regions such as Osh that are associated with particular ideologues or terrorist leaders. For example, these include the Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov (also known as Abu Salah).
- The idea of resurrecting the 'Caliphate' appears to have been socialised amongst the communities researched before the advent of ISIS. Hizbut-Tahrir (HT) had been indoctrinating their congregations with an Islamist (political Islam) agenda for several years before ISIS gave this idea physical form through establishing its state.
- Apostasy is an idea that has been empowered by versions of Islamist thinking and was the primary element in radicalisation narratives. The idea of apostasy has survived the Syrian conflict and will potentially pose a threat to social cohesion and freedoms of belief in Kyrgyzstan unless actively countered.
- It was likely this idea motivated these ideologues and some of their followers in the early days of the conflict to move freely between Kyrgyzstan and Syria, thereby establishing the FTF phenomena within their country, probably around 2013. Elaborate covert networks were developed to recruit, radicalise, train and transport FTF to Syria, mostly from countries where Kyrgyz citizens were migrant workers.
- Kyrgyzstan's migrant worker communities played a significant role in radicalisation, both directly and indirectly.
  - The vast majority of FTF had been immigrant workers, mainly in Russia and Turkey and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan. One individual was recruited in South Korea whilst working there. His family allege that he was one of many Central Asians being recruited, indoctrinated and mobilised there. This Korean network was also alleged to raise significant terrorist funding.
  - A proportion of the FTF had been affected by one or more parent being an immigrant worker when they were growing up and some were brought up by grandparents or other family members.
- While playing a background factor in the decision of some to become FTF, families also played a role in the decision of many FTF to disengage from terrorism and return to Kyrgyzstan. Some families indicated a willingness to help deradicalise these FTF. However, there is currently no support to these families in the form of information, advice and resources to help them address the challenges involved.
- The predominant narrative used by recruiters, graphically echoed in online videos, adopted a twofold approach. The first provides a sense of duty that all Muslims are a family and must help protect each other. The second creates a sense of moral outrage at those deemed responsible (Shiites) for murdering and raping women and children.
- The appeal of curiosity and adventure, especially the prospect of participating in a real war, was also exploited in the recruitment of young men.
- The individuals' decision to engage was triggered primarily by the narratives' emotional appeal. These narratives did not make a rational choice appeal.
  - Consequently, the primary motivations for being a FTF were a desire to help Muslims (42%). A minority (8%) went purely because of curiosity or a desire for adventure.
- News via mass media first aroused the interest of recruits in the Syria conflict. This interest was then effectively mobilised by radicalisers to recruit young men.
  - Criticism or counter narratives against extremism and ISIS seem to have been ineffective. Indications suggest they actually heightened awareness of the Syrian conflict and extremist groups, and thus may have facilitated the recruitment of individuals when recruiters presented an alternative version of events.
- There was evidence that escaping the perceived injustices of their home environment was also a motivating factor in becoming an FTF.
  - Most Kyrgyz of Uzbek origin outwardly claimed that there was harmony between them and ethnic Kyrgyz, but indirectly they highlighted perceived police corruption and state level discrimination as major causes of grievances against life in Kyrgyzstan.
  - These grievances may have increased the attraction to the idea of an ideal (caliphate) state abroad.
- Religious identity was a significant motivator during radicalisation and recruiters scouted mosques in Kyrgyzstan and other countries for potential recruits.
- Ideologues who influenced the FTF used brief scriptural references in their narratives to give themselves credibility.
  - Religion was primarily used as a source of identity to define in and out groups, to create a crisis environment and to provide specific justifications for violence to counter the generic scriptural teachings against it.
  - Cultural religiosity also played a role – Many recruits and their families were effectively religious novices, making them vulnerable to the indoctrination of radical preachers who advocated a mythical and politicised version of religion.
  - There are indications that 'mainstream' Islamic institutions lacked credibility and failed to provide effective religious counter narrative or alternative role models.

- Most FTF who experienced Syria ended up being disillusioned with the reality of life there and the corruption of the people they went to fight alongside. This and other factors highlighted by the research could provide effective counter narratives if exploited soon.
- There are indications that most FTF, together with family members, may have undiagnosed mental health issues relating to the trauma of the FTF experience. Left unaddressed, these could present a future criminal or terrorist threat.
- Corruption within the state, judicial and policing systems is a major contributor to radicalisation and a barrier to countering radicalisation and terrorism. This cannot be seen as merely an infringement of best governance practice and human rights. It has significant counter terrorism implications. There is a possible causal link between abuse, including torture, and deradicalisation. It is, therefore, a state security issue which undermines the state's investment in counter terrorism and could be a future motivator for domestic anti-state terrorist action.
- The underlying economic, social and political issues, especially corruption, that led to individuals' vulnerability to radicalisation remain unaddressed.
- The absence of a recognised and effective deradicalisation policy for these FTF potentially represents a future security threat to both Kyrgyzstan and the international community once they are released from prison.
- Conditions in prisons which involve inactivity and cohabitation of extremists are likely to strengthen the radicalisation of current FTF rather than reform them.
- Released FTF are likely to receive effective support from some families to prevent recidivism, but indications are that communities may be hostile.
- Those FTF who are not successfully absorbed within a strong family and support group are likely to be vulnerable to recidivism and further recruitment into violent extremism.

INTRODUCTION

1. The issue of Kyrgyz citizens leaving for combat zones in Syria and Iraq to take part in armed conflicts or hostilities is a relatively new phenomenon for the country. This direct participation of citizens in terrorist activities on the territories of foreign states and their return to their country of origin causes serious concern for both the international community and for the state of Kyrgyzstan. A concern is that individuals who are often described as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) could re-engage with current or future conflicts abroad or may encourage others to do so. Some have already proved to be a domestic threat, having killed and injured Kyrgyz' citizens.

2. The Research Centre for Religious Studies of KRSU and the Public Council at SPS, in cooperation with the University of Nottingham (UK), conducted this research with support from Hedayah, the Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism and EU funding. The aim of the research was to identify the extensive range of personal, social, economic and ideological factors that led to the recruitment, radicalisation and mobilisation of individuals and their return to Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the research question was to determine *why and how people become foreign terrorist fighters and why they return to their country?*

Background

3. According to the State National Security Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 850 of its citizens (including 140 women and 107 children) have left to participate in armed extremist groups such as 'Islamic State' and 'Jabhat al-Nusra' (now calling itself 'Hayat Tahrir al-Sham') in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries since 2012 (Kadyrov, 2020). Of these, 180 individuals have been killed and another 100 are detained in the Kyrgyz Republic. The main departure flow was between 2015 and 2016, and as of May 2018 only about 200 Kyrgyz' nationals remained in the ranks of militants abroad. Approximately half of those who left the country fulfilled non-combatant roles such as cooks, caretakers and family dependants. Over 90% were ethnic Uzbeks, approximately 12% of whom were women. According to other reports, over a third of these individuals were killed, and at least 48 people were captured or surrendered (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Three attacks conducted on Kyrgyz soil August since 2016 are causally related to this mobilisation of FTF.

4. For the purposes of this report, FTF are defined as persons who travel abroad to commit, facilitate or participate in terrorist crimes or to receive or give terrorist training in another country. This term covers not only individuals travelling to take part in acts of violence, but also other forms of assistance, support or funding. Therefore, the term FTF is not homogenous but comprises individuals who have never been involved in fighting, or even witnessed it and individuals who merely wanted to live under a 'sharia-based' system established by terrorist organisations.

5. The degree to which FTF returning to their countries of origin is a threat is treated with scepticism by some researchers (Lemon, Miranova, & Tobey, 2018). However, despite the low figures involved, the authors of that study note that potential threats should not be ignored. Of particular concern to Central Asia

states is the redeployment of ISIS fighters to Afghanistan, bringing the threat of terrorist activities closer (Savitsky, 2018). Within this region, ISIS is challenging the Taliban and the Afghan government to gain control in various territories, leading to a further potential line of conflict and violence (Cordesman, 2018). Afghanistan's instability and the increasing control of the Taliban and other extremist groups remains a source of security concerns for Central Asian states.

6. This research into FTF who have experienced the complete cycle from the recruitment stage to the practical implementation of terrorist actions should help to form a broad and clear understanding of the possible causes and motives for radicalisation of Kyrgyz' citizens. The findings of this research are intended to improve government policy on countering extremist and terrorist activities, as well as to introduce evidence-based programmes for deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of returned fighters. They are also intended to enrich the international community's understanding of the networks associated with international terrorism and to add to academic literature on terrorism, especially to the development of extremism, recruitment, radicalisation and deradicalisation. These intentions can only be achieved through an authentic understanding of issues from the perspectives of the FTF and those who know them. That required recording their words, some of which have been reproduced in this report. By definition, extremist opinions are often false, according to most measures of truth, and offensive by most standards of decorum. Reproduction does not mean the endorsement of the research team, not even when views have been analysed and used to provide possible explanations or make recommendations.

7. Kyrgyzstan suffered from outbreaks of communal and state-based violence in both June 1990 and June 2010. Both of these events occurred during times of political unrest, when political leaders manoeuvred to replace old elites, and when the central government was suddenly and radically weakened by political change (Kyrgyzstan Inquiery Commission, 2011). The unrest of 1990 took place in six geographical zones of the city of Osh and its surrounding region. There were around 1,200 victims, including more than 300 fatalities and 462 seriously injured. A large number of properties were destroyed. The events of June 2010 also resulted in significant human casualties and destruction with approximately 470 people killed and a further 1,900 people receiving medical treatment. It is estimated that close to 111,000 people were displaced to Uzbekistan and a further 300,000 were internally displaced. There was also significant damage to property, mostly belonging to ethnic Uzbeks. Ethnic Kyrgyz also suffered significant losses in terms of life, health and property (Kyrgyzstan Inquiery Commission, 2011). There appears to have been little effective conflict resolution relating to these events, leading to possible unresolved grievances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

8. A broad and in-depth literature review was undertaken to support and shape the design and analysis of the research. In general terms, while there is considerable evolving research on radicalisation, particularly with regard to psychological factors, this is mostly in a Western (European and North American) context or led by Western scholars. There is also relatively little data regarding the specific methodological issues associated with interviewing terrorists and their families in a Central Asian context as well as on associated analytical techniques. Therefore, current available best practice had to be adapted for this research. That has resulted in small but significant contributions to closing research gaps in methodology and in findings within the regional context. The literature review addresses relevant concepts, including FTF, extremism and radicalisation. It does so in both a generic sense and, to the extent possible, within the particular contexts of Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan. The literature review is documented as Annex A.

METHODOLOGY

Overview

9. This research was based on interviews with FTF prisoners in Kyrgyzstan who agreed to share their stories. Wherever possible, families of the prisoners were also interviewed to obtain information about their past and context, as well as to corroborate their stories. The results were discussed with a panel of eight experts representing various aspects of civil society, but who did not have specific expertise in terrorism related issues. This approach yielded three clusters of interview data for analysis: prisoners, families and experts. Details of the methodology are documented in Annex A.

10. A conceptual framework incorporating well-established social science theories was applied to ensure objective data collection and a cooperative and reasonably reliable approach by the interviewees. All team members were trained in the concepts and methods required for conducting interviews and subsequent analysis, within ethical and other necessary constraints.

11. A set of interview questions was developed, based on Grounded Theory, to facilitate a-priori data coding using an inductive reasoning approach. The questions were further framed and delivered in accordance with the principles of the "observing rapport-based interpersonal techniques" (ORBIT) framework to maximise the likelihood of prisoner cooperation and reliability of information. These two theories shaped the interview questions and techniques respectively. Additionally, a qualified psychologist was part of the research team and influenced the question and analysis. A simplified version of the ORBIT methodology drawing on the framework for question formulation and articulation, combined with the principal investigator's own experience of interviews involving terrorists and associated sources and the research manager's experience of working within the Kyrgyz prison system, was developed and used to train the interviewers. This proved to be successful in gaining the cooperation of prisoners. Motivation for cooperation may partly have resulted because prisoners felt joining in the research was in their interest, despite being informed that participation will have no bearing on their case as part of the ethical informed consent statement read to them. Getting the cooperation of family members was more difficult due to a reluctance on the part of both the prisoners to give contact details, and on the part of some relatives to agree to the interviews due to suspicions that anything they said may be used against them by the state. Interview diffi-

culties were also aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Accuracy and reliability of results could have been improved by allowing more time and funding to enable several interviews to be conducted with the same individuals in order to increase rapport building and to facilitate cross examination of points previously made in interviews.

12. This data was supplemented by a set of case studies to enrich the results as well as selected post priori themes that emerged during data collection and analysis. Findings were validated by focus groups involving experts and practitioners from multidisciplinary areas to develop practical recommendations on further opportunities for more effective reintegration of FTF into society. These individuals were not experts in countering violent extremism (CVE) but represented organisations that focus on community engagement and resilience in order to understand local perceptions and attitudes towards FTF related problems and ways to overcome them.

Data Collection

13. The research design planned for 20 interviews with FTF and 40 with family members. However, in the course of data collection it became apparent that getting 40 family interviews would not be achievable. Therefore, it was decided to increase the number of interviews with FTF. This had the benefit of providing a more detailed study of FTF and a better understanding of radicalisation. In addition, many interviews with family members revealed relatively few of the details required for the research. Data collection took place between September 2019 and September 2020. This involved 38 in-depth interviews with prisoners, 20 interviews with relatives (including two case studies) and eight with experts from various fields. These figures are insufficient for quantitative analytical techniques and so this research was designed around a qualitative approach. However, to give some idea of the degree of variation in FTF backgrounds, experiences, views, etc., figures or percentages are occasionally used to aid analysis and illustrate findings. Interview quotations and a couple of case studies are used to illustrate the main findings throughout this report. Quotations from the experts' interviews are similarly used to illustrate points made in this report.

FINDINGS

Overview

14. Of the 38 prisoners interviewed, 27 admitted to being in Syria, but two of these claimed that they were there by mistake. One of these individuals was there for only two days and the other claimed that he was struck by a blow to the head and kidnapped to be a cook in Syria. Nine prisoners claimed they had not been to Syria and that law enforcement had incorrectly charged them or framed them. Two had intended to go to Syria, but for various reasons had not actually crossed over the border. It is not possible to verify the individuals' versions of events but in most cases their versions are contradicted by the legal cases against them. Finally, one prisoner refused to confirm or deny being in Syria but admitted that he recruited people to go to Syria. Based on their own claims, almost 80% of the prisoners admitted to being FTF in Syria according to the definition of this report.

Psychological Issues

15. The non-clinical nature of the interviews prevents an unambiguous assessment of mental health of respondents. However, according to the research team psychologist, that it was possible that out of the 38 respondents, only one had a mental illness before travelling to Syria. Therefore, the vast majority of prisoners' mental health was in the normal zone before they left for Syria. These results are consistent with the work of several researchers (Silke, 2003; Horgan, 2003; 2008), that people become radicalised and make decisions in favour of violent extremism and terrorism without being affected by mental disorders.

"No, my father did not hit my mother. He did a little bit, not that much. He was scolding her for mistakes." FTF

16. Most prisoners had a normal social childhood with friends being a part of their lives. After leaving for work abroad or deploying to Syria some appear to have lost contact with friends. This was particularly the case after imprisonment. During interviews they tended to avoid talking about friends, saying that they were not so close. The most likely reason for this was fear on the part of both themselves and their friends that by keeping in touch they may attract the attention of the police. The experts assessed that the imprisoned FTF were likely to be lonely, which may have had an impact on their ability to fully deradicalise and avoid recidivism.

"I think my friends are probably afraid of the national security services and that is why they don't keep in touch. In fact, even my relatives avoid contact for that reason." FTF

> *"The absence of a meaningful environment makes you free to choose whether to leave or not to leave. And if you have strong family ties, you are attached to something, you have some responsibilities to, say, your parents, relatives or friends i.e., things that make you stay." (Psychologist, youth expert)*

17. While there was some evidence of family members with plans and willingness to support FTF after their release from prison, there was no obvious indication that old friendships would be rekindled, or new ones developed. The importance of friendships outside the family to assist with reintegration into society should be considered in any deradicalisation programme for FTF. Research carried out in Kyrgygzstan on young people has highlighted loneliness as a vulnerability factor in radicalisation (Nasritdinov, Urmanbetova, Murzakhalilov, & Myrzabaev, 2019).

18. Some prisoners' stories revealed childhood memories of experiencing or witnessing domestic violence, often both. According to one psychology expert this potentially traumatic experience is on a par with situations where a person becomes a victim of violence themselves. There was no obvious indication of such trauma in the individuals or, that in comparison with local societal norms, their families were dysfunctional. Therefore, any impact of such latent trauma may subliminally heighten sensitivity to the imagery of violence rather than be a direct trigger to radicalisation.

Social Issues

19. The age of inmates interviewed ranged from 19 to 37 years old. The average age at the time of their visit to Syria was 23.5 years. The majority (75%) were in the zone of conflict before the age of 25, with radicalisation taking place between 14 to 25 years of age. One interviewee was a 14-year-old teenager when he fell under the influence of his brother-in-law while working with him in their fields. The brother-in-law told him about Syria, that Muslims were suffering and were being killed there and that they needed help. He showed the teenager various video clips about the war. Then the brother-in-law went to Syria with his family and encouraged the teenager to join them. With the help of an unidentified woman sent by his brother-in-law, the teenager managed to make a fake passport but was detained while trying to leave.

> "It's easy to get influenced at 13 or 14. You have questions about whether to work or study further, where to work, what to do after school. And YouTube... now everyone has phones, if someone's interested, they could put a video in a general group. Then everyone can see it. We didn't know a lot of things, we didn't understand, we didn't think it would end up like this." FTF

20. The 14 to 25 age group appears to be the most vulnerable to radicalisation, as this is the age when there is a strong idealisation of aspirations and values. Young people in their teenage years are trying to find themselves, to define their own purpose in life and are often wrestling with the complex problems that exist in the world. Expert opinions supported the conclusion that age is a factor in radicalisation. At the same time, each of the experts pointed out different nuances related to the availability of education, social elevators, and general age specifics: few commitments, greater freedom, risk-taking, categorical judgments, tendency to idealisation and polarisation of opinions, lack of analytical-critical thinking skills. In addition, the experts noted that young people have a tendency to conformist behaviour, i.e., have not formed their own opinions and, as a result, they are more susceptible to external influence.

Education

21. The majority of respondents have a secondary education (11th grade – 32%, 9th grade – 36%), while 16% left school in 6th – 7th grade. One respondent had higher education and three started, but did not finish university. Overall, the levels and standards of education of the FTF were low or incomplete. Reasons for this were mainly indicated as financial, the need to work to help parents. Additionally, a number of individuals noted that they did not see the point in continuing their education because it was uninteresting. A third of the respondents noted that they were 'good' or 'excellent' students until the 7th grade and then they developed other interests. The majority of the respondents noted that if they could change the past, the first thing they would do would be to get an education and acquire a profession.

22. According to the experts interviewed, a low level of education plays an important role in the vulnerability of young people to radical ideologies, since lack of education leads to a lack of critical thinking. With the availability of the Internet and social networks, people are easily manipulated and do not always critically evaluate the information they receive. Although the radicalisation of almost all FTF interviewed involved contact with recruiters, online material was also used and a critical thinking approach may have helped reduce its seductive effect. A lack of critical thinking skills is aggravated by the low quality of secondary education provided by the state which, according to experts, requires serious reforms as it no longer meets current requirements. Modern education should meet modern needs, especially critical thinking and how to distinguish between fact and false information on the internet. Children of migrant workers, who were left without full parental control, in the care of relatives, were mentioned as being additionally vulnerable to manipulation.

> *"If you're poor, you're less educated. If, you are less educated, it is much easier to mislead. It's natural. If it is the child of a migrant, he did not receive a normal upbringing, parental love and support, was not introduced to him. This forms a number of insecurities. At this point, if someone offers support, gives a certain vision of life, then the young person is easily influenced." (Expert: Media Specialist).*

Notwithstanding the need to reform the education system and the importance of introducing critical thinking components to help with resilience to radicalisation, it would be unsafe to draw definite conclusions. Firstly, critical thinking is an ill defined concept and the evidence for its effectiveness in resilliance to radicalisation is not very strong. Secondly, the link between education levels and radicalisation is inconsistent. Jelil, Bhatia, Brockmeyer, Do, and Joubert (2018) have suggested that ISIS recruits are better educated than the average for their country of origin. Their data was based on forms that were filled out by the recruits themselves and is likely to be distorted. Other research (Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbahar, & Barton, 2018) draws a more nuanced conclusion, indicating that low levels of education could lead to radicalisation. Furthermore, there is a view that low levels of secular education can coincide with lower levels of religious knowledge. Those views are certainly in line with the results of this study.

Religious Education

23. Some experts believed that the generally low level of secondary school education leads to the popularity of alternative religious education. When these are combined, they result in a negative effect, according to some experts consulted. When young people have not developed critical thinking skills and have a lack of general education, they are less able to adequately evaluate the religious

knowledge they receive. In general, the interviewed experts were critical of the role of religious education in countering violent extremism. The experts had the impression that the teachers at religious schools are themselves uneducated, they receive their knowledge through unauthoritative sources and through various interpretations and therefore lack a deep understanding of the sacred texts. They were also concerned that religious education in the country is not unified, and it is unclear who teaches what, thus calling into question the veracity of religious education and raising the prospect that it may be a source of politically dangerous influences. In addition, experts mentioned that the State Commission on Religious Affairs has an unequal attitude toward other religions, favouring some forms of Islam, and thereby creating conditions for discrimination and intolerance.

> «I don't think religious education is the solution to this problem. I think it creates an environment in which these problems multiply» (Expert: Business Community Stakeholder)

24. Formal religious education was observed in only one of the respondents, who studied at Al-Bukhari Madrasah, Uzbekistan, in 2014, and took theological courses in two madrasahs in Turkey (Sadik Samarkandi in Istanbul, with Sheikh Hamidullah). When answering this question, respondents were confused between knowledge of rituals and in-depth theological education. For example, a third of respondents mentioned that they had received a religious education, but they referred to instruction in praying (namaz), memorising some parts of the Quran, or learning Arabic. Almost all noted that they had learned prayers and the Quran from close relatives or while attending Friday prayers, and rarely attended special courses to learn the Quran. Thus, there was little evidence of systematic knowledge of religion and understanding of theological concepts among these FTF.

25. Moreover, about a third reported that they were not particularly religious prior to their conviction. Religious observance was self-judged as performing prayers, going to the mosque, and celebrating religious holidays. These are part of the way of life in their communities and were not identified with a meaningful relationship with God. In fact, few individuals mentioned a relationship with God. Religion was mostly talked about in the context of rituals and political rights (defence against rape and murder). At the same time, families were also not particularly religious and perceived religious practices (namaz, mosque attendance, fasting, etc.) to be more a part of their cultural tradition. Some FTF respondents said they had only discovered religion in a new way after imprisonment, while others said they had become interested in religious topics shortly before going to the Middle East. In those circumstances, the family's reaction was not always supportive.

> "If I start telling my father about religion, he says "I won't listen to you." He doesn't listen to me. My mother does, but she says, 'You should not be too zealous, be measured.'" FTF
>
> "My parents were not into religion. At the moment only my sister has started reading namaz." FTF

Family and Economics

26. Prisoners' responses to questions indicated that their family played a significant role in their lives, especially the mother. When asked, "who is the authority figure in your life?" most respondents pointed to the mother whose advice typically was "be the right person," "do not hang out on the streets," and to "be honest, and don't steal." The main ambition after release of most prisoners was to sort out their mother's life and make her content. At the same time, the analysis shows that the absence of fathers played a negative impact on the formation of those accused of being FTF. For example, 11 respondents did not have a father in their lives (due to divorce or death). Even in families where the father was formally present, his role in education was minimal or he was a negative example. Heavy drinking and domestic abuse were the primary manifestations of this negative behaviour. Only one individual spoke positively or neutrally about his father. Women appeared to have a degree of autonomy, judging by the divorce rate and some of their comments.

> "Even in the most difficult situations, I didn't drink, because my father used to drink a lot of alcohol, and I saw it. He didn't normally beat my mother, but once he beat her so hard that she fell into a coma. My father was a boxer" FTF
>
> "My son wanted to become a policeman. His father also worked in the traffic police, but every day there were parties and drinking, so I divorced him" (Mother of FTF).

27. In general, young people in difficult situations are most likely to turn to parents and trust them the most to provide support. Many FTF did not find attention and understanding from their parents and were either forced to deal with matters alone or fall under the influence of ideologues or other acquaintances. In these cases, parents were predominantly occupied with earning money, most parents were, or had been, migrant workers. This situation was readily recognised by some experts. A youth activist said: *"In my opinion, those who left [for Syria did not feel a strong attachment] to their family. Because parents were busy thinking about how to feed their children and don't pay enough attention to them."*

Employment and Migration

28. No direct evidence was found of the influence of economic factors on radicalisation. Indirectly, the economic conditions of FTF' families (poverty, lack of opportunities to continue education, doing sports that do not require financial resources (for example, wrestling)) were circumstances that led to the fact that most of the respondents had to start working at an early age. Almost all respondents worked mainly in low-paid or manual jobs, for example on construction sites, as cooks, handymen, etc. either in Kyrgyzstan or as migrant workers.

> "After graduating from school, I had been working at a construction site." FTF
>
> "I worked at a construction site, in commerce, with a business … in Russia and Turkey." FTF

29. These economic conditions led to most prisoners travelling to find work abroad. Only four of the interviewees stated that they had not been labour migrants. Most of the interviewed respondents worked in Russia and Turkey, some in Ukraine and one worked in South Korea. Interviews indicated that migration provided favourable conditions for recruitment and radicalisation, confirming previous research (Elshimi, Pantucci, Lain, & Salman, 2018). Individuals would either be contacted by acquaintances or by recruiters in the country who would actively target them to become involved and facilitate their travel to Syria. These findings are in line with other research (Paulussen, Nijman, & Lismont, 2017) which has found that individuals are often pushed toward terrorist movements abroad as a result of domestic circumstances.

> "I was in Turkey for only 5-6 months, if you stay there for a long time, you become a terrorist." FTF

30. As migrant workers, individuals tend to live in close-knit groups, so ideas spread quickly amongst them. Many of these young male FTF were children of migrants and so tended to be relatively under-loved, under-educated, and socially neglected with lower levels of education increasing their vulnerability. Living conditions for migrant workers are usually depressing. A lack of social protection, high levels of intolerance towards migrants and other humiliating factors affects their willingness to leave for another country in order to find a better life and justice, including participation in hostilities. The experts echoed these ideas: while working as migrants, young people experience significant injustice with regard to work and living conditions as well as pressure from their parents to send money. They begin to feel deeply unhappy and become dissatisfied, experiencing feelings of emptiness. Recruiters fill this void by showing an alternative meaning to life, with the possibility of finding happiness through serving their religion and helping their people. This can restore their self-worth.

> "I was working in Russia and met a man from Uzbekistan on social media [Odnaklassniki] and he sent me a video showing suffering of children and then he helped me to go to Turkey and then to Syria to join Jabhat ul Nusra." FTF

Motives for involvement

Narratives

31. Narratives designed to produce emotional triggers to engage in violence were one of the most common motivations for respondents to decide to travel to fight in Syria. According to them, their interest in the activities of extremist and terrorist organisations was related to watching video clips depicting scenes of violence against children and women. In many instances, the attention of the FTF to these clips was drawn directly by recruiters or family members. This channelling of individual vulnerabilities into emotional appeal is described by many researchers. For example, Borum (2011b) identifies grievance, injustice, blame and devaluation of those blamed as common components in radicalisation that lead to hatred of the outgroup. These components are evident in the FTF's description of the narratives they received and their reactions.

> "In the videos I saw little children were killed by bashing their heads against concrete, women were raped. I have a little sister and if she had been amongst those women what would I have done if no one helped me, if I called but no one came, I would be helpless." FTF

32. This theme of human sympathy for the plight of helpless women and children is the most prevalent narrative within the descriptions of the videos that prisoners claim to have been motivated by. These evoked a near universal human sense of indignation, heightened by particular factors. Firstly, these narratives identify the victims specifically as Muslims, resonating with a theme that can be traced back to Saudi volunteers who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and then fought in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya in the 1990s onwards. In almost every case, the researchers found more sympathy for the victims than hatred for the oppressors (Hegghammer, 2010). Notwithstanding this difference in the balance of sympathy and hate, these narratives clearly evidence an ingroup and outgroup construction which facilitates love and hate respectively through the construction of an emotionally charged crisis environment.

> "Of course, if you see the death of a child, the agony of a women being beaten or killed, how would you react? Even on the street, if you see someone beating a child you will feel bad." FTF

33. In a contemporary setting the in- and out-group construction has changed from Muslim vs non-Muslim in the above examples to Sunni vs Shia. This was noted by the selective use of religious text by ideologues and by specific identification of the Assad regime as 'Shia Muslims,' being responsible for the alleged atrocities against helpless Sunni women and children and occasionally against unarmed Sunni men at prayer. Neither the FTF interviewees nor the experts identified this shift of narrative from an interreligious conflict to a sectarian conflict, suggesting that the Syrian conflict had successfully and seamlessly transformed the Islamist extremists' definition of in and out groups from a war against the West to one within Islam itself. A point that the experts drew attention to is the idea of "happiness in another world, not this," which also played a role in recruitment. Such a message creates a highly emotional affect: a sense of meaning emerges and the individual is ready to go to the rescue. While very few prisoners mentioned life after death or heavenly rewards as a factor in their decision to join the fight, it is possible that these ideas may have been a part of some narratives, thus playing a subliminal role in their choices. While the FTF were largely religiously illiterate, recruiters and ideologues made

> "Help Muslims, yes. He gave various ayahs [verses], hadiths [Prophetic traditions] and arguments. We need to help them, because women are being raped there...our sisters, children are being killed by Assad." FTF
>
> "Shiites are lost. They are unfaithful. The Shiites aim to conquer Palestine, believing that if they die from Sunni hands, they will enter paradise." FTF

tactical use of scriptural references in their narratives and statements to establish their credibility and 'scholarly' credentials.

34. The consistency and directness of messaging against the Assad regime suggests that these narratives could be part of a coherent political strategy to radicalise individuals to participate in a regime change campaign, in which the construction of religious based in and out groups identities were an instrumental objective. This possibility lends credence to claims made by some FTF and family members that their observations indicated the conflict in Syria as a geopolitically orchestrated event intended to benefit global and regional powers as well as oil corporations (Yahya and Aybek, Annex C). It might also explain the 'inability' of some states to detect and dismantle the recruitment and training facilities that are alleged to have taken place on their soil. Therefore, a question could reasonably be posed: were the narratives used in the radicalisation of these FTF part of a state supported disinformation campaign?

35. Most of these FTF had experienced previous violence in some form. While they pointed to the desire to 'save others' as a conscious motivation for going to Syria, for many, the unconscious motivation could have been to "save themselves and their loved ones in the past, when they witnessed or were victims of domestic or social violence," through the manifestation of latent domestic and political violence related trauma (Levine & Frederick, 1997). This motivation may have been a way for the psyche to cope with an unfinished traumatic experience, a way for these individuals to find situations where they repeatedly revisit their trauma hoping to experience healing. This hypothesis is only partly supported by some of the statements and deserves in-depth research.

> "I remember that my family starved when I was little because of the violence in 2010. I dropped out of school and we immediately left for Kazakhstan after that." This might have affected his decision to go to Syria: "I watched a video in YouTube - people were shot during their namaz [prayers] and killed …I went to Jabhat al-Nusra, because I wanted to help Muslims." FTF

36. The above motivational triggers best describe individuals who are justice seekers, as Paulussen et al. (2017) depict in their typology of various extremist seekers. This seems to account for the majority of FTF who identify justice, or lack of, as significant factors in their decision to go to Syria. The narratives deployed also formulate an identity around religion but it is unclear, due to the brevity of most interviews, to what degree this fulfils the needs of a particular seeker and to what degree it evokes an existing identity in the individual. There is, however, clear evidence in some cases of individuals who are significance seekers. Some of those accused of being FTF could be described as sensation seekers. These are individuals attracted to risky behaviours such as fighting, dreams of extreme professions, systematic exposure to risky situations and behaviour related to emphasising masculinity (freestyle wrestling, boxing, martial arts). A very small number (4) seem to fall out of this seeker categorisation. They claim to have been merely curious about events within Syria, and it is possible that these individuals, rather than being attracted to risk, simply fail to recognise risk – a factor which seems be missing from current radicalisation theories.

> «You're leaving with other thoughts, that maybe I'll become a hero too, I'll do what others do, fear disappears on its own." FTF
>
> «I was interested in this war. I thought it's like in a movie. When you go to war and [actually] planes are constantly being shot down ... by shells. You are scared.» FTF

37. In the opinion of an expert, one of the factors why many people were affected by the message of "helping Muslims" is the existing education system and cultural environment which promote a courageous image of a man who should be "a rock and protector against the backdrop of a small number of values that we are now seeing in our country." According to another expert, a child who grows up in an environment where the idea of "Muslims must help a Muslim" was promoted will definitely be caught up with such a call. The experts also expressed the view that the unrealised need for affiliation, recognition and self-esteem is actualised through the path of being an FTF. A Youth Psychologist expert said:

> "Before religion, I was a bit of a bully, went to discos and drank and smoked. I still smoke, for over 10 years now. I was involved in sports, karate, boxing... And I watched videos about training in Syria. I just wanted to see what was going on in Syria and to come back." FTF

> *"Each of us wants self-fulfilment and recognition, but recognition is achieved through action and most likely participation in hostilities makes it part ... of a meaningful community of Muslims who are fighting to restore peace or, I don't know, to create a caliphate or something. This is most likely a moment of self-actualization."*

38. Another expert suggested that young people may seek a stimulating challenge in their lives. As they have limited opportunities to get a good job or to climb up the career ladder, they can take advantage of the opportunity offered by extremist groups. In some stories, individuals' (5 out of 38) motive for travelling to Syria was an unmet need for adventure (new experiences, events, travels, change of scenery, activities, etc.). Some fell into the option through force of circumstance and were either persuaded by or followed companions into Syria. Others (4 out of 38) seemed to plan the trip like touristic entertainment rather than a journey to participate in combat or for realisation of religious aspirations (building a caliphate) (Armstrong, 2014).[1] This motivation is con-

> "I am fond of travelling. I visited many cities in Russia and neighbouring countries. I worked as a cook in Chechnya, but the cafe burned down and I went to work in Turkey with a friend. At first, I thought I was going to work, then they said I was going to jihad. There was no fear. I went to the border with a friend and crossed it." FTF

1 The so-called "Arab-Afghans" had similar motivation during the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. «Few were directly involved in the battles, most were limited to humanitarian aid without leaving Peshawar, and some left after a few weeks. There were never more than 3,000 Arab fighters in the region at the same time. Some had this kind of summer holiday: a 'jihad tour' that included a trip to the Khyber Passage for a photo shoot."

firmed by their short-term stay in the country (from a few days to 2-3 months) and their desire to leave as soon as they arrived at the camps. Some of these individuals kept photos of their trip in their phones as keepsakes without understanding the consequences of this decision. These photos were later used as evidence of their guilt in criminal proceedings. The law makes no allowance for claiming such relatively passive motives for going to Syria. It might be right for it not to do so. However, the individual's motive for going and their experience of the time spent there are potentially significant to the degree they might be radicalised. There is a difference between an individual committed to a conflict and an individual merely curious about it. The types of interventions necessary to reintegrate both types of individuals into society are also different as is the likelihood of successfully achieving deradicalisation and reintegration.

> "I think the trip to Syria was just stupid, because I hadn't thought about the consequences of going there. While I was waiting for documents in Turkey, a friend suggested going to Syria to have a look ... well, I heard that there was a war there, I just wanted to see it, because I am curious and I like to travel." FTF

Media – Information acquisition channels

39. The prisoners were almost unanimous in mentioning during interviews the role of videos being a trigger in their decision to become involved in the conflict. This point is reinforced by most family members and was the subject of many comments by experts. YouTube was reported to be the primary platform for these videos and sharing and discussions was via social media. This was almost exclusively on the Russian Odnoklassniki (English translation: Classmates) app, which was one of the most popular social media apps in the former Soviet republics. WhatsApp and Odnoklassniki messenger were the primary methods of communication and the FTF used these to send each other messages. MP3 files were shared by these means to spread propaganda, sermons and other preaching and recruiting material about the jihad in Syria.

> "I watched internet movies, YouTube and Odnoklassniki, where children were raped in front of their parents. I saw 4-5 of them and could not sit down after that, wanted to take a weapon against Assad. Through Odnoklassniki, I met a man who helped me move to Syria." FTF

40. Video themes of women being raped and children being killed were reasonably consistently described by the FTF. It is unclear, however, if the prisoners were referring to a single or several videos. The research team was given access by state officials to a database of extremist videos removed from the Internet and no video fitting any of the descriptions given was found. This is not to say that there is doubt over the existence of such videos, simply that these videos may be graphically innocuous rather than ones that fully depict the descriptions the prisoners gave. It is likely that the videos did not actually show "women being raped" and "children being killed" in front of their parents, but these acts were described through voice narration or through text in the video. It is also likely that women were videoed describing their ordeal in emotional detail without actually showing the act of rape. Similarly, narration could have accompanied images of injured bodies of dead children explaining that they had been killed by Assad's forces by "bashing their heads against walls," as described by some FTF. In this way, the spoken word or text may more powerfully and creatively fill in the gaps in visual imagery. While various videos of Assad's forces committing atrocities against civilians have been independently verified by third party human rights investigation bodies, the exact videos seen by the FTF cannot be corroborated by this current research scope. A cursory examination of the Syrian Archive (Archive, 2021) failed to provide sufficiently clear matches. There are known sophisticated and planned propaganda campaigns of narrative construction drawing on both factual and forged videos. This leaves open the possibility that one FTF's description of a video of a women being raped in front of children was probably based on some sort of manipulation of an Al Jazeera TV interview on the Internet (2014) where a Syrian woman describes a similer ordeal in front of her 2-year old child.

41. It is important to investigate this issue in detail in order to draw full lessons from the propaganda used to target Kyrgyz men. Videos which manipulate news reports are not likely to fall foul of government or international censorship of graphic imagery. Nor are they likely to be discredited as fake, even if their message might be misleading. One prisoner was convinced of the authenticity of the video he saw, at least in technical terms (see adjacent quotation). The point here is not whether the videos were real or fake, but the extent to which they accurately depicted the alleged atrocities that took place. Another individual said that he had heard about such videos, but he had not personally seen any. None of the FTF individually confirmed the stories and the practices depicted in the videos from their personal observations while in Syria, though independent human rights bodies have verified atrocities committed in the country (Archive, 2021). Any further research should aim to identify these particular videos to determine the extent to which they depict authentic events and the extent to which they were manipulated for radicalisation.

> "I saw the dead children lying there, they were not fakes. I am an IT professional and have worked in photography and editing in my city, and I can tell the difference between editing and a real video." FTF

42. The importance of understanding extremist propaganda to countering radicalisation and to planning effective deradicalisation cannot be over emphasised. Experts also highlighted the power of visual imagery in persuasion. A media expert explained that *"we perceive 80% of information visually and it is very memorable and has a stronger impact on us than text."* Another expert pointed out that YouTube algorithms unwittingly assist the radicalisation process by drawing the attention of individuals to similar content. According to another, a herd mentality is triggered by such sites which evokes *"primitive feelings of 'one's own' and 'another's'"* meaning that they help with construction of in and out groups in a particular crisis environment. A youth psychologist highlighted the need for creating *"media literacy"* in society to help people know how *"to consume this [video] content,"* the problem is that *"we never talk about it, how video affects us."*

43. There is complex interplay between the crisis depicted in the narratives, which points to an urgent need to react, and the networks which both articulate these narrative-based needs and facilitate the radicalisation required to take action. Kruglanski, Jasko, Webber, Chernikova, and Molinario (2018) identify the three interconnected ingredients necessary for radicalisation as: need, narrative and network. Although that research focuses mainly on an individual's psychological perspective, the idea and the interconnectedness of these three ingredients applies equally well to a group or scenario perspective such as this case of Kyrgyz FTF.

Networks, Ideologues and Hotspots

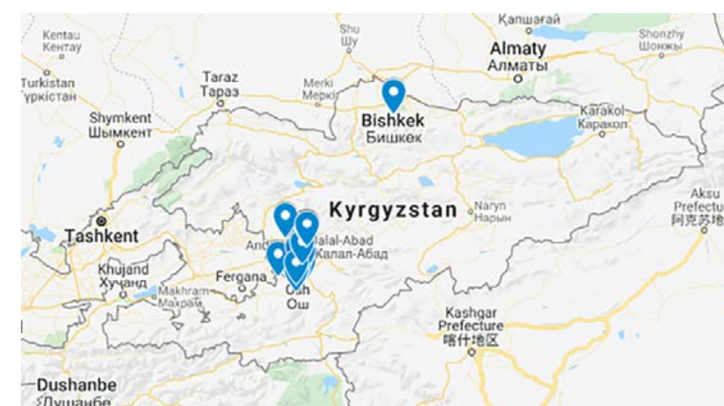
44. Notwithstanding the powerful impact of narratives and the predominance of social media in delivering it to most of the interviewees, only one individual claimed to have been radicalised purely through the medium of social media (through Odnoklassniki). However, it is possible that individual was avoiding mentioning the involvement of others in case it led to torture and possible incrimination of a friend or family member involved in his recruitment. In three of the other 38 cases, FTF claimed to have met 'strangers' who convinced them to go to Syria. The rest claimed they were persuaded by people who were familiar faces: acquaintances from a neighbouring village, a classmate, a friend or a family member. This highlights the communal nature of radicalisation, particularly in Kyrgyz society. The influence of this social network appears to be directed by the views of a couple of radical preachers who in turn appear to have almost silent consent from at least one former mainstream religious leader. The consequence of the interplay of these social and religious factors is that there is a geographic concentration of these networks of radicalisation.

45. Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov, otherwise known as Abu Salah, and his mentor Rashid Kamalov (See Annex D) appear to be the most influential ideologues referred to by the prisoners and their families. Both were imams in local mosques and there are reports that recruiters would scan mosques to identify suitable candidates for radicalisation (see Yahya's statements at Annex C). By initially claiming that he did not support Hizbut-Tahrir's ambitions to establish a caliphate and then providing 'theological' only support for ISIS, Kamalov appears to have done what many extremist ideologues do to avoid prosecution – play word games to camouflage his real sympathies. He has been helped by the fact he had been openly critical of governments, especially the Uzbek government. This has gained him support from human rights organisations to lobby on his behalf because his arrest and imprisonment were successfully depicted as being politically motivated (Saipov, 2015). Abu Salah, on the other hand has been more open about his views, motivations and actions. His speeches have been instrumental in influencing the majority of FTF interviewed, and he appears to have been responsible for the three terrorist attacks in Kyrgyzstan (see Annex D). Many of the FTF are from his locality and had either direct or indirect contact with him before their radicalisation.

46. Most of the FTF originated from the border regions of Osh and Jalal Abad, indicating the possibility of major radicalisation hotspots. The reasons for this concentration are discussed in different parts of the report and are likely linked to a legacy of communal violence and the presence of particular religious ideologues. The long-term effects of the pro-Caliphate movement HT, which was previously influential in the area, are also highly likely to be a cause of this hotspot. HT has been supportive of Al Qaeda to which Jabat Al-Nusra as affiliated (Zenn & Kuehnast, 2014, p. 5). This could explain how the JN leader, Abu Salah, originated from this area as well as the concentration of JN recruits from it.

> «Help Muslims, yes. Different ayahs, hadiths, arguments were given. We need to help them, because women are being raped there, our sisters, children are being killed by Assad's people ... It hurts a lot that women are being raped. The fact that children are being killed. The fact that we had this practice [before] in 2010." FTF

Figure 1 – Map Showing Concentration of FTF Origins in Kyrgyzstan



30% from Jalal-Abad Region:
Jalal-Abad City (20%), Suzak village (5%), Dostuk Village (5%)

5% from Chui Region (Voroncovka)

65% from Osh Region:
Aravan town (5%), Osh City (30%), Kashgar-Kyshtak village (5%), Kara-Suu Town (25%)

Impact of Corruption and Community Violence

47. The experts also emphasised the existence of structural factors that play an important role in radicalisation. For example, unfair trials, corruption and discrimination, particularly against the Uzbek population. Of these, corruption seems to be the common denominator in societal grievances. Kyrgyzstan is listed as the 124th least corrupt country in the world (Transparency International, 2021). Gaining a diploma, even through bribery, does not result in a good job, thus giving rise to resentment against the state and the search for a better share abroad. Those who do not believe in the system and the country's future are emigrating.

> «In my mahala, when I was a schoolboy, I liked the fact that we were all united: Kyrgyz, Uzbeks lived together, helped each other. Then, after 2010, we were divided into 'sartes' [derogatory term for Uzbeks] and Kyrgyz. Now there is no solidarity. But these employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were always bothering me, always demanding money. If I don't give them money, then they will torture me and put me in jail again. So, in 2014, for the first time, I went to Turkey to earn money." FTF

[Corruption in society] is one of the elements that are destroying the country. It's such a serious element. We see the duality of power [hypocrisy], we know that we can't rely on it, we know that everyone is involved. It's like primitive people in chaos. Everyone is in it for himself. Because the system does not work" (Media Expert).

48. All respondents were affected in one way or another by the events of June 2010. Most prisoners were young when these events occurred. Only a few directly referenced memories of the upheaval from their experience of living in communities where violent clashes had occurred. Some indirectly indicated the impact of the unresolved community crisis. Although the conflict was largely ethnic in nature, none of the interviewees pointed to contemporary ethnic tensions. Rather they indicated discontent with the state for failing to resolve the issue. An unwillingness to speak about these events could mean that there was a lack of healing of this traumatic experience. This post-traumatic past could have had an impact on their decisions and behaviours, thereby contributing to their radicalisation. The adjacent example shows how the events of 2010 had echoes in the narratives used to radicalise the FTF and which were the prominent factors in influencing their decision to go to Syria.

49. These findings resonate with an independent inquiry into the events of June 2010 in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyzstan Inquiery Commission, 2011). The report noted that "sexual and gender-based violence committed during the events has remained unreported and largely unrecognised by the authorities." According to a psychology expert this could mean that many people in these communities have unhealed wounds and suppressed emotions of high intensity - anger, sadness, disappointment and desire for revenge. As the analysis of relatives' answers shows, the impact of 2010 persists and apart from dissatisfaction with the existing injustice against them by law enforcement agencies, was a source of identity-based alienation from society and the state:

"The Uzbeks were humiliated after these events; it was really difficult. Now it's better to live in Bishkek, so we haven't had to deal with this. I speak Kyrgyz well, and so do my children. But my son was subjected to attacks, he wore a beard, and they beat him up and took money from him. He did not shave off his beard, he did not listen to us. I think that's why his life happened [went to Syria]. (Mother, 61 years old, her son and daughter-in-law left for Syria with their children).

Involvement in Organisations and Specific Actions

Specifics of Organisation

50. Most prisoners ended up being members of one of the groups belonging to the Jabhat al-Nusra organisation (JN). These included Tawhid Wal Jihad, Khatiba Al-Bukhari (previously, Jannat Oshiklari) led by Abu Salah and Jaihul Hur. Others joined ISIS, Sayfullo Shishani, Ahrar Sham or the local Turkman's jamaat. JN's recruitment campaign emphasised a 'humanitarian' approach to protect women and children allegedly being raped and killed by the Assad regime. The IS approach, meanwhile, appeared to attract recruitment by promising a mythical, utopian 'Islamic State' which counteracts the 'evils' of democracy. The majority of the FTF interviewed were recruited by or into JN. This was mainly because one of the leaders of JN originated from their region and his supporters, both in and outside Kyrgyzstan, were able to leverage their social and religious network to entice recruits. Interviewees spoke of violent and often fatal clashes between the two organisations – JN and IS – although both claimed to be fighting for the same cause. One FTF noted that the organisations and even the groups which comprise them compete for recruits because each member represents power, influence and wealth. Individual choice mattered little. FTF were expected to join whichever organisation they were recruited by. Even leaders like Abu Salah fell victim to political rivalry and have reportedly been jailed by elements within the JN. For ordinary recruits, life was unsurprisingly harder with little autonomy.

Ways of involvement

51. The FTF were either recruited directly from Kyrgyzstan (about a fifth) or by contacts (the majority) either familial or other acquaintances when they were migrant workers in countries such as Russia, Turkey and South Korea. It is evident that there were networks of recruiters in those countries and, in some cases, there were facilities where workers were accommodated that doubled as indoctrination centres (for example, see Yahya in Annex B). These centres concentrated on religious indoctrination and took up to $1000 per month as 'rent' from up to 200 workers. It is alleged that a proportion of that revenue was used to fund terrorism. Even if this allegation is only partly true, it represents a significant source of terrorist finance, especially if this model was replicated in other countries. Individuals, once indoctrinated and willing to go to Syria, were sent to Turkey, where they in some cases undertook military training before crossing the border. Contact with recruiters could last for months and sometimes years. The recruiters for two FTF were older relatives who had been in direct contact with them for several years.

52. The alleged existence of these significant recruitment, radicalisation and fundraising activities in countries where Kyrgyz migrant workers congregate, should be investigated and prevented from reoccurring. It is possible that South Korean security forces, for example, were untrained to detect recruitment and radicalisation activities of international terrorist networks on their soil. If so, they should obtain the necessary expertise and set up a suitable liaison with Kyrgyz and other Central Asian countries' authorities to prevent a resumption or evolution of similar activities by future migrant workers on their soil. The allegation by some FTF that they received military training in Turkey, near Istanbul, is particularly concerning. While FTF claims deserve to be sceptically received, there is no obvious motive for them to fabricate this element of the story, especially as it was made as an incidental comment in the interview. If true, the claim represents either a serious breach of internal security or connivence on the part of elements within the Turkish state. Political connivance was directly alleged by at least one of the FTF and indirectly by others. For these reasons, the Turkish government should be made aware of the allegations contained in this report.

53. A strong influence on the decision to travel for most FTF was related to their attachment to an in-group identity: 'We are Muslims." They were motivated

by a wish to be involved in addressing the problems of Muslims in Syria and felt responsible for the suffering of their fellow believers. This identity construction was coincidental with the narratives used by recruiters about the rape and killing of Muslim women and children. It reflects a generic motivation identified within FTF, by other research, which is a reaction to injustice, real or imagined, that needs to be corrected (Stern, 2010). This wider identity had to be narrowed given that the Syrian conflict was essentially a conflict within a nominally Muslim country. Therefore, a sectarian element was introduced to narrow the in-group to mean that true Muslims were only Sunni Muslims of their own type. This narrative construction not only drove a wedge between Muslims, but it also caused painful division within families with radicalised young men verbally attacking their parents – something that is taboo in their religion and their culture.

> "We are all Muslims - a big family. We must help each other. These Shiites have made a mess of things, killed and raped. I wanted to help." FTF
>
> "I did not listen to my parents when I left for Syria because they did not pray. I asked them [to do so], but they didn't. Then I spoke to them rudely. That's what I regret - that I spoke rudely." FTF

54. At the same time, the respondents themselves also expected emotional support related to the desire to lead a life in accordance with religious beliefs and logistical support for their actions (moving to the country, paying for tickets, etc.). If such support is not provided to a member of the group, the feeling of collective identity is diminished. In addition to exploiting the collective identity of the in-group, recruiters also targeted the potential recruits' masculinity with evident success. The idea of women and children being raped and killed, indirectly appeals to the protective concepts inherent in the idea of masculinity, something that is amplified in a patriarchal society. The feeling of a sense of duty to act and the shame of inaction associated with this are known mobilizing factors in terrorism. Unsurprisingly, some social media messages were designed to directly appeal to potential recruits' masculinity and, for some, this was a decisive factor to go to fight in Syria rather than 'sit like women' at home.

> "The main objective is to help the religion when in need. But there are also those who work for money, for themselves... the decision [for me] was made after they said that those who think only about themselves are like women. 'Either help or put on a headscarf and sit at home [like women].' I listened to the propaganda for about 6-7 months, the last push [for me] was «sit like women."" FTF

Practical Actions

Evaluation of terrorist experience

55. Most (80%) of those who admitted going to Syria expressed either disappointment or disillusionment with the experience. The stated reasons for that reaction are discussed below and elsewhere and should be taken into account to develop a rich picture of life and experiences of a FTF. The predominant reason for disappointment was discovering a clash between the idealism of the cause they were motivated by, and the brutal reality of their actual experiences. Most FTF did not have a clear idea of what was really going on in Syria. They talked about this in their interviews as something that surprised and shocked them. For example, they saw that other fighters were drinking and smoking during the month of Ramadan, which conflicted with their indoctrination by recruiters on religious sources (Quranic verses, hadiths, and videos of individuals who posed as Islamic scholars.) Ruslan (see Annex C), the most religiously literate FTF interviewed, was the most critical and disillusioned with his experience with JN. He had gone to Syria motivated by the desire to live in a caliphate under Sharia law. Instead, he found that in Syria "everything is completely against Sharia." He spent eight months in jail due to a disagreement with his group, JN, and was ultimately 'rescued' by his mother and helped to escape. Aybek (Annex C) observed the vicious infighting within the different jihadi groups and the harsh measures involving torture and executions of their own fighters in an attempt to maintain discipline.

56. Stories abound amongst relatives of cruelty and neglect by the fighting groups. The Yahya case study (Annex C), for example, claims that "Women are not respected there. If a husband dies, after three days they marry her to another man by force." He points out that there is "nothing like that in Islam." For him, this is a "mockery," where if a man likes another's wife, then he will kill him to marry her. Yahya also recounts incidents of recent widows and their children being left without food for days. Treatment of FTF, although considerably less deplorable, seemed mostly to be devoid of compassion and non-violent pleasure. They found little friendship and comfort amongst their brothers in arms.

57. None of the fighters mentioned any strong bonds of friendship or camaraderie during their experience in Syria. Bonds and friendship are common in combat situations, particularly when fighters are bound by a strong cause, teamwork and shared adversity. Research on American soldiers during WWII indicated that after the desire to return home, the second most important thing that sustained their motivation in combat was close ties with their comrades (Stouffer, 1949). That study also revealed that the majority of soldiers found prayer gave them the greatest source of personal support in combat. The absence of camaraderie and friendship in Syria may point to the totalitarian nature of the groups involved and to the instability of a system where leadership is neither elected nor appointed on merit. The constant fracturing of groups and the in-fighting for leadership influence may be another symptom of this. Discipline in ISIS was maintained almost exclusively through fear, with death sentences meted out for minor mistakes. The result was little loyalty and mass desertion (Aybek, Annex C). Even more remarkable for groups styling themselves as champions of religion is that hardly any FTF mentioned prayer as a source of support while fighting in Syria, even though they were taught how to perform ablutions and regular prayer. Some of them admit to only concentrating on prayer and religion after their imprisonment in Kyrgyzstan. These facts, taken in common

> "When I was in ISIS, I tried not to talk to anyone, not to say anything unnecessary. If you say the wrong thing, you can be under suspicion. Your own mates could have you executed. However, I made good friends with the local population." FTF

with the other sources of disillusionment felt by the majority of FTF, point to groups whose lust for violence and power had eclipsed any sincere sense of spirituality and a moral social purpose.

58. One of the most common sources of disappointment was with the rivalry and fighting that they witnessed or participated in between the groups, especially between the two groups that most of the prisoners joined: ISIS and JN. In all the cases investigated, the choice of group to join was not made by the FTF. Few understood what differences existed between the various groups involved in the fight. They assumed that as the groups were fighting for a common cause, they would be united. Reality on the ground, however, appeared to be in stark contrast with the nobility of the common cause these groups claimed to champion. Another disappointment was the absence of any sense of achievement, of righting the wrongs that they had evidently witnessed on video. Hardly any saw evidence of the cruelty in Syria that they saw on the video that inspired them to go and fight. Many undertook mundane tasks that did not reflect the cause they were fighting for, nor any self-image of a heroic warrior that they might have had of themselves when they set out for Syria. The inability to conduct second interviews prevented finding out if such relatively mundane duties were allocated to inexperienced fighters, those deemed incompetent or they were allocated in response to needs at the time. Some fighters did experience conventional combat situations while others were acting in support roles, suggesting that guarding duties may have reflected particular needs at the time rather than being reflective of any competence related employment policy.

> “We came to one place. We started to learn religion. They taught us how to do ablutions, if we were wounded or if we bleed. We studied for a fortnight, then we were taken to military training. After one month of training, we went to an outpost. We were just guarding the border.” FTF

59. Only a few prisoners admitted to retaining any sense of mission and purpose after their experience. Even by jihadist standards, these individuals tend to be naïve and idealistic, without significant knowledge and experience of the realities of the ideology and the groups they were part of. Such individuals are rife for future exploitation by ideologues and terrorist leaders after their release from prisons. Research has shown that “radical beliefs and connections to associates involved in terrorism increase the likelihood of reengagement” (Altier, Leonard Boyle, & Horgan, 2019). On the other hand, this naivety, which makes them vulnerable to future recruitment, can also make them more susceptible to deradicalisation, if presented with a carefully crafted counter narrative and an authoritative and supportive social environment.

> “Inshallah, the caliphate will definitely come here. People will not work, they will perform religious rites, they will marry, if there is no money, it will be the duty of the Caliphate to get them married.” FTF

60. The impact and memories of the FTF’s experiences are likely to change over time as they revise their recollections in different contexts. Observations in Syria changed, for some, their conception of the conflict being from a national one

> “I perceive myself as Muslim. There is preaching that Muslims must help … you become ready for everything. And you watch TV news and they show you videos from Syria and all these factors mentally make you suffer. I used to come from work and cry thinking that I was a bad Muslim. I live in luxury here and enjoy myself and they suffer there. But when you arrive there, you can observe only businessmen and oil men. Oil men fight with each other and again there are oil men, businessmen, weapons, etc. I am telling you that it is a very political conflict. Bashar Assad seeks advantages, Turkey seeks own benefits, you can find there America, England, you can see Bashar, Syria and Kurds take advantage…everyone seeks [own] benefits.” FTF

where their imperative was to stop the rape and murder of innocent coreligionists to a geopolitical one where superpowers and energy corporations are allegedly raping the country and murdering the people for their own benefit. These views were prevalent not just among some of the FTF, but also amongst some family members who see the Syrian conflict as a Western plot to weaken Muslims by making them fight against each other (see Rashid’s uncle, Yahya’s, case study). These views are currently only held by a minority of FTF, but are powerful because they represent independent thinking and are largely based on their observations. The international community should consider the extent to which these views are rooted in reality. Any truth in these versions of events suggests that the states and corporations involved must share the blame for radicalisation and share the burden of responsibility for deradicalisation. Otherwise, such narratives could in the future provide a powerful strand to an anti-secular, anti-democratic and anti-western political manifesto.

Assessment of war experience on mental health

61. Participation in hostilities can be seen as a stressful event of an exceptional nature, which can cause general distress to almost anyone. Unlike many other stressful situations, participation in a war can be a psychological trauma with delayed consequences (Malkina-Pykh, 2005). Prisoners’ narratives indicated that at least a quarter of those convicted are likely to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder associated with warfare.[2] It can further be assumed that a number of respondents who refused to talk about events during their stay in Syria may have been motivated by an unwillingness to remember traumatic events due to a mixture of emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, fear and sadness. Being at war is accompanied by the complex influence of several factors (Pushkaryov, Domoratsky, & Gordeeva, 2000), and these factors are richly endorsed by the statements of many of the interviewees. For example:

> “I was in Syria, but I don’t want to talk about it anyway: «After being recruited I became a recruiter. Then in 2015, I decided to break with the group and went to work in Turkey. Then they said I was going to jihad. There was no fear. We went to the border with a friend and crossed it.” FTF

2 Since the research did not include the tasks of diagnosing the mental health of respondents, this assessment is preliminary, based on the observations of the research team psychologist and is made as a hypothesis to help develop recommendations for future work with this category of prisoners.

- A clearly recognisable sense of threat to life, the fear of death, injury, pain and disability;
  - One individual describes his fear of imminent death as: *"When we were in the foxhole shooting without stopping...There was a house next door, a plane flew by and dropped a bomb. I was sitting in a trench and, closing my eyes, I remembered a lot and a lot went before my eyes. It was just scary at the time. And I thought about the fact that my death was coming so early." FTF*
- Incomparable stress arising from direct participation in battle; at the same time, there is psycho-emotional stress associated with the death of a comrade in arms or the need to kill;
  - A fighter describes his reaction to seeing death as follows: *"During the fighting, I tried not to participate actively. I realised that if you raise your head, you could get shot. I saw dead bodies and how people died on the battlefield and I was scared." FTF*
- The impact of specific factors in the combat environment (time pressure, acceleration of action, surprise, uncertainty, novelty);
  - The uncertainty and novelty of combat is illustrated by this individual's account of a near self-inflicted death: *"I threw a lemon [hand grenade] at a post where the kafirs, the Shiites were. It hit the wall and bounced back at me. My whole life passed before my eyes, and I will never forget it." FTF*
- Participants can be unaccustomed to the climate and terrain (hypoxia, heat, increased insolation, etc.) of the war;
  - Isolation, disruption and destruction of war stands in stark contrast to the normality of life back home, to the extent that men want to give up, something many discovered to their surprise: *"When we arrived [in Syria], I didn't have my passport. At that time there was no military action. One afternoon I was preparing to eat and I heard a helicopter. Then I heard a whistle sound and then about 50-60 bombs fell. The windows were smashed and the walls fell in. That's when I got scared, went to my uncle and asked him for my passport." FTF*
- Physical stress of hardship including factors such as lack of sleep, lack of water and food.
  - Hardship and failure combined to make the experience a frustrating and futile one for some FTF: *"Life in Aleppo was hard, there was no light. We lived in dilapidated houses. There was always bombing. I wanted to help the Muslims. But it turned out that my help was of no use. Planes are bombing there, bombs are everywhere and, in general, Assad has better weapons." FTF*

62. These examples of potential trauma demand formal clinical investigation and treatment as these individuals could represent a future threat to their families or communities. Recent research undertaken in both UK and USA populations has shown that individuals exposed to combat roles were "strongly associated with perpetration of violence against both family and strangers" (Kwan et al., 2018). These accounts also provide potentially rich stories to challenge the sanitised heroic image of fighting that recruiters exploit. It is significant that while a small number still admitted to believing in the cause, none admitted to enjoying the fighting or even being part of the groups involved.

Future Implications

63. There was a belief amongst some interviewees that although the Syrian war has mostly lost its appeal, if a similar event occurred in another country there would still be individuals who would respond to it. This means that a future threat from FTF to the international community remains. Implicit in this is that returning FTF have not been fully deradicalised. There are differences between disillusionment, which is strong and prevalent amongst most FTF and their disengagement which has been, in many cases, purely a consequence of their imprisonment. There is little objective evidence in most cases that the individuals in prison are deradicalised. They mostly exhibit critical views of the government and the country's justice system, as do their families, albeit in a more passive sense. It was not possible to determine, because of the limitations of this research, if those grievances will be sufficient to maintain their radical views. It is worth noting that political Islam (Islamism) developed as a response to perceived flaws in the effectiveness and corruption in the governments of Muslim majority countries. Al Qaeda, ISIS, JN, HT are movements that differ in the way that Islamism should be brought into existence and how it might be implemented. Having been disillusioned by establishing an 'Islamic State' abroad, some individuals may be attracted to the idea of making things more just at home. This suggests that a domestic terrorist threat is likely if a few FTF or other radicalised individuals decide to band together in response to continuing domestic political or religious grievances.

"Democracy is the kufar system. YouTube davats [preaching] tell the truth and verify that we must live according to Sunnah. Islam must be brought to life. Everything I have read and learned in Quran is appropriate and everything they say [recruiters] is correct in relation to war. Our scholars are afraid to speak openly due to fear of being imprisoned." FTF

64. This new potential threat posed by domestically orientated former FTF is most likely if mainstream politicians choose to play the religious card by promoting policies and laws that could be identified as Islamic. The likelihood of that happening are high. Survey results indicated that a significant majority of young Kyrgyz people would support a politician who had strong religious views (Nasritdinov et al., 2019). Such a policy approach could raise the expectation that Kyrgyzstan is an 'Islamic' state rather than a secular one, as it currently is, and this would disadvantage other religious minorities. Moreover, while interpretations of Islam are generally diverse and accommodating, extremists have a narrow and exclusive view of Islam. They are likely to be emboldened by any shift away from the country's current secular status which allows plurality of beliefs within religions. Any accommodation of a non-extremist version of Islam could be perceived as inadequacies or even threats to their version of an 'Islamic' state, as can be seen in other Muslim majority states. For these reasons, it is important for the state to recognise and deal with a relatively small and simple problem now than risk it developing into a bigger and more difficult one in the future. A focused and funded deradicalisation programme that exploits the opportunities for counter narratives based on the disillusionment of the FTF should be the centre piece of the government's response.

Deradicalisation and Reintegration

Context

65. Three significant and interrelated background factors identified in this study increase the vulnerability of mostly young men to radicalisation. These have been defined as a lack of local economic opportunity, a legacy of unresolved ethnic conflict, and rampant corruption, manifesting itself both as financial exploitation of a poor population as well as an inconsistent system of justice. Collectively, these have caused a set of political grievances that will continue to motivate many to yearn for an idealised political system based around mythical notions of a caliphate. It is worth noting that the FTF disillusionment was with the behaviour of the individuals involved in the 'land of Sharia' rather than with the idea itself. Therefore, these three issues deserve to be addressed by the government if any deradicalisation initiative is to be sustainable.

66. These economic and political vulnerabilities were exploited by extremist preachers by creating a theological case for either religious identity-based humanitarian intervention in Syria or, more directly, the idea of an ideal and just 'Caliphate.' The activity of these preachers, which likely preceded the Syrian conflict, is evidenced by the hotspots already identified, where a religiously radical environment was created in which individuals were particularly vulnerable to radicalisation. These individuals provided the backbone of the subsequent recruitment, radicalisation and logistical network for would be FTF in Syria. One feature that strengthened their appeal was their ability to point to the ubiquitous corruption that frustrated individual ambition and made survival an uncomfortable struggle, forcing many families to be torn apart just to feed themselves. However, the extremists' ability to interpret scripture to justify their violent acts could have been more effectively confronted by mainstream Muslim leaders, as there does not seem to be much evidence to show that these leaders made a sufficiently strong effort to promote religious teachings on the essential requirement for honesty, fairness, peace and harmony for all parts of Kyrgyz society. The country's Islamic leadership should ensure that it is seen as independent and that it focuses on the fundamental moral religious teachings aimed at reducing corruption throughout society as well as more precise and effective theological counterarguments to seditious and militant interpretations such as an 'Islamic State' for which there is no agreed historical precedent. The country's secular politicians will, in turn, need to provide a safe and effective environment for grievances to be aired and addressed.

Reasons for returning

67. The reasons for FTF returning indicate a predominance of individuals who were, to varying degrees, disillusioned with terrorist organisations and the nature of the conflict in Syria. This fact alone provides an optimistic environment for prospects for deradicalisation. While this research does not directly explore existing deradicalisation programmes, it is required to provide contributions to CVE, deradicalisation and other counter-terrorism policies and actions. Consequently, the findings and recommendations are appropriately configured to achieve this.

68. The most common motive for returning was the FTF's concern about their families who, in turn, were worried about them. This was followed by the fear of living constantly in dangerous conditions. Most of the prisoners regretted their trip and many repented of their deeds. More than half continued to follow their newly acquired radical Salafi and Islamist form of religion, but do not (currently) support the idea of a jihadi war. All those in custody feel oppressed, frustrated and outraged by the charges made against them and the sentences they received. Many claim that they were forced to make confessions while being tortured by law enforcement units.

> "When I was in Syria, my father died, I was told that because he worried about me. I came back for the family and for the sake of my mother. As for Syria, my mother said, "let the dead bury the dead, look at the future and don't live with past." FTF

69. Disillusionment with the motivations and behaviour of the groups they joined was another significant factor for some of the FTF returning. Primarily, the apparent violent rivalry amongst the groups appears to have led to an identity conflict in their minds. This ingroup, that they had joined, not only failed to demonstrate the love needed to bind their loyalty to it, but also turned in on itself. The group regarded any critical contribution as a threat, further alienating individuals. At least one FTF escaped after being sentenced to death for disagreeing with ISIS' policies. Fear of death and injury in combat were also relevant to some FTF's decision to return. Five of those who took part in combat operations were wounded. These needed hospital treatment for which they were sent to Turkey. However, the Turkish authorities identified them as FTF and repatriated them to Kyrgyzstan.

> "In 2014, different organizations in Syria started fragmenting into groups, jamaats. After these events, I decided to leave Syria. The conflicts resulted in fights between these jamaats. I did not want to kill Muslims. I wanted to help the Muslims. But it turned out there was no use in my help. Therefore, I realized that all these efforts were in vain and I began to think how I can leave." FTF

70. Three of the 38 FTF returned with the specific purpose of conducting terrorist attacks. One individual said that after experiencing Russia's bombing and saving women and children from it, he wanted to go to Russia and "commit a terror attack" there but his plans changed when he came to Kazakhstan. Two individuals were part of a larger team dispatched by Abu Salah to kill the head of the Ahmadi Muslim community in Osh. This was a rare, if not unique, planned assassination mission conducted by a Syrian based terrorist group in another country. According to one of the assassins arrested by the police, this was a special mission to kill Ahmadis whose dissuasion of people from going to Syria was becoming a major problem for JN (see Annex D). This is significant because the head imam in Kara Suu, near Osh, had warned that "Wahhabist imams promote themselves as experts because of their knowledge of Arabic, Internet skills, and veneer of profound knowledge of Islam," "but they succeed only because their

propaganda and its ideology are not being contested by local voices" (Zenn & Kuehnast, 2014, p.13). The FTF attack on the Ahmadis was explained by the police as being inspired by a dispute, or as being money related (kyzy, 2015), but the assassins' own accounts suggest that this may be an example of local voices challenging the interpretations of extremists and their exploitation of naïve young men.

Interrogation and Torture

71. Most FTF alleged violations of human rights, including torture after arrest in Kyrgyzstan. While the research did not specifically set out to ask questions about this, 16 of the 38 prisoners alleged being subject to torture during interrogation by the Kyrgyz security services or the police. It is likely that others would also have made similar claims if asked. There was no way of verifying these claims, but the consistency of reports and the general public census about the use of torture by the country's security forces suggests that they are credible allegations. Six interviewees also spoke about extortion and the demanding of bribes by law enforcement and the judicial system, with one individual claiming a bribe of $5,000 was demanded. These allegations are relevant when assessing the mindset of prisoners and the type of interventions necessary to effectively deradicalise them.

72. Speedy and effective interrogation of suspects by police and intelligence agencies is a crucial component of any counter terrorism strategy. In highly securitised states it has become a cornerstone of belief that torture delivers just that: speedy and effective results. This belief is supported by the fact that through torture, names of other suspects are obtained as well as testimony against them, which is successfully used in prosecution. However, there is no evidence to say that the information obtained is reliable or that the same or better information could not have been more reliably obtained using other methods. The main arguments against torture are legal and ethical ones. These do not convince those charged with delivering security against the brutality and horror of terrorism, perpetrated by individuals whom they see as despicable characters. They feel committed to producing results and see injustice in safeguarding the human rights of those who have no regard for the rights of others. Therefore, the question should be addressed primarily from a counter terrorism and deradicalisation perspective. In this context, research has repeatedly shown that torture is ineffective in interrogations (O'Mara, 2015). There are other more effective methods of obtaining information from terrorists, especially those with an ideological motive. The consequence of continued use of torture is that future security threats might not be effectively exposed through interrogation using these means and that it will be more difficult to deradicalise and reintegrate back into society FTF who have been tortured.

Prison Conditions

73. Conditions during incarceration are critical to ensuring that former FTF do not become further radicalised and to maximise the potential for those who may be keen to become deradicalised. Failure to address deradicalisation whilst in prison has resulted in terrorists committing even more severe atrocities after release (Stern & Pascarelli, 2020). Kyrgyzstan has begun to adopt measures to mitigate this, but only in terms of segregating extremist prisoners from ordinary criminals by introducing amendments to the laws on countering extremism and terrorism in 2016. Prisoners convicted of such crimes are now housed in separate buildings from ordinary criminals, where they are confined to their cells for all but one hour of exercise, without access to education, vocational training or other exercise facilities. While this situation avoids the radicalisation of other criminals, it creates conditions for further radicalisation of FTF, does not provide sufficient distractions from their grievances, and fails to prepare them for legal reintegration into society by providing vocational training, a situation aggravated by there being a lack of deradicalisation programmes in operation in prisons.

74. Prisoners do not consider themselves deserving of punishment because they feel they went to Syria with noble motives: to defend women and children. They also argue that any 'crimes' they committed were outside Kyrgyzstan and therefore they question the jurisdiction of the country's laws over them. Some also question why they are accused of extremism and terrorism because, as far as they are concerned, they wanted to simply live according to sharia laws. Many say they did not kill or rape yet have to endure worse conditions in prison than those convicted of such serious crimes while, in fact, they had gone to Syria to fight against such alleged crimes. While these may be normal defensive arguments when faced with a significant prison sentence, there appears to be a genuine belief amongst many prisoners that a wish to live under 'sharia' law is a righteous aspiration that should not be punished. This indicates that the concept of sharia has not been sufficiently debated amongst Kyrgyz Muslims to expose the diversity of interpretations that exist. This lack of sufficient critical debate has allowed it to be understood as a singular idea, which the extremists champion and moderates are seen to compromise over.

75. The next major point that deserves attention is cohabitation of different types of extremist and terrorist prisoners. While there is separation between the general prison population and those charged with terrorism and extremism, there is no distinction made within this second category of prisoners. This group includes individuals convicted of violent forms of extremism (like ISIS) and non-violent extremists (like HT) who may be held in the same cell. On the one hand, this provokes arguments between inmates, and on the other hand, it may radicalise non-violent extremists into violence. It may also allow the violent extremist to learn from the powerful network building capability of non-violent groups such as HT. This threat from mutual learning and radicalisation is made more immediate by the fact that most prisoners have almost daily contact and support from either their families or possibly their organisation support network in the form of food deliveries – most prisoners refuse to eat prison food because they do not consider it to be halal and thus rely on the delivery of food or provisions from outside.

76. In some ways, the threat from violent and non-violent extremists mixing is greater than the threat from various violent extremist groups mixing. After all, HT and ISIS or JN have the same ultimate goal: the establishment of a political caliphate. They differ only on the methodology, particularly in the way in which that methodology is publicly articulated. The rivalry and division between ISIS and JN are evident in prisons. One prisoner mentioned that FTF prisoners divide themselves into black (ISIS) and green (JN) groups in prison because they neither like nor trust each other. According to JN members, ISIS attacked and killed

their group members for political reasons. They frequently accuse each other of apostasy to legitimise killing each other, but there is no guarantee that future alliances or even amalgamations will not occur. Any counter terrorism and deradicalisation strategy must remain alive to such possibilities, rather than reacting to them after they have occurred.

REHABILITATION AND RESOCIALISATION OF FTF

Deradicalisation and Reintegration Programmes

77. Expectations around radicalisation and rehabilitation programmes in Kyrgyzstan are unrealistic, according to a prison extremism expert. These range from outright dismissal of their effectiveness and usefulness, to unrealistically naïve beliefs about what they were able to deliver. None of the FTF and their families experienced any deradicalisation or reintegration interventions. Those that have taken place in the country have been projects sponsored by the international community or donor nations with finite interventions. To counter extremism in the long term and avoid potential security threats, sustained national level programmes are needed to rehabilitate and reintegrate FTF. To do this, it is necessary to engage communities in building social resilience to prevent the FTF from recidivism, and extremist and terrorist groups from recruiting and radicalising more people (Dechesne & De Roon, 2013). This in turn requires that social factors, such discrimination and deprivation are addressed. All policies, programmes and initiatives require an effective narrative to aid implementation and therefore the role of effective counter and alternative narratives is crucial. Several themes have already been highlighted, for example, disillusionment that could form the basis of these narratives. Other themes that channel the desire for justice and service to others would need to be constructed as more attractive alternatives to the extremists' narratives. These could include: "help children and women here," be a "hero for your own country." To achieve maximum engagement and appeal, these narratives should be deployed repeatedly through various media channels, including feature length TV documentaries or films.

78. In Kyrgyzstan, the current discourse is focused on religious rehabilitation, which aims to lead to the rejection of Jihadist-Takfiri ideology. This has patently failed as none of those interviewed, FTF, families and experts, pointed to any arguments from such a programme. In terms of counter extremism, mainstream Islamic discourse in Kyrgyzstan is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. Indeed, there were references in some interviews to a former head of the Muftiat (Chubak Hajji) who indulged in promoting takfiri ideas. Rather than attacking (likely unsuccessfully) extremist theology, mainstream Muslim leaders need to provide positive messages about religious teachings on integrity, compassion and peace. It should be made clear that the concept of declaring apostasy is not only contrary to the secular constitution of the state, but is also the door that opens onto the road to extremism in the country.

79. Declaration of apostasy by religious leadership excludes citizens from their chosen faith and sets a precedence for ever-narrowing criteria for declaring others as an out-group. This trend is repeatedly illustrated by the testimonies of the interviewees. Apostasy of the Shiites was a consistent theme in the radicalising propaganda deployed by both JN and ISIS and it was obvious that the FTF had anti-Shiite prejudices. Apostasy was also used to justify the only terrorist murder in Kyrgyzstan: the killing of an Ahmadi Muslim, Yunusjan Abduljalilov, because he and his Ahmadi community allegedly attempted to dissuade local individuals from going to fight in Syria. Apostasy was even used as a fig leaf to justify the killing of one jihadi by another, as exemplified by the lethal power disputes between JN and ISIS. Apostasy is a corrosive idea that, if allowed to take hold in the mainstream, will feed extremist violence as well as opening up the possibility of sectarian conflict in the country. The use of apostasy in the current prejudicial manner by mainstream religious leaders creates discord and division amongst communities and contradicts a Quranic injunction against creating fitna (discord) in society. Instead of championing apostasy, mainstream religious leaders could mobilise the plethora of positive teachings within Islam which repeatedly enjoin believers to act with honesty and justice, to live peacefully and to serve humanity. In this way not only will they fulfil their religious obligations, but will also improve society and strengthen security.

> "I and my accomplices were convicted because we killed a member of Ahmadiyya sect. Ahmadis are not Muslims. We even watched the news after we murdered him, where Chubak Hajji was asked the question about Ahmadiyya. He replied they were not Muslims." FTF

80. While it is true that religious rehabilitation is a central component in dealing with religiously motivated extremists and terrorists (Gunaratna, 2015), this research shows that the FTF are mostly religiously illiterate; their knowledge and training was of basic ritual practice. Poorly conceived blanket initiatives on religious rehabilitation can lead to the opposite effect: an awakening of interest in religion which, without proper guidance, could lead to the adoption of radical beliefs, especially given the weaknesses identified within mainstream religious leadership. In addition, any discussion of religion among radical prisoners can be perceived by them to be an aggressive attempt to question the truth of their faith. Given the fact that the country and the penitentiary system itself lack authoritative theologians who can qualitatively run theological rehabilitation, it is advisable to focus on psychological and other rehabilitation activities aimed at non-violence (renunciation of violence). Religious rehabilitation should be carefully introduced, based on the individual's level of religiosity, experience of violence, type of affiliation with a terrorist organisation, motives, etc. as well as the capability of the individuals who engage with him. Ideally, this would be best delivered through the family and the local community, who should be trained to deliver these interventions.

> "I started studying religion in detention. There's a guy in the cell who was in Syria, He's teaching me Arabic. There is a lot of time, we read the Quran together, study Hadith. Usually, relatives bring us books." FTF

Psychological rehabilitation

81. As indicated previously, it is likely that many FTF are suffering from conflict related trauma and possibly other psychological issues. Left unaddressed, these could pose a safety threat to their families through a propensity to extreme domestic violence, or a security threat to the state if these individuals revert to terrorism. Other research has indicated that deradicalisation programmes "must be adaptive and tailored to address the motivations and ideology of a specific terrorist" (Bertram, 2015, p. 126). Tailored de-radicalisation programmes require an understanding of the push and pull factors that are relevant to the individual. To be effective "it is essential to not only consider ideological but also psychological factors, and the interplay between" them (Dechesne & De Roon, 2013, p. 90, p.90). Other experts (Stern, 2010) warn against a tendency to rely only on religious or ideological factors, as is the trend in Muslim countries. Radicalisation in part addressed the individuals' need for recognition and belonging to a group. The importance of these interventions is instinctively recognised by families of FTF, most of whom have no knowledge of deradicalisation and reintegration. These psychological programmes must support an effective resocialisation process to aid rehabilitation. The strategic goals of rehabilitation programmes should be to develop a sufficient level of personal maturity, where individuals can make independent decisions, are able to distinguish cognitive distortions in their own thinking and are able to rely on their own internal resources, rather than looking for outside support.

> "I believe that absolutely everyone needs a psychologist after their return. Orphans can be accommodated in madrasahs, but only after therapies with psychologists. They should not be released immediately. My son also needs a psychologist after his release [from prison]." Mother of FTF

Involvement of local communities

82. Many community experts raised societal issues. They emphasised that an environment of healthy and positive relationships within the community plays an important role in preventing and countering radicalisation. Local communities need to be prepared to receive FTF prisoners after their release. Currently, most of the communities to which these men will return still have influencers sympathetic to extremist and militant movements such HT, JN and ISIS. Under these circumstances, there is a high risk of recidivism for some of the returning prisoners. Social and communal activities to give them a new sense of spiritual or social purpose are needed to reengage FTF within society.

> "In any world Baghdadi [ISIS] has his people. They know who is where, how many brothers are imprisoned, who says what. It is quite possible that someday they will make themselves known." FTF

> *"Because when a person sees some [social or spiritual] perspective, some vision, he makes a connection to something other than, I don't know, his friends from the wrestling club or these radicalising videos. This is very important. I don't see any direct efforts like this yet" (Expert on youth policy).*

83. An analysis of the interviews showed that most relatives do not trust law enforcement and mostly hid the facts of any relatives who departed for Syria as FTF. In contrast, those who did trust law enforcement spoke openly, and expected help from the state could not get it and are frustrated by the situation. The findings show that relatives played a big role in the decision of many FTF to disengage from terrorism and return to Kyrgyzstan. They also indicate a willingness on the part of the families to support and help deradicalise these FTF. However, there is currently no support to these families in the form of information, advice and resources to help them address the challenges involved. For example, some FTF need psychological (mental health) support that most families could not provide. Also, they were unable to cope with the effects of not doing so.

> "I believe that all our citizens must be returned. But I am skeptical they will be brought back. Because ours [government] cannot even help those who are here now [in Kyrgyzstan]. Everyone thinks only of their own pockets, including officials." FTF

84. Relatives of extremists and terrorists remain a vulnerable group in the sense that they are in contact with them. By failing to support the ideology of FTF, tensions may arise within the family. At the same time, families are stigmatised and almost automatically fall under the suspicion of law enforcement agencies. Therefore, families are also vulnerable to radicalisation, criminalisation and mental health issues, all of which need state level support to effectively address. Any support provided to families has a double benefit. It not only protects them from the vulnerabilities mentioned but also it strengthens their ability to contribute to the deradicalisation of FTF and to prevent recidivism.

CONCLUSIONS

Research and methods

85. The research demonstrated that the simplified version of the ORBIT methodology applied was successful in enabling prisoners to speak with relative openness. Rapport building was considerably assisted by the fact the interviews were conducted between the prisoners and the researchers without anyone else present. Most topics that prisoners were reticent to speak about were associated with fear of incrimination of self or others. There were hardly any cases of hostility towards the interviewers. It is evident that prisoners occasionally invented fictitious answers to hide the culpability of others, but where their interviews could be cross referenced with family members' interviews, it was possible to discern a more accurate and reliable version of events. It would have been more effective to have interviewed the same individual more than once to explore some issues in greater depth. To increase openness, especially with family members, it would have been beneficial to have obtained some form of legal undertaking that material divulged in these interviews could not be submitted as evidence in court.

Drivers of radicalisation

86. Most FTF were exposed to socioeconomic circumstances that made them vulnerable to the appeal of alternative political and economic systems. This made them receptive to the idea of building a just society (in this case, the Caliphate). The impact of a poor economy, discrimination and corruption meant that many had disrupted upbringings, separated from parents who had to become migrant workers abroad. Most had the minimum compulsory education before they too had to work to make ends meet. Only four of the FTF went to Syria directly from Kyrgyzstan: the remainder were recruited while working (studying in one case) abroad in Turkey, Russia, and less frequently in Kazakhstan, Ukraine or South Korea. FTF interviews provided strong evidence of a clandestine recruitment network operating in these countries which, after recruitment, indoctrinated the individuals, mainly using religion as a theme and also extracted a proportion of their salary as part of a terrorist finance scheme. Allegations made about weapons training in Turkey, if true, raise questions about that country's knowledge or facilitation of terrorist networks on its soil. The existence and operation of these international recruitment networks deserve to be researched by the international community in consultation with Kyrgyzstan. Alleged activities in South Korea are particularly concerning for that country, as there appears to be no other research confirming what was claimed to be a significant recruitment, indoctrination and fund raising operation on its soil.

87. The radicalisation process appears to have been diffused with no singular factor involved and without identifiable triggers, except in the case of a few individuals who mentioned a particular event that solidified a decision to become involved with which they had already been toying. With one exception, all of the 38 FTF interviewed had poor levels of religious knowledge or practice and this was in most cases reflected in their families' approach to religion. They were, therefore, vulnerable to the influence of those who styled themselves as religious scholars and quoted scripture. FTF respondents were from similar locations in the country which indicated hotspots of radicalisation and recruitment activity. These areas were characterised by a post-conflict legacy with resulting inter-ethnic tensions, grievances about corruption and discrimination, the spread of extremist ideologies and a network of violent extremist ideologues. The presence of such hotspots shows how a combination of various factors can form a fertile environment for the spread of radical ideas and radicalisation leading to violent extremism. The question remains if other hotspots are in the process of emerging in the country now or in the future.

88. Religion was primarily used as a source of identity to define ingroups and outgroups, to create a crisis environment and to provide specific justifications for violence. Many recruits and their families were effectively religious 'neophytes,' making them vulnerable to the indoctrination of radical preachers who advocated a mythical and politicised version of religion. There are strong indications that 'mainstream' Islamic institutions lacked credibility and failed to provide an effective religious counter narrative based on a positive alternative to the idea of a political caliphate for addressing national and international issues. At least in one case, a senior mainstream religious personality advanced the idea of *takfir* (apostasy) which is a concept instrumentally used by extremists to justify the killing of fellow Muslims.

89. The issue of corruption in the legal system and police abuse, including torture, cannot be seen as merely an infringement of best governance practice and human rights, in terms of counter terrorism. The FTF interviews indicate a possible causal link between this abuse and unsuccessful deradicalisation. It should, therefore, be seen as a state security issue. Continued corruption and abuse by state actors undermine the investment made by the state in counter terrorism and could be a future motivator for domestic anti-state terrorist action.

Pathways of Radicalisation, Deradicalisation and Reintegration

90. Mass media news initially triggered an interest in Syria by the individuals who went on to become FTF. In many cases, this created awareness of a significant event within the Muslim world which was then reframed as a crisis in extremist narratives. The ensuing criticisms of ISIS in the media were largely ineffective in dissuading against becoming FTF, but they might have helped to drive individuals to join JN, which also criticised ISIS. While there were no cases of self-radicalisation identified, this does not necessarily mean that the Internet and social media were insignificant in the radicalisation process. The research indicates radicalisation and recruitment involving a complex relationship between social networks, material distributed on the Internet as well as recruitment and indoctrination networks in Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and South Korea, amongst other countries.

91. A narrative of rape and killing of Muslim women and children depicted through videos and shared on social media had the most impact in terms of radicalisation. These alleged atrocities were often blamed on Shiites and were occasionally supplemented by direct appeals to individual masculinity. Opportunities for combat with weapons and heroism are also themes that appealed to a young male audience. Videos were hosted on YouTube via the Russian social media platform Odnoklassniki. FTF were generally reluctant to acknowledge or to talk in detail about the contacts they had with influencers and recruiters for fear of incriminating others. However, it was evident that they were mostly recruited by either family members or acquaintances and the impact of the videos and content of their themes were likely reinforced through discussions. In some cases, workers lived in accommodation abroad, which also doubled up as a recruiting and indoctrination centre. Their 'rent' was inflated to allow the collection of funds for terrorist organisations.

92. Experience in Syria was mostly negative for the FTF. Disillusion with the lack of religiosity observed in the 'land of sharia,' the brutal in-fighting and the repressive atmosphere within the groups they joined and the absence of an obvious opportunity to be of help to the women and children they went out for provided some sources of disappointment. Fear during the violent reality of combat and missing family and friends were others. Almost all of the interviews provided potentially powerful material for counter narrative stories with regard to the difference between the utopian image of ISIS and other jihadi groups and their harsh, selfish and brutal reality. At the same time, there is little evidence that any of them have been dissuaded from the idea of a sharia-based political system or a caliphate, mainly because the theological and pragmatic flaws in these concepts have not been exposed to them as clearly as the failings of the humans involved in the 'Islamic State' project.

93. Concern for families, especially mothers, and disillusion with the conditions and behaviours of the groups the individuals joined, were the main reasons for FTF wanting to return. In some cases, their return was directly facilitated by family members. In others, individuals were forcibly repatriated by Turkish authorities once they were identified while undergoing treatment for wounds received during fighting in Syria. Whatever the reasons or motivations for return, disillusion and disappointment with their experience in Syria were almost universal amongst returnees.

94. Despite the disillusion felt, little in the FTF experience has strengthened their commitment to the current secular democratic system. Corruption, abuse and economic decay are likely to encourage revolt against the current system of governance. It is likely that over time the impact of their disillusion, which could be powerfully leveraged for deradicalisation purposes, will be lost and replaced with an idealised mythical version of the past. This will make them more vulnerable than ever to any new radicalisation or mobilisation initiative, even possibly in rare cases to lone terrorist action. Therefore, the window for exploiting this opportunity is likely to close within a year or so because FTF themselves indicate that memories are already being replaced by more 'positive' recollections of their time in Syria.

95. Effective counter terrorism and counter extremism requires an alliance between state and society, with the police and security services acting as the unifying link between the two. Currently, there is considerable distrust of the security services and the law enforcement system, meaning that families and friends of extremists, or individuals vulnerable to extremists, will not share information with state institutions. This relationship needs to be transformed into one of mutual trust and interdependence to avoid future waves of FTF or domestic terrorism occurring in the country and this should occur as part of a state level strategy to counter terrorism and extremism.

96. The possibility of FTF committing terrorist attacks on their return from Syria is confirmed by the case of an FTF's abortive plan for an attack in Russia. More significant is the team dispatched to assassinate the head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the Osh region. This appears to be a unique case of a JN (which was affiliated to Al Qaeda) team sent to their homeland for an assassination mission. Although other, ISIS affiliated groups have conducted assassinations in many countries, this may be the first incident of a specialist team trained, equipped and dispatched from Syria for a mission. As such, the case has not received the analytical attention it deserves by either the Kyrgyz state or the international community to ensure that any lessons for future threats and for deradicalisation can be fully learned.

97. Three issues need to be addressed in order to maximise the possibilities of converting the FTF's current disengagement from violence into sustainable deradicalisation and to facilitate their re-engagement with civil society. Firstly, the segregation of extremist prisoners from ordinary criminals is a positive step and should be expanded to include segregation between violent and non-violent extremist prisoners to prevent the two groups from strengthening each other's capabilities. Secondly, activities should be introduced into prison to positively occupy the prisoners. These could be workshops where prisoners are able to carry out employment tasks in order to earn money and to generate funding for the prison system. By being occupied, the prisoners are less likely to fantasise about ideological issues and how their current disillusion could be converted into future utopian projects. Finally, it is important to address the issue of religious education within the prison system. While the prisoners turning to religion and establishing a relationship with God can be a positive thing, it is likely that many of them will continue to teach each other how to interpret spiritual and moral religious teachings into political ideology. Therefore, it is important to give prisoners access to theologically sound sources of instruction, should they need them.

98. It is important to stress that the research found no evidence that most FTF have been deradicalised by their punishment. On the contrary, indications are that their experience in prison could make them vulnerable to re-engagement with extremism, in one way or another. Therefore, they represent a latent and potentially serious threat to both the citizens of the country as well as the state itself. A national deradicalisation and reintegration policy needs to be produced which will urgently address the potential threat posed by these FTF as they are progressively released into society. Any such programme should be tailored to the individual and should put families at the heart of the initiative. Family influences such as childhood separation due to migration affected some FTF, as explained earlier. In some cases, family members also had a positive influence in facilitating disengagement through return from Syria. The policy should urgently address the psychological needs of the FTF and, where relevant, their immediate families. The programmes should also attempt to address, at least to some degree, any individual cases of economic hardship or unemployment so that they are unlikely to be drawn back into violent extremism.

99. Central to any new policy, counter narrative or deradicalisation programme should be a strategy that attempts at the reorientation of emotions – one seeking to redirect feelings of love and hate towards specific in and out groups (Berger 2018). The role of emotions associated with in and out groups is often overlooked in policy and programmes. Love of the ingroup and hate of the outgroup are powerful emotional drivers for the sustainability of an individual's commitment to the cause. This research uncovered compelling evidence of a paucity of unifying love within terrorist organisations resulting in widespread disillusion of their members, mass desertions by their fighters and a precipitous decay in their power. That information needs to be more widely shared to expose the contradictions between the extremists' championing of Muslim identity and their cheating Muslims of their theology, security and success. Any deradicalisation programme must, therefore, attempt to redefine the ingroup and outgroup identities within the minds of the former FTF. It must also attempt to reframe perceived crisis environments affecting Muslims or provide an alternative solution to them. Current deradicalisation programmes do not appear to directly adopt this approach. At the very least, any counter or alternative narrative initiative should aim to redirect the emotions of love and hate, as well as provide a credible alternative way of addressing perceived crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

100. The following recommendations are made:

Government institutions:

100.1. The state should consider creating employment opportunities in rural areas in order to reduce the pressure for migration, which impacts the upbringing and education of young people. (para 26-30).

100.2. The overdue review of the national education system should include a preventative role through the introduction of critical thinking skills, especially discrimination between reliable and unreliable information on the Internet. (para 22).

100.3. Reform of state institutions, especially the judicial sector and the police should be considered to reduce the impact of discrimination and corruption on citizens. (para 47, 49, 63 & 69).

100.4. The government and media should note that news of alleged atrocities can be interpreted as a crisis in the minds of vulnerable individuals and can be exploited by extremists to recruit and radicalise them. Wherever possible, a positive state level response should be articulated in order to minimise the void that might be filled by extremist interpretations of events. (para 90).

100.5. Civil society and the state's security services and legal system should improve the relationship to one of mutual trust and interdependence.

100.6. The impact of corruption, particularly the use of torture in investigations, in the law enforcement system should be understood and addressed as a security threat rather than only as a human right issue. (para 68, 71-72).

100.7. Training and education should be provided to police and security services to help them conduct interrogations more effectively, without the use of torture, to better detect extremist networks and assist with countering violent extremism and prevention policies and procedures.

100.8. The state should iterate sustainable deradicalisation and reintegration policies as an integral part of its counter terrorism and extremism strategy with an approach that prioritises the reorientation of perceived in and out groups, as well as the associated emotions of love and hate. (para 99).

100.9. This strategy should take account of these research findings which indicate that families and social networks are influential in both radicalisation and deradicalisation. It should also consider the role of friendships in reducing vulnerability to radicalisation. (para 68, 75, 77).

100.10. A clinical assessment of the trauma experienced by FTF should be carried out and psychological support provided to them during their deradicalisation and reintegration into society. This support should also be provided to families, where needed. (para 61-61).

100.11. Violent and non-violent extremists should be separated in prison to avoid further radicalisation towards violence and network development. Additionally, a range of productive activities should be provided for prisoners to prevent them from focusing on their grievances, learning about violent conflict or militant politics as well as to provide skills that may better reintegrate them into society. (para 73-76).

100.12. The government should use the issue of radicalisation hotspots and associated ideologues identified by this research as a case study to review other parts of the country to identify similar hotspots that might be in the process of emergence or may develop in the future. (para 44-46, 87).

DDR/PCVE actors (including government and media)

100.13. Deradicalisation and reintegration programmes should be tailored to the individual by allocating time and resources to assessing the particular vulnerabilities, motives and circumstances that radicalised each FTF. (para 81, 98).

100.14. Rehabilitation programmes should provide safe and acceptable alternative ways to satisfy the motivations that inspired the FTF to go to Syria. For example, the desire to help those in need, a sense of belonging, adventure etc. (para 35-38).

100.15. Counter narratives or alternative narratives should be constructed and deployed which aim to reorientate FTF's desire to make a positive difference. Narratives should exploit the appeal of, and responsibility to, the family, especially exploiting the strong image of the mother. (para 77).

100.16. The DDR/PVE actors are suggested to commission a film, based on the stories of FTF (see case studies) and their families, to highlight the factors that led to them being recruited and those which caused them to become disillusioned with the reality of their experience (para 77).

100.17. The media should critically examine the political response but avoid influencing the public debate with its own views (para 90).

Religious organizations:

100.18. Mainstream religious leaders should be challenged to provide a narrative on a righteous response to an environment where corruption and poor socio-economic prospects exist, as an alternative to the extremists' mythical sharia and caliphate option. (para 88).

100.19. Mainstream Muslim leaders should be required to address the spread of hatred of other sects and religions. They should not promote the concept of apostasy which is increasingly used to justify the killing of fellow Muslims, through creating divisions based on theological differences. (para 79).

100.20. Mainstream Muslim leadership should aim to establish its credibility with all sections of Islamic beliefs. In particular, it should be seen as being independent of the country's political system and should accept its religious responsibility to prevent fitna (discord) by working actively to stop claims of apostasy by one group against another. (para 66).

International organizations:

100.21. The international community commissions research into the covert techniques adopted by terrorist organisations' exploitation of migrant workers, particularly in lesser-known countries such as South Korea. (para 51-52, 86).

100.22. The government and the international community should consider if the geopolitics of the Syria conflict should be explored and if states and corporations are accountable for any exploitation of terrorism for foreign policy or for economic benefit. (para 34, 60).

100.23. Detailed research should be conducted to identify the videos which prisoners claim to have influenced them, to better understand their propagandist and radicalising nature and to develop methods to counter them as well as to determine if there is support for the hypothesis that they were part of a coordinated international disinformation campaign. (paras 34, 39-41).

ANNEX A – LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon

FTF is an old phenomenon that has recently been conceptualised with the challenges presented by Jihadist groups in the Iraqi and Syrian wars. FTF in general are acknowledged as those "who have travelled from their home states to other states to participate in or support terrorist acts, including in the context of armed conflict" (OSCE, 2018, p.3). UN Resolution 2178 (UNSC, 2014) produced a definition considered vague by some, while a clearer and briefer definition was proposed by the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (2014) by avoiding the word 'terrorist,' and using the foreign fighter term instead. In literature, the FTF term has become diversified and is either represented by terms such as foreign fighters, foreign rebel fighters and foreign jihadist fighters or occasionally by terminologies such as 'transnational rebels' and 'transnational insurgents' (Salehyan, 2006) or 'transnational communities' and 'transnational Jihadists' (Malet, 2013).

The foreign fighter concept can also be designated to an individual who is a foreigner and supports a conflict without being an active member of the group involved. Perliger and Milton (2016), for instance, identify the qualifying struggle by different characteristics (p.4) including "a nationalistic dimension," a civil war or violence "restricted to a specific territory." For others (Cilluffo, Cozzens, & Ranstorp, 2010), the FTF concept is interchangeable with Western Foreign fighter, as both terms refer to "violent extremists who leave their Western states of residence with the aspiration to train or take up arms against non-Muslim factions in Jihadi conflict zones" (p.3). Similarly, Hegghammer (2013) stated a "foreign fighter is someone who leaves or tries to leave the West to fight somewhere" (p.1) connecting the term with being a Western citizen. Jihadist organizations prefer Western fighters recruits because that allows their message to be better heard in Western media and because "[f]oreign fighters draw attention in ways that indigenous people cannot...and serve to globalize local conflicts and promote Jihadist narrative" (Cilluffo et al., 2010, p.2). However, the general characteristics tend to be their recruitment by non-state organisations and non-affiliation with the regular armies of a state, rather than having Western citizenship.

In general terms, definitions are produced by national and international organisations in support of legal instruments designed to mitigate the perceived threat posed by these individuals. They are also produced by academics in order to identify relevant individuals for their studies. Definitions rely on individuals' identities both in terms of their origin and destination. They further account for their motivations and potential roles in any intended conflict situation. As this research is based on a pre-selected group of individuals convicted under laws associated with FTF and because some protest their innocence, a simplified but specific definition will be used. For the purposes of this research, an FTF is a citizen of Kyrgyzstan and is believed to have attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq to support or join a terrorist movement.

Motivations and Radicalisation

Moore (2015) notes that the existing literature categorisation of "foreign fighter is often used in a general and ubiquitous way, sometimes clouding the complicated nature of activism." This tension, between encapsulating the general need for definitions and exposing complexity through analysis is in itself a ubiquitous problem of social science. The complexity, he points out, can be mitigated by exploring concepts and ideas such as the lifecycle of 'foreign fighters,' mobilisation, activism, and disengagement and how these may expose social factors such as relatedness or 'fictive kinship.' The UN classification differentiates FTF from mercenaries and employees of private military companies as they are usually recruited by governments or fight for financial incentives (UNSC, 2015).

With several motivations and despite a lack of material incentives, the numbers of FTF going to Syria and Iraq evoked international concern (OSCE, 2018). Both countries have different jihadist groups which recruit foreign fighters from all continents. They include the self-proclaimed Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra. Other groups involved include "the Free Syrian Army, Kurdish groups, and groups and militias fighting on the side of the Assad regime." These groups "have also attracted foreign fighters, primarily Shias from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan" (Bakker & Singleton, 2016, p.10) as well as individuals from Western countries, mostly in support of Kurdish groups.

Methodological and Theoretical Perspective

Academic literature on FTF in the context of the conflict in Syria and Iraq is still at an early stage, since obtaining information from primary sources remains challenging for reasons such as security, time, resources, access, availability of interviewees, etc. In Western literature, research is conducted mostly using two techniques: interview-based research and data collection from official sources (OSINT, or open source intelligence) or information provided by journalists. Research conducted by Venhaus (2010), Nasritdinov et al. (2019) and Stern (2010) is based on interviews and is accepted as a primary source. Gustafsson and Ranstorp (2017), Paulussen et al. (2017), Moore (2015) and Nilsson (2015) used secondary sources based on open source datasets that focus on individuals' travel over a specific time period, or other variables that explain individuals' tendency to become violent extremists. Most studies that rely on first-hand information are based on small numbers and have limitations owing to:

- Difficulties in acquiring research participants from within the conflict zone (particularly where IS are concerned);
- Restrictions imposed by ongoing criminal investigations and privacy regulations; and,
- The inaccessibility of returnee participants due to, inter alia, a fear of self-incrimination (Scherrer, Isaksson, Ragazzi, & Walmsley, 2018).

To compensate for these difficulties associated with interviewing FTF, the internet has become a key tool. However, this research has direct access to former FTF, and therefore an interview-based approach will be used. There is no commonly agreed methodology on how to interview FTF. UNODC (2018) manual guideline recommends using interviews either post-arrest, or when an appropriate risk of disclosure to the subject versus benefit of conducting the interview is reached. Yet, as Silke (2003) mentioned, in order to understand the fighters' psychological motivation and their mental health at the point of becoming a violent extremist, direct contacts and experience with terrorists seems to provide genuine results. Hence, interview-based research is acknowledged as more accurate and should adhere to domestic legal rules of interviews prior to commencing (UNODC, 2018, p. 57). The major hurdle in obtaining information from former FTF interviewees is their reluctance to speak and a desire to avoid sharing the truth. Researchers (Alison, Alison, Noone, Elntib, & Christiansen, 2013) have developed practices for interviewing terrorists that aim to mitigate these difficulties and information from them has informed the methodology of this research.

Life Cycle of FTF and 'Pull and Push' Factors

An understanding of the FTF phenomenon requires an understanding of the concepts of radicalisation, violent extremism, terrorism and pull and push factors, which help to explain how an individual may become a violent extremist or terrorist. The overall life cycle can be considered in three stages: radicalisation and becoming a violent extremist; mobilisation and related theories that explain motives; deradicalisation and the return of the individual and their reintegration. This approach has close connections with Horgan's (2008) three-stage process model: becoming involved, being involved and disengaging.

Stage I: Radicalisation into Violent Extremism

Literature indicates no universally agreed definition of radicalisation into violent extremism in either academia or in governments. One thing commonly accepted is that radicalisation "may not necessarily lead to violence but is one of several risk factors required for this" (J. G. Horgan, 2009, p. 52). As Sedgwick (2010) concludes, the term can be defined within three areas: the security context, the integration context, and the foreign-policy context. The conflation of radicalisation with violent extremism (Borum, 2011a; Odorfer, 2015) has been reconceptualised after the 9/11 attacks. According to Odorfer (2015), radicalisation discourse was used to refer to liberal, anti-clerical and pro-democratic progressive political stances before 9/11. After that, the concept tends to be applied in the opposite direction to anti-liberal, fundamentalist, anti-democratic and regressive views, and is more related to violent extremism. Borum (2011a) also associates radicalisation with violent extremism and designates 'radicalisation into violent extremism (RVE)' as "the processes by which people come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it, and how they progress—or not—from thinking to action" (p.8). J. G. Horgan (2009) defines radicalisation with violence and ascribes 'violent extremism' as increased and focused radicalisation through involvement with a violent non-state movement. He indicates phases for violent radicalisation (p. 152) as becoming involved with a terrorist group and remaining involved and engaging in terrorist activity.

According to Aly and Striegher (2012), the "lack of conceptual distinction between what are considered radical values and violent behaviour has yielded an approach that defines certain sections of Muslim communities (most notably young Muslim men) as vulnerable to radicalisation and attempts to address this vulnerability through targeted programmes" (p. 850). For instance, after the Madrid bombing of 11 March 2004, both in the EU Commission Reports 2005 (Commission, 2005) and

2008 (Alonso et al., 2008), the EU used the term radicalisation along with violence and coined it as 'violent radicalisation' which involves embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.

Based on the analysis of multiple violent extremist groups with different ideologies, Borum (2011b) tried to discern the common factors in radicalisation or how vulnerabilities turn into an emotion of hatred. He models a four-fold process: Grievance (It is not right) related to dissatisfaction; then turns out the feeling of injustice (It is not fair); injustice is blamed on a target policy or person (It is your fault) and the target person is devaluated (You are an evil person). Two salient approaches related to radicalisation, the psychological context and social movement context are considered significant in further understanding violent extremism.

Psychological Context

Psychological studies have tended to explore two related, but distinct aspects of individuals involved with violent extremism and terrorism: their motivational factors and the degree of normality of their personality. The general approach to radicalised people assumed a lack of empathy by crazed fanatic psychopaths who enjoyed the suffering and torturing of their innocent victims. In some studies, extremism is elaborated as "a consequence of a motivational imbalance: the tendency of individuals to privilege one need at the expense of others" (Kruglanski et al., 2018, p.108). For many years psychologists, particularly 1970s scholars, believed that radicalised and extremist people were mentally ill and more likely suffering from personality disorders of an antisocial character stemming from a damaged childhood (Silke, 2003). Their research was based on limited samples and the idea that marginalised terrorists are deviants is not supported by recent decades of scientific research (Silke, 2003), and "the evidence for normality for various reasons and developments in the context of alternative explanations for abnormal behaviour" (J. Horgan, 2003, p.16) has recently become predominant.

Six root causes of radicalisation to terrorists are offered by J. Horgan (2008) (p. 84-85). These factors provide a framework to designate 'openness to socialization into terrorism':

1.1. Some emotional vulnerability, in terms of feelings of anger, alienation and disenfranchisement

1.2. Dissatisfaction with current activity, whether political or social protest, and the perception that conventional activity does not work or produce results

1.3. Identification with victims, either real, in terms of personal victimization (e.g., by the military or police), or less tangible

1.4. The belief that engaging in violence against the state or its symbols is not immoral. This belief is held at the point of engaging in terrorism.

1.5. A sense of reward by "being in this movement." All suicide bombers, across the world, have one thing in common. They believe that they will achieve 'more' in death than they ever could in life, such as becoming a hero.

1.6. Finally, kinship or other social ties to those experiencing similar issues, or already involved, are crucial.

Kruglanski et al. (2018), on the other hand, use 'significant quest theory' to argue that radicalisation into violent extremism involves three basic ingredients: the need, the narrative, and the network. The 'need,' differs from basic livelihood needs and refers to the desire to gain respect, competence, esteem etc. For instance, "when individuals experience a loss of significance, or even the threat of such a loss — they are motivated to seek ways to restore their significance" (p. 109). Second, the 'narrative' refers that "[i]n the context of political extremism, an ideological narrative fulfils this function by describing a collective cause that can earn an individual the significance they desire" (p. 109). Hence, that narrative can justify the meaning of the violence. The third one, 'network,' refers to the group of (likeminded) people who gather under the same narrative and shared norms. This contributes to the radicalisation of an individual in two ways: "(a) contact with such network makes a violence justifying narrative cognitively accessible to a person, and (b) the network's support for the narrative validates it and serves as proof of its veracity and soundness" (p. 110).

However, in opposition to Silke (2003), Horgan (2003; 2008) and Kruglanski et al. (2018), Paulussen et al. (2017) argue in their research that some of the radicalised FTF do suffer from mental illnesses. Their arguments cite mental health care providers in the Netherlands who compared 300 police records of jihadi individuals with their own medical files. The "figures indicate that 60% of suspected jihadi radicals indeed had a history of mental health issues, which, as explained, ranges from psycho-social problems to psychiatric disorders" (p. 7). Another common point of the Jihadists, according to this research, is that about a third of them have an absent or abusive (immigrant) father and "some radicalised jihadists, pointing to characteristics such as low self-esteem, need for self-aggrandisement, abnormally high level of aggression, and dysfunctional conscience" (p. 12-13). In terms of risk factors, the research indicates that possible "psychotic disorder or psychotic experiences are: ethnic minority status; urban upbringing; low IQ; childhood trauma; and substance abuse" (p. 13).

The apparent contradiction between these otherwise credible research outcomes demands some form of resolution. It is likely that there is a difference in psychology between terrorists who are in positions of influence and leadership and those who are mere foot soldiers. Studies conducted into madrasah radicalisation in Pakistan indicate that terrorist leaders prefer to indoctrinate young men with particular psychological needs and world views in order to ensure their compliance in demanding missions such as suicide bombing. As the numbers radicalised have grown in recent years, it is likely that radical leaders and ideologues have tended to target and recruit individuals with psychological vulnerabilities.

The research also identifies the typology of violent extremists under four types: Identity Seekers; Justice Seekers; Significance Seekers; Sensation Seekers. Before Paulussen et al. (2017) research that reflects the potential psychological reasons of participation in jihadist extremist groups, Venhaus (2010) has also indicated a more comprehensive, but similar conclusion by identifying each person's motivations and world view. In order to explore why young men seek violent extremism; interviews were held with 2,032 foreign fighters to get their personal histories. The research identifies four seeker types: revenge seekers (looking for an outlet for frustration), status seekers (looking for recognition), identity seekers (looking for a place to belong), and thrill seekers (looking for adventure). Hence, he concludes that instead of marginalising Muslim society in the West, it is important to produce communication-based solutions to answer these needs; because in both research 'identity seeking' is the common point that needs attention as to why these radicalised Muslims in society feel identity-based marginalisation.

Stage II: Causes of Radicalisation into Violent Extremism

Terrorist groups are heterogeneous. The pull and push factors that prompt indivi-

duals to join them represent different motivations. The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism Report's (2015), which is based on qualitative interview researches, described these as:

- Push factors are "conducive to violent extremism and the structural context from which it emerges" (p. 7). These factors are interwoven with poor governance, weak state institutions and resource shortages.
- Pull factors are "the individual motivations and processes, which play a key role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremist action" (p.7). These factors aim to identify personal context and predispositions such as "rudimentary literacy levels and almost no religious knowledge" (p. 9). It is assumed that such factors make individuals vulnerable to indoctrination and influence of violent ideas.

Push factors are grouped by considering contextual conditions and structural root causes of terrorism that drive people towards violence and include, for example, state repression, relative deprivation, poverty, and injustice. Push factors are the root causes of pull factors, which capture the aspects that make extremist groups and lifestyles appealing to some people. These include, for example, ideology, group belonging, group mechanisms, and other incentives (Vergani et al., 2018). These factors and personality factors are interrelated.

Material motivation approaches attempt to identify reasons that trigger individuals to join violent groups through a correlation between human and material capital. These theorists believe that poverty is connected to illegal activity. For instance, Vergani et al. (2018), express that in their 116 articles-based pull and push factors research, 'poverty' is defined as one of the prominent push factors for radicalisation into violent extremism and especially those which "look at radicalisation in Africa" (p.9). Unemployment is identified as the second important factor because it can lead to "frustration that triggers individual's anger" and it can lead to "more free time and more practical availability to recruitment into violent extremism" (p. 9). Education is also frequently cited as a pull factor. It seems to be a contentious factor because, according to Vergani et al. (2018), individuals with lower levels of education are associated with less sophisticated and more black-and-white world views. However, most research cited finds a positive correlation between education and radicalisation.

An example of such research is the Jelil et al. (2018) study based on micro-empirical evidence contained in the information on 3,965 foreign recruits to ISIS. These were personnel records leaked to journalists (Sky News 2016, CNN 2016, Zaman Al Wasl 2016) and included the recruits' age, education, country of residence, and self-reported knowledge of Islam. Findings reveal that higher unemployment rates are a push factor toward radicalisation, especially in countries close to Syria, suggesting that domestic socioeconomic policies may have an impact on global security. Another finding contradicts Vergani et al. (2018). Recruits have higher levels of education than average for men in their country of origin. Furthermore, this higher level of secular education is associated with lower levels of religious knowledge.

Krueger and Malečková (2003), Benmelech and Klor (2018) argue that there is a negative correlation between recruits' resources and the tendency to join violent extremist groups. The methodology they used is based on discussion focus, literature review and hate crime as a case study. According to Krueger and Malečková (2003), members of Hezbollah's militant wing or Palestinian suicide bombers are at least as likely to come from economically advantaged families and have a relatively high level

of education. They concluded that participation in political violence is unrelated, or even positively related to individuals' income and education, hence educated people from privileged backgrounds are equally likely to participate in politics, including terrorism since it is a form of politics.

Another traditional approach is to explore ideological factors. Benmelech and Klor (2018) cannot directly determine why people join ISIS, yet they come to the conclusion that instead of economic or political conditions, foreign fighters join ISIS because of ideology, accentuated by the difficulty of assimilation into homogenous Western countries. Ideology and identity play crucial roles in an individual's tendency to join a terrorist group. Strong and early familiarity with the ideological principles of the groups, which could happen through indoctrination, and affinity with the values and norms of the groups from within the family might be a catalyst in influencing individuals to join. Hegghammer (2006), analysing 240 biographies of Saudi militants, revealed that "[a]lthough unemployment was probably a factor, the primacy of politics and ideology over socioeconomic factors seems to apply to radicalization processes in Saudi Arabia" (p.53). Ideological motivation is derived from emotional connection to a specific set of norms and practices, and allows the individual to relate their personal experiences to the group's goals and ideological framework (Perliger & Milton, 2016). However, Stern (2010) notes from her visits to rehabilitation centres for returning FTF that the main motivation often arises in reaction to injustice, real or imagined that needs to be corrected: "[y]et ideology is rarely the only, or even the most important, factor in an individual's decision to join the cause" (p. 98). These diverse views may in part be resolved by the different definitions of ideology held by the relevant researchers.

There are some non-traditional explanations of pull and push factors. For instance, in Paulussen et al. (2017) research on Dutch FTF mostly concentrated on domestic personal factors. They argued that "departure from the Netherlands to join jihadi movements should be understood more in terms of trying to run away from their problems at home as the push factors, rather than being drawn to the conflict as the pull factors" (p.8). Moore (2015) investigating Caucasus foreign fighters' motivation to join a terrorist group found that participation in external conflicts is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon based on social networks operating and "the process of activism engenders the formation of new forms of 'relatedness' and 'fictive kin'" (p. 411). In a similar vein, Nilsson (2015) finds that socialisation with global jihadists is one of the instruments used by terrorist groups in recruiting Swedish foreign fighters. Likewise, Nillson, Gustafsson and Ranstorp (2017) examined a set of variables in the foreign fighters who travelled from Sweden to join jihadi terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq between June 2012 and September 2016. They argue that among these 267 people, who are or have been residents of Sweden, there is no common socio-psychological profile. Nonetheless, the causes and motivations of European foreign fighters to join IS have been both multiple and complex. Successful recruitment has not only been influenced by personal circumstance but also by specific local social intersecting contexts such as socio-psychological; social; political; religious-ideological; and identity issues, all of which can create multiple combination and sequences of pull and push factors.

Silke (2003) puts another factor forward and argues that "it is the combined impact of a number of factors that pushes and pulls someone into becoming a terrorist, and these factors will vary depending on the culture, social context, terrorist group and individual involved" (p. 34). According to him, there are six interwoven factors that drive an individual into terrorism:

- *Biological Factors* are mostly seen in young males who are enthusiastic to join deviant activities to satisfy higher levels of impulsivity and gain confidence
- *Status and Personal Rewards* are a motivation for some because they do not see the organisations as 'terrorist' groups but instead perceive it as 'freedom fighters,' 'rebels,' 'the resistance,' etc. (p. 45)
- *Press-Ganging and Conscription* as a factor stresses how terrorist groups induce individuals to get involved with their community. Two approaches are given: one is highly active in identifying potential recruits and enticing new members with rewards and benefits of joining; the other one is more passive in approach.
- *Social Identification and Marginalisation* can be described as belonging problems. Individuals may need to share their aims, grievances and ambitions. If the terrorist group share similar family background and ethnic motivations with an individual, then this may trigger them to be recruited. Thus, feeling marginalised by mainstream society can drive individuals into particular terrorist groups.
- *Psychology of Vengeance.* A desire for revenge has long been recognised as a key motivation for joining a terrorist organisation. Such individuals feel it necessary to right a perceived injustice, restore their self-worth and to deter future injustices.
- *Opportunity'* is an often-overlooked factor. Individuals wishing to join a terrorist group may find it hard to do so because that act is usually illegal and because groups are highly suspicious that some of those wanting to join may be agents of intelligence organisations. Lack of opportunity might explain why many radicalised individuals do not mobilise into violent action and also why some become known as "lone wolf" terrorists.

Radicalisation can, therefore, be understood through research and theories applied to various contexts including psychological, political, social and material. All of these provide a variety of perspectives, some of which appear conflicting. Collectively, these both enrich and complicate understanding. The diversity and contradiction in research findings, such as those related to education, poverty and other material factors, has not yet been resolved. This research is intended to add to the debate by exploring some of these factors within the data set identified in Kyrgyzstan.

Stage III: The Deradicalisation, Disengagement and Reintegration

The life cycle of an FTF is based on three evaluations: How a potential foreign fighter is radicalised before they join a terrorist group; how and why an FTF disengages from the group and returns home; and how to reintegrate and rehabilitate the ex-FTF. This research primarily attempts to explore the first of these phases and, if possible, will comment on the second. It only provides information that might help with the third of these phases. Deradicalisation, disengagement and reintegration are all dependent on understanding the process of radicalisation, which is the primary objective of this study.

Deradicalisation and Disengagement

Deradicalisation and disengagement are often used as interchangeable concepts by scholars (Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010; Clutterbuck, 2015). While deradicalisation is "the process of changing an individual's belief system, rejecting the extremist ideology, and embracing mainstream values" (Rabasa et al., 2010; p. 1); disengagement is usually understood as the cessation of action only. Deradicalisation also refers to methods used to undermine the process of radicalisation. In that particular context, deradicalisation occurs before an individual would have been radicalised but in most contexts, deradicalisation is assumed to occur afterwards. Disengagement is the process by which an individual's behaviour is changed by withdrawing from a radical organisation.

Deradicalisation programmes "must be adaptive and tailored" (Bertram, 2015, p. 126) and to be effective they must consider ideological and psychological factors as well as "the interplay between" them (Dechesne & De Roon, 2013, p. 90, p.90). They further observe that social factors should be addressed in shaping deradicalisation policies to prevent those factors from reactivating the conditions and motivations that led to radicalisation in the first place. For example, it is important to address unemployment or deprivation. Governments may establish rehabilitation and job training or career counselling centres as a strategy. These are as important as religious re-education (Stern, 2010), which is mostly carried out in some Muslim societies like Yemen. The findings of this research will hopefully inform and reform future deradicalisation activities in Kyrgyzstan.

The Extremist Mindset

While FTF can have a variety of mindsets and ideologies, they are all extremists and so their world view has some common components. These include the concept of ingroups and outgroups; the idea of a crisis environment, often posing as an existential threat to the ingroup or its interests (Berger, 2018). These elements are important components of narratives used during the recruitment and radicalisation of potential candidates. They frame the ideological vision through which the FTF perceives the conflict and determines the extent to which the FTF gains satisfaction from the fighting involved and attachment to the cause and the group. They also frame how the FTF perceives the crisis and the enemy. All of these perceptions are mediated through the emotions of love and hate (Brewer, 1999). It follows, therefore that to change perceptions about who constitutes either an ingroup or an outgroup would fundamentally require a reorientation of emotional responses. Deradicalisation and reintegration strategies tend to ignore this fundamental emotions-based approach.

Violent Extremism in Central Asia

The majority of existing research regarding FTF focuses on how 'Western' citizens are radicalised and fight in foreign lands. 'Eastern,' particularly Central Asian countries' citizens' participation in terrorist groups and their motivations are consequently overshadowed. In Central Asia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the word "extremism" is used within a securitised context and frequently, extremism is equated with terrorism. Many governments in the region view terrorism as a potential challenge to the state which might destabilise its political existence. Such internal agendas shape the definitions of extremism and terrorism. Lain (2016) summarises the diverse definitions of violent extremism and terrorism in Central Asian Countries (p. 387) as:

a. Kazakhstan's law defines terrorism as the "ideology of violence and the practice of influencing decisions adopted by state authorities, local autho-

rities or international organisations by enacting or threatening to enact violent and/or other criminal activity."

b. Turkmenistan condemns any act that is conducted with the "aim of seizing power and violent change in the country's constitutional order." It also adds to the definition the "creation of a situation of chaos or influencing a decision taken by the authorities."

c. Tajikistan has the widest definition. It condemns the use or threat of use of violence "committed with the intention of undermining public security, intimidating the population or influencing the decision making of ruling authorities." It also covers any attempt on the life of a state or social figure with the aim of "weakening the foundations of the constitutional order and state security."

d. Kyrgyzstan defines terrorism as action or the threat of action that could cause loss of life or material loss committed with the "aim of violating public security, intimidating the population or influencing the decisions of the authorities."

e. Uzbekistan emphasises acts that force the state to commit, or abstain from committing, an act, intimidate the population or destabilise the socio-political situation. It is the only state that defines this as taking place "in order to achieve political, religious, ideological or other aims."

With the exception of Uzbekistan, definitions and counter-terrorism laws do not tend to identify the religious context. Apart from legal sanctions, counter measures are based on government policy and civil society engagement options, in which case studies and life stories are counted as sources of evidence-based CVE policy development. Engagement of civil society with the authorities is the main approach to solution seeking. Hence, guidelines and manuals on CVE are published with the involvement of all sides. Among the Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan uses governmental and civil society coordination-based solution strategies. Young people convicted of crimes are placed under the guidance of a local mahalla (neighbourhood). This neighbourhood collaboration saves them from radicalisation in prisons and offers them a second chance (Zenn & Kuehnast, 2014). This approach has been extended to mosques, educational institutions, hospitals and other public institutions.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has a relatively high degree of religious freedom and religious diversity (Nasritdinov et al., 2019) but it is the leading Central Asian state in terms of both "total and per capita contributions of foreign fighters and travellers" (Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Esengul, 2017, p.2) to Syria and Iraq. Although the main groups radicalising people from Kyrgyzstan into violent extremism include ISIS (Speckhard et al., 2017, p. 7), most Kyrgyz FTF end up joining JN. These FTF are mostly from the Uzbek ethnic group (Tucker, 2016) who were marginalised during ethnic clashes in the 2010 South Kyrgyzstan revolution or those who moved to Russia as migrant workers (Elshimi et al., 2018). Kyrgyz migrants in Russia may have a tendency to join ISIS, with the internet providing a conduit for radicalisation.

Causes and motivations for the recruitment of Kyrgyz' citizens

While the Syrian conflict and ISIS threat is declining, discourse on the radicalisation of Kyrgyz' citizens remains active. International Crisis Group delivered an impactful publication on radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan (ICG, 2016) which claims that the failure of government to provide basic needs along with an absence of political pluralism has led to the popularisation of religious groups as an alternative. The report further claims that economically and socially marginalised ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan, with poor education, seem to be drawn to radical and imported versions of Islam. Uzbeks are particularly under-represented in politics and are not well-integrated into wider society, pushing them to adopt radical views. Women, when domestically abused and violated, are likely to find solace within extremist religion. Such women can be targeted by Islamist groups, and there have been cases where women have initiated the joining of extremist groups. Speckhard et al. (2017) suggest there should be a focus on the role of women in the radicalisation of Kyrgyz' citizens.

Research on pull and push factors in Kyrgyzstan is sparse. Existing studies highlight some areas of focus: socio-economic, weak state institutions, individual religious and personal incentives, family or partner pressure or attraction, as well as ethnic minority status. Financial deprivation (a wish to become rich, especially among Uzbek minorities in Kyrgyzstan) and socioeconomic problems are the main push factors that trigger participation in terrorist groups. Two important pull factors are religious belief (ideology) and belonging to a group. Nasritdinov et al. (2019) took the generally used pull and push factors in 'western literature' as a reference and conducted interviews with 1054 young Kyrgyz citizens, in order to reveal young people's vulnerability or resilience to radicalisation. They concentrated on six aspects that may play a role in radicalisation: Grievances and Perception of Justice, Politics, Religion, Socialization, and Psychology. The main observations were:

1. Young people who experienced discrimination and developed grievances are more vulnerable to radicalisation and are almost twice as likely to justify killing themselves and others for religious purposes (p. 17). They see the state as unjust and have experienced discrimination (p. 19). They are Salafi and Sulaimanchile[3] sympathisers who learned about religion from the Internet.
2. Instead of being active in official politics, young people have a tendency to engage in 'informal politics.' "Religion is an increasingly important part of politics" with approximately two thirds of young people declaring that they would, or might, vote for a candidate with strong religious views. (p. 20).
3. Almost half of the respondents surveyed did not sympathise with any specific Islamic group. Among the remainder, the most popular group was Tablighi Jamaat (16%); all other groups received little following (2-5%).
4. Research reveals that two groups of young people are more vulnerable: those who have fewer friends and feel lonelier and more isolated; and those who have frequently experienced conflicts. Both groups call for a radical change to the political system, perceive their society as less just, and often think of avenging others (p. 26).
5. People with lower scores on life satisfaction, and higher scores on aggression are more vulnerable, since radicalisation is often seen as a response to circumstances that make a person unhappy (p. 27).

3 Followers of Suleyman Hilmi Tunahan, a Sufi preacher, who opposed the secularisation of Turkey by Ata Turk and became the leader of the second largest Islamic group in Turkey.

Lack of economic opportunities

Some researchers (Lynch, Bouffard, King, & Vickowski, 2016) claim that poor economic conditions and lack of opportunities make Kyrgyz' citizens an easy target for recruiters. These economic prospects lead to the migration of Kyrgyz' citizens to Russia, and while working there in poor conditions, they are recruited by ISIS and the al-Nusra Front (Elshimi et al., 2018). Separated from their homeland environment, migrant workers in Russian "might become socially alienated and more susceptible to radicalisation and … recruitment" (Lynch et al., 2016, p. 42).

Gender patterns of recruitment

The predominant view that only males are normally radicalised "may be evidence of a lack of research and engagement surrounding the role of women in radicalisation" (Odorfer, 2015, p.14). Some organisations, such as the HT, specifically target Kyrgyz women. The movement's leaders believe Central Asian women have a strong influence over their families and can easily convince their children and relatives to join. Women are seen as "less likely to be suspected of spreading extremist messaging and can substitute for husbands" (Zenn & Kuehnast, 2014, p.6) who may be labouring in Russia or are imprisoned. Others claim that "domestic violence, second unofficial marriage, infidelity of husbands and the financial dependency of women contribute to making such women acquiescent to recruitment by their spouses" (Speckhard et al., 2017)p. 14).

Weak government institutions and services

The initial wave of recruitment targeted South Kyrgyzstan where mostly Uzbeks reside, "many of whom feel blocked from participation in government employment" (Speckhard et al., 2017, p.7) and who are poorly integrated. The inability of the government at that time to provide basic 'deradicalisation' services, contributes to the creation of recruitment opportunities. For instance, Speckhard et al. (2017) assumes that "open government policies in Kyrgyzstan might contribute to ideologies and groups to freely enter the Kyrgyz dialogue and provide fertile ground for recruitment" (p. 14). The security services, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are considered ill equipped to track IS supporters (ICG, 2016). Degradation of public education leading to "under-education and ignorance are key factors" that enable leaders to "manipulate and recruit" (Zenn & Kuehnast, 2014, p.8).

Weak narratives of traditional Islam vs non-traditional.

Since 2010, HT has been active in recruiting majority ethnic Kyrgyz from northern Kyrgyzstan. The growing numbers of 'Wahhabists' in Kyrgyzstan are often youth who are recruited in the hundreds of unregulated Pakistani and Middle Eastern funded madrassas in the country. or who receive scholarships for religious training abroad in South Asia or the Middle East and return home. There is a widespread belief that these madrasas carry a hidden agenda to teach extremist ideology and facilitate recruits' transport and entry to Syria.

Measures for preventing violent extremism

In CIS countries legal definition of radicalisation is generally not the issue, but restrictions, arrests and convictions often occur without "evidence, backing such claims of religious extremism or terrorism" (Lain, 2016, p. 386). H. Human Rights Watch (2018), noted that the Kyrgyz government convicted hundreds of people for possessing videos, pamphlets, and books that it banned using a dangerously overbroad definition of extremism. People were sentenced even if they did not distribute the material or use it to incite violence. Under Kyrgyzstan's law, prosecutions for possessing extremist material is carried out under Article 299-2 of the Criminal Code, which is the most widely applied charge against terrorism and extremism suspects. Although Parliament has approved amendments, they have not changed Article 299-2's reliance on overbroad definitions in Kyrgyzstan's 2005 Law on Countering Extremist Activity. Government capacity in areas associated with deradicalisation, such as "conflict prevention measures in province development plans" (Odorfer, 2015, p.17) is being strengthened through initiatives like the UNDP's Peace and Development Programme (UNDP, 2015).

Kyrgyzstan's challenge of returning and relocating FTF

To some extent, Kyrgyzstan's experience of returning FTF can be assessed with that of the EU. CTED and the European Parliament have identified several challenges that states face from returning and relocating FTF. These include the fact that the situation and location of a significant number is unknown, many pose a potentially serious security threat and dealing with their wives and children can be problematic. Governments need to provide policies, capabilities and facilities to deal with FTF returnees. These include policies related to the prevention of radicalisation, criminal justice responses, disengagement and deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes, both inside and outside prisons for convicted individuals (Scherrer et al., 2018, p.5).

The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (Zhirukhina, 2019) also notes that Kyrgyzstan developed a protective policy regarding FTF and returnees. Article 50 (2) of the Constitution amended in 2016 allows FTF to be deprived of citizenship for terrorism-related crimes. Society and government are not ready to accept FTF back due to security concerns. In addition, the rehabilitation of returnees requires a significant financial commitment. For example, Australian security services estimated that it would cost the equivalent of $7.4 million per year to monitor one returnee (CTED, 2018a, p.8). Except for Kazakhstan, other Central Asian states do not have rehabilitation centres. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan has joined the repatriation trend. In cooperation with the Iraqi government, it has identified its citizens detained in Iraq and has made similar efforts in Syria with plans to rescue Kyrgyz children from Iraq.

Effectiveness counter and alternative narrative campaigns based on FTF life stories

Three types of counter-messaging frameworks or approaches are used to counter violent extremism: alternative narratives, counter-narratives, and government strategic communications. Alternative narratives promote a positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy and usually are initiated by the government or civil society. They are not intended to confront violent narratives, instead promote a faith-based form of citizen involvement and civic engagement among youth (Beutel et al., 2016, p.3). Governments' strategic communications are the efforts aimed at clarifying government policies and raising public awareness. These strategic communications and alternative narratives can be useful in the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism, but are less likely to reach audience segments that are seduced by extremist content.

In deconstructing the terrorist groups' narratives, properly constructed counter-narratives are most effective as they target the audience already captured by extremist content, demystifying messages, demonstrating lies, hypocrisy, and inconsistencies of terrorists (Beutel et al., 2016, p.3). In terms of constructing counter-narratives, four criteria have been identified by Braddock and Horgan (2016) as being of importance (p. 4):

- Revealing incongruities and contradictions in the terrorist narratives and how terrorists act
- Disrupting analogies between the target narrative and real-world events
- Disrupting binary themes of the group's ideology
- Advocating an alternative view of the terrorist narrative's target.

The relevance of Braddock and Horgan (2016)'s work to this research is in identifying possible a priori and post priori codes that might be used to analyse interviews with FTF prisoners for both wider analysis and potential use in future counter narrative work. The voices of disillusioned FTF are the most effective tool to discredit the motivations to join a terrorist group, at least in theory. However, challenges arise in using former FTF as many feel stressed about speaking of their experiences, do not trust law enforcement agencies, or suffer from mental health issues (Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Bodo, 2018, p.7). The International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism (Speckhard et al., 2018) worked out a new model for capturing the defectors' stories. Their two-year effort collected interviews of defectors and returnees from Western European and Balkans countries, imprisoned ISIS cadres in Iraq and Kyrgyzstan, and from Syrians ISIS cadres escaping into Turkey. The police in Kyrgyzstan have posted them on their website, used them in CVE prevention work, as have other NGOs, and claimed that this yielded positive results.

ANNEX B – METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research objectives were to:

1. Explore vulnerability to radicalisation leading to violent extremism among FTF with a focus on understanding radicalization and the appeal of terrorism.
2. Analyse pathways of radicalization leading to violent extremism including motivations and aspirations of FTF.
3. Provide guiding recommendations to prevent, reduce and stop processes of radicalisation that lead individuals towards violent extremism based on FTF case studies.

The outcomes were to represent potential global benefits, while the findings were to be particular to Kyrgyzstan but with wider resonance in Central Asia. They can be summarised as:

- *Outcome 1.* Increased knowledge among state and non-state institutions of FTF's drivers of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism and opportunities for deradicalisation.
- *Outcome 2.* Enhanced understanding among key stakeholders in the sand disengagement of FTF.
- *Outcome 3.* Enhanced understanding among key stakeholders of how to produce effective informational campaigns to counter radicalisation and assist with deradicalisation.
- *Outcome 4.* Contribution to CVE, deradicalisation and other counter-terrorism policies and actions through acceptance of research-based recommendations.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Of the many methods available, Grounded theory (GT) was chosen for this research. GT seeks to understand and explain human behaviour through inductive thinking processes (Elliott & Lazenbatt, 2005), and as a scientific methodology, it is fundamentally different from social research in the positivist tradition. In the traditional model, researchers formulate preliminary hypotheses based on existing theory. To a large extent, the literature review provides ample material for this. However, given that this research is based on a small sample size of in-depth individual interviews, and that most of the literature is based on Western experiences or studies, involving GT allows an element of exploration through its data analysis procedure known as theoretical coding to develop hypotheses based on what the participants in the study actually say.

In order to minimise any lack of cooperation on the part of interviewees and to maximise the reliability of the responses, an adaptation of the "observing rapport-based interpersonal techniques" (ORBIT) framework was used. This is a science-based methodology developed for counter-terrorism interviews (Alison, et al, 2014) and (Alison et al, 2015). ORBIT, combined with GT in face-to-face interviews and focus

groups, created a framework that has provided a reliable and validated theoretical basis for data collection and analysis.

Clusters and research sample

The research included the collection of information in three clusters: FTF prisoners, relatives and experts:

The primary cluster represented in-depth interviews with prisoners convicted under Article 375 of the Criminal Code (1997) *"Mercenarism"*, article 226-4 of the Criminal Code (1997) *"Participation of a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic in armed conflicts or hostilities on the territory of a foreign state or completion of terrorist and extremist training"* and Article 243 of the Criminal Code (2019) *"Participation of a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic in armed conflicts or hostilities on the territory of a foreign state or completion of terrorist and extremist training"*, which are voluntarily agreed upon. Interviews were conducted in Osh, Bishkek 47 and 27 detention facilities, the latter accounting for over 80% of the interviews conducted. A total of 38 interviews were conducted; on average, an interview took three hours and was conducted without the presence of anyone other than the prisoner and interviewer.

The secondary cluster included in-depth interviews with relatives or close circle of convicts from the first cluster. The preliminary assumption was that convicts who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study would agree to share the contacts of their relatives. Despite the confidentiality of the information received, a significant number of those interviewed refused to provide contacts, or these contacts were not valid. Prisoners justified their refusal on the grounds of the safety of their loved ones (according to the respondents, they are already under observation by law enforcement agencies), their unwillingness to cause additional emotional disturbance or suffering, and the absence of close relatives and friends in Kyrgyzstan. A total of three close relatives of the FTF convicts were interviewed, and a mother of one of these convicts refused to participate in the study. In order to compensate for the missing interviews in the second cluster, 17 interviews were conducted with relatives of those who had left for combat zones in the Middle East at different times. This 'self-selective' sample is likely to be representative of understanding the radicalisation of the FTF. However, it is not representative in understanding the potential for *de-radicalisation*, as the refusal of those who do not participate may indicate that these individuals lack trust in society and are unwilling to cooperate. Consequently, any information relating to deradicalisation obtained through a 'self-selective' sample may not apply to all FTF.

The third cluster focused on experts and practitioners from multidisciplinary areas to develop practical recommendations on further opportunities for more effective reintegration of FTF into society. This cluster did not include experts in CVE, but included organisations that focus on community engagement and resilience in order to understand local perceptions and attitudes towards FTF, problems and ways to overcome them: *youth and women* to understand the specifics of women's and youth reintegration, taking into account local traditions and context; groups to assist vulnerable people and victims of violence to examine the advantages and disadvantages of their rehabilitation and reintegration programmes and lessons learned that can be taken into account for reintegration and rehabilitation within the CVE framework; and social entrepreneurship and innovation groups to determine the extent to which members of these sectors are interested and willing to hire or interact with FTF. A total of eight community stakeholder experts were interviewed and, in addition to

the above-mentioned questions, they presented their understanding of the impact of external factors on radicalisation.

Categories of questions

The questions asked during interviews were constructed to identify any changes in attitudes and beliefs of the prisoners. In particular, the messages, arguments and experiences which had influenced these changes. The questions were developed according to the specific hypotheses formed for each category which included: background factors, purposeful propaganda, educational background, views on social justice, economic factors, psychological factors, religious (theological) arguments and practical actions. These categories gave rise to specific issues, some of which formed the a priori codes required for subsequent data analysis. These a priori codes were identified from a variety of sources, including literature review, adaptation of theories to research methodology, local specifics and professional judgment based on previous research experience with prisoners in Kyrgyzstan.

Data Collection Process

Data collection took place between September 2019 and September 2020 and owing to various circumstances, covered several phases described below.

- September-October 2019 - Pilot interviews with six prisoners in the Osh penal colony and 24 interviews in the north of the country in the city of Osh and the Chui Oblast
- October-December 2019 - Interviews with 15 relatives
- June-October 2020 - Interviews with nine prisoners, five relatives and eight experts.

The process of data collection became more complex and took longer than planned due to:

- During June-August 2019 the political situation in the country was unstable owing to a confrontation between former President Atambayev and Zheenbekov, which prevented access to prisons
- The prisoners did not want to share contact details of their relatives as either they did not want to bother them, create difficulties, or in some cases, keep in touch with them. The research team had to find alternative interviewees: relatives of other FTF in conflict zones.
- During the Covid-19 quarantine period between March and May 2020, all data collection activities had to be suspended
- Questions for the experts could only be formulated after all the data (including analysis of FTF and family interviews) had been collected. These were necessary to verify and clarify the findings of the study.
- A major political crisis arose in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020. The impact of this persisted for the rest of the year, making it difficult to conduct interviews with experts, and as a result they had to be postponed.

Interviews

Data was collected using questions to identify, as far as possible, the radicalisation of an individual and any experience of deradicalisation in chronological order. The interviews were conducted as follows:

- Introduction stage. The interview began with an introductory phase designed to establish mutual understanding. During this phase, the purpose of the survey was explained and any problems or issues that the respondent had encountered were addressed.
- Approach to interviewing. The interview followed the ORBIT approach. In particular, the five skills of "Global motivational interview" were used:

Acceptance: An unconditional positive attitude towards the prisoner (accepting their views, but not necessarily agreeing to them)

Empathy: The interviewer's ability to understand the interviewee's point of view

Adaptation: Adaptation to the interviewee's answers and management of the interview format

Advocacy: The ability to identify the beliefs and views of the interviewee

Autonomy: Encouraging and supporting the right of the interviewee to choose whether or not to disclose information

The sample size may be considered insufficient for a reliable quantitative analysis. However, this is a larger sample size than comparable FTF studies and leads to a good quality qualitative analysis, especially when enriched with the case study approach.

Description of Data Clusters

FTF Interviewed

Of the 38 prisoners interviewed, the average age of respondents was 29 years. The minimum age was 19 years, the maximum, being 47. The highest number of respondents were aged 25 years (15% of the total sample). The family status of respondents was as follows: 62% were married, 23% were single, and 15% were divorced.

Family Members Interviewed

The average age of the 20 family members of respondents interviewed was 51 years, the youngest was over 40 years old and the oldest, 73. An addition, 12 women and 8 men whose sons, wives, daughters and grandchildren left for Syria were interviewed, but most of them were not relatives of the FTF who were interviewed. Most of the respondents at the time of the interview were living in the south of the country.

Experts

A total of eight experts from different fields - business, psychology, specialists in the youth sphere, etc., were interviewed as part of the survey. As described in the methodological section, the research team initially aimed to talk to experts who did not specialise in violent extremism.

№	Full name	Type of activity
1	Akylai Karimova	Expert at the "Center for Support of International Protection"
2	Azhar Kasmalieva	Project manager at the "Youth Development Institute"
3	Daniyar Amanaliev	Founder, Ololo – a network of co-working spaces, entrepreneur
4	Dina Maslova	Journalist, founder of information portals "kaktus.media" and "kaktakto.com"
5	Tynchtykbek Bakytov	Psychologist, youth expert, coordinator of the youth wing of SDC (UNFPA)
6	Ulan Shabynov	UN Expert on peacebuilding
7	Ulan Usoyun	Civic activist, head of the youth organization "Kochmon" (Nomad)
8	Zhamilya Kaparova	Director of "Ensan Diamond" Crisis Center

ANNEX C – CASES STUDIES

All names in the cases studies were changed.

Rashid's Case Study

Background

Rashid was a 23-year-old Kyrgyz citizen of Uzbek ethnicity from a village in Osh province. At the time of the interview he had been detained at the GKNB facility for 20 days. Before this, he had been detained for seven months at a GKNB pre-trial detention facility. He was serving a three-year sentence, of which there was a year and 10 months left to serve, partly due to time already spent in detention and partly because he had been charged under another Article. Initially, he was prosecuted on extremism charges, but later he was also prosecuted on terrorism charges.

Family and Early Life

Rashid's parents divorced when he was a child and remarried. Both have new families, so he and his younger sister were brought up by their grandparents. His father is still alive, but Rashid has had no contact with him since he left. He resents his parents' divorce more than anything else. It is a painful subject and Rashid tells everyone that his uncle is his father. Although sensitive about it, he did not feel he was treated differently because of this situation and has now come to terms with it. He regularly communicates with his mother and she occasionally lives with him because her husband works in Russia. She travels two to three times per year to Russia to see him. The most important people to Rashid are his grandparents who live in Osh, and are effectively his parents.

As a child, he had his own books. His favourite fairy tale was the Three Brothers, an Uzbek fairy tale where the youngest brother was the hero and role model. Growing up, his grandparents provided positive examples and were a role model for him. Rashid noticed that there were good people and traditions around him. He did not experience any discrimination growing up in Osh city. Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations were good, and his friends were mostly Kyrgyz ethnics.

Rashid was educated in his village to the 10th grade and has good memories of that time. He was a member of a team entering 'wits and humour' competitions which it often won, and this made him excited and happy. After leaving school he went to work in construction. He felt that the social and medical services were sufficient, is satisfied with the way in which he lived his life and has not thought about changing anything in his past. His grandfather, and occasionally his mother, used to advise him a lot because, being the only son, he was spoiled, rowdy and often got into trouble. He now recognises the wisdom of that advice as he has now ended up in prison. His ambition had been to study and become a heart surgeon, but he was unable to study further because he travelled to South Korea for work when he was approximately 17-18 years old.

Religious Influences

Rashid developed what he believed to be a good understanding of religion through his tolerant family, especially his grandmother. He used to attend the village mosque where he was a regular at Friday prayers. He found the sermons interesting and thought all of them were good, but could not remember any because he was distracted by his own problems or found himself wondering when the prayer would end so that he could go home.

Rashid started learning to read the Quran after school with one of his uncles who was an imam in the village mosque. He remembers that the Quran class gave him the feeling that he knew more than others. He did not feel that anyone imposed obstacles in his desire to become religious and felt there was freedom of religion. The best role model for him is the Prophet.

Rashid used to see a preacher in a neighbouring village, Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov (also known as Abu Salah) from Sirozhiddin, who became a famous international terrorist leader. He had also been the imam of the mosque where Rashid had studied. Rashid believes Abu Salah studied in Syria, came to Kyrgyzstan to work as an imam for four or five months and then returned to Syria in 2011. Therefore, Abu Salah knew what was happening in Syria from the very beginning. He is believed to be in Syria where he is the Jabhat al Nusra's (JN) Amir (leader) for the Uzbek and Kyrgyz *jamaat* (group).

South Korea

Rashid had chosen to find work in South Korea as some of his friends had travelled there for work. He worked in a factory and managed to learn some Korean by attending language courses for about four months. He saw many mosques in South Korea maintained by the government. Some mosques were built by foreign countries and the imams were from South Korea, Turkey and Indonesia. Rashid could not understand the language of the sermons, so he used to pray with his friends. In the mosque he used to attend, the imam was Turkish, and Rashid was able to understand some Turkish.

There were no differences between his mosque in Kyrgyzstan and those in South Korea. The ways in which they prayed were also the same. Rashid did notice some differences in the sermons and these likely reflected the differences in the four *madhabs* (schools of thought) in Islam. However, he regarded all of them as being right. Turks, Kyrgyz, Indonesians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis would all go to the same mosque and sit together. Prayers were in English and sometimes in Korean. Despite being from different countries, they had good relationships. As well as followers of the Hanafi school, there were also followers of the Shafi school, mostly Indonesians.

Rashid learnt about the situation in Syria on social media while he was in South Korea. He cannot remember any specific reason for searching about this on the Internet, but on returning from work each day, browsing the mobile Internet was the only thing to do.

The hook for his involvement was the imam from his neighbouring village, Abu Salah. Rashid discovered him preaching on the Internet and started listening to him. In addition, he could watch the news about Syria on South Korean TV. This sparked his curiosity, especially during the active phase of war in 2016. Al-Qaeda was a popular topic of conversation amongst the South Koreans, and this interest led Rashid to search the Internet to find out more, eventually leading to his involvement. In the

main, Rashid got his information from YouTube. He knows that people were also using Instagram, but he doubted there was anything to find there.

Decision to 'Join'

In 2016, Rashid left for Syria as he wanted to help people there. He claimed to have only reached Turkey, but has been accused by Kyrgyz authorities of travelling to Syria and Iraq. He was influenced by a party of travellers who left his village with the leader of JN, who he stated persuaded him to go there. They told him that they wanted to help or to protect their religion: Muslims were being killed and tortured. Rashid felt that this group had both a good understanding and knowledge of religion.

Rashid was unable to explain why Kyrgyz citizens tend to travel to Syria while working in countries such as Russia or Turkey. His own experience while working in South Korea was of searching the Internet, repeatedly listening to things and then finding himself fully drawn in. From the various messages on the Internet encouraging people to join the fighting, the one which affected him most was when they would say "those who are abroad you just think about yourselves, you are behaving like women, take actions! Come here and help us or wear a hijab like women!" Rashid said he would feel 'offended' when he heard this and immediately wanted to go. However, the thought of crossing the border was a frightening one. The messages also said that those abroad should at least send money.

Rashid was aware of the news of terrible acts being carried out by terrorists in Syria. He had tried to compare these with the information he found on the Internet, but he found differences with their interpretation. Some blamed religion and showed Muslims in a negative light when they kill ordinary people. He had seen videos of beheadings and apparently random killings on You Tube and considered them to be very cruel. Abu Salah had stated that ISIS had not carried out such activities. Rashid was unsure whether this was true as he had never visited Syria, but had come across conflicting accounts on social media.

Before he left for Syria, Rashid wanted to be a hero just like the men he had seen in the videos. He thought his fear would disappear because there comes a point when there is nothing to be afraid of. He had been watching the video asking if he was a woman when he felt a sense of psychological inspiration and immediately bought the air ticket for Turkey from South Korea. At that time, he was not working but was planning to open his own business in South Korea. He had been watching these videos for approximately six to seven months before leaving for Syria. The decision to go to Turkey was entirely his own and no one tried to stop him.

Turkey

Rashid spent nine months in Turkey. Although he could not speak the language well, he managed to find employment within a factory. Once he decided against going to Syria, he could not return to South Korea because he had missed the time period within which he could re-enter that country. Unlike other men who travel to Syria, Rashid claims there was no one to meet him and guide him in Turkey. He had planned to cross the border using a map that showed gaps in the border fence where he could cross.

Rashid had never heard of ISIS until he was in Turkey. He had thought of ISIS and JN as a single entity. It was only when the representatives of the two organisations started to preach against each other that he realised they were different entities.

He found this adversarial preaching in the Uzbek language on the Internet using his mobile phone.

Decision to Return

Rashid spent his nine month stay in Turkey working in a factory. He did not visit the border area although he had considered doing so, but was concerned about what would happen to his family if he did cross the border to Syria. The thought of this immediately made him want to go back home. Rashid believes that most of those who did cross the border had better knowledge and understanding of religion than he had, despite his family being religious.

After Turkey

From Turkey, Rashid returned to Kyrgyzstan where he lived and worked in Osh for a year before his imprisonment. He had sent money to his grandparents from South Korea and spent some of that to buy land and build a house for himself. He started working in the construction business with his uncle who is a foreman, and had good relationships with his friends at that time.

Initially, the police came with a search warrant suspecting him of hiding weapons, but they did not find anything. However, later they found some videos of Abu Salah and some *Nasheeds* (hymns) on his computer, using computer forensic techniques. It was mainly these *Nasheeds* that led to charges against him as one of them had been banned. Rashid was arrested for possessing prohibited materials under Article 299, but alleged that the police also planted CDs as evidence against him. He accepts responsibility for possession, but maintains that he should not be charged under that Article, because it applies to the distribution of material, which he had not played a part in doing.

Arrest and Imprisonment

At first, Rashid was frightened and took responsibility for all charges against him. When he requested a lawyer, he was told that he was only being interviewed as a witness, but after questioning he was charged. He thought he was just sharing his thoughts with the police, but was forced to accept responsibility for things that did not happen. This was a scary experience for him. The police found a photo of him and a friend in South Korea standing together on *Odnoklassniki* (Russian social media). They said that if he testified against this friend, GKNB officers would arrest his friend based on his statement. Rashid refused to do this, but later found out that the friend had made a statement that was used to convict him. Rashid believes his friend was threatened by the police to do this.

Rashid did not consider himself a member of any religious group, although according to the criminal case against him he was a member of the terrorist group, JN. He believed that the reason for this was that people from his village had also been imprisoned for being members of JN, and Rashid did in fact know the local JN leader, who was also from his village. One or two men travelled from the village to Syria. Rashid was not sure why they went, although they had said they would be defending their religion. They travelled when the Arab Spring started in 2011 and even took school children with them. He did not know how they travelled, but they were continuously travelling out and returning home, even during the war, because there were no restrictions in place before the travel ban was imposed in 2016.

Rashid was living in a mass cell and did not experience any conflicts with, or between, the other inmates. Instead of planning things around his dreams, he passed the time chatting with the other inmates. There were no study or work opportunities in the prison, life was just eating and sleeping, although he enjoyed physical training, wrestling and boxing with the other prisoners. Life would have better if he could watch TV. While in detention, many of FTF returnees were also detained there. They started returning to Kyrgyzstan in 2019 and the arrests began then. One of the men from his village left in 2014 and another in 2015. Rashid had noticed that the FTF who returned from combat zones did not share the full story "They only praise and never blame." He thought that they did not want to appear in a negative light because they had yet to reject their ideology. Similarly, Rashid only wanted to think positively about Syria.

Learning from Inmates – ISIS and JN

Rashid attributes a lot of his knowledge about FTF to his fellow inmates sharing their stories with each other in the detention facility. They told him how they used weapons; they shared their war stories when they all sat together. A different version of reality is depicted by television channels which claimed that FTF recruiters hoodwinked young men into these activities, or that FTF travelled to fight because of money. Rashid did not believe this to be true. "If I was paid, I would not be here in the jail" he claimed. It was nothing to do with money, but it is to help those in need. Although television appeared to show that FTF killed children, the fighters refuted this, claiming that the Syrian government were responsible for these actions. The FTF lived there as ordinary people, got married and had children. The Government in its attempt to capture them killed children nearby and blamed the FTF. However, the FTF were also known to sometimes blow themselves up.

Rashid learned that Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad was created by the Kyrgyz former preacher, Abu Salah, and it had the ideology of JN, but the relationship with ISIS was one of conflict and fighting between the groups. According to the FTF prisoners, they did not even know that JN was a designated terrorist organisation and they blamed ISIS for ruining JN's reputation.

When deciding whether to join ISIS or JN, the FTF were drawn to national or regional communities and contacts within these two organisations. In Syria, Central Asians such as Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uighurs live separately from Arabs or other nationals, and Turkistanis were separated from the Uighurs.

Some individuals did not distinguish between ISIS and JN, having equal sympathy with both. However, all inmates within Rashid's facility were against ISIS as its members had killed their (JN) leader and his family. ISIS raided other members' families too and killed them and their children. These actions lead to everyone associating terrorism with Islam, and creating a hatred for the religion. This difference in approach and vision was the reason for ISIS and JN members being accommodated in different cells. An ISIS member, who had spent four years in Russia before being arrested and deported, was also in the facility.

Reflections and Self Analysis

Rashid stated that he loved to work, but also considered himself to be lazy. He recognised that hard work leads to wholesome reward. On reflection, he was satisfied with his own character although he could not point to anything, he particularly liked in himself or was proud of. He enjoyed hand crafting and is excited to finish projects, which he usually managed to do. He did not like the fact that he occasionally speaks before thinking. If he had a magic wand, he would fix the mistakes that led him to prison. He blames himself first and also the close friend who testified against him. If he could alter the situation, he would still be friends, but would avoid being too close to him.

The worst feeling he can recall was the marriage of the girl he loved to another man, before he travelled to South Korea. He had talked with her several times before, but she did not reciprocate his feelings. He felt complex emotions at the time, including resentment and anger but recognised that one has to struggle and continue living, "that is life."

Rashid had similar mixed emotions after being sentenced. He did not feel afraid but asked himself "what am I going to do, if I am jailed for a long time? What if I am imprisoned for life?" This drove him crazy and it took between three and four months for him to feel normal again. He asked himself, "why did it happen?" The answer was fate. This was destiny. Only when one reaches their destination can one understand this, he believes.

Rashid feels guilty and sinful for not taking care of his grandparents, especially as they are getting older and they had warned him against wrong doing. They are his responsibility because they raised him and took care of him and his sister, and their blessings are important to him. Rashid thinks he can change his life, but will see what happens after his release.

Rashid experienced changes in his religious views which led to his decision to travel to Syria, but nothing has changed since. That decision was not only to change his own life, but also to help others. His intentions were to help Muslims and other ordinary people. There was no need to discriminate between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, in Africa, there are people who suffer from hunger and so on and need to be helped. He feels there are many people in Kyrgyzstan who are extremely poor and have disabled or sick family members. There are also similar people in prisons, particularly those who were sentenced without any justification. With money, they could easily be released. Rashid did not feel he had enough experience and knowledge to advise others, except that they should behave positively and not harm people.

The Future

After his release, the first thing Rashid wants to do is to get married, try to open a business and become a father of three. He wants to find a suitable wife, realising that if he marries an educated woman, there could be arguments over her being educated, while he is not. On the other hand, he recognised that an educated wife could bring up the children better. Rashid expects to work all day, but will also try to be involved in parenting. He will not divorce and abandon his family. For him, happiness means being with family and loved ones, and to have many children. If there is a need to be away from them, then that is fine but ideally, it is not good to go without seeing one's children.

Rashid would like to learn both English and Russian. He had wanted to travel back to South Korea, but imprisonment had prevented that. He had also been thinking of moving to Germany. Imprisonment could make it difficult to travel to Europe, but some people had travelled even after being sentenced by the court and therefore such a sentence is not the end of life. Rashid always dreamt about travelling the world and admires his mother for having travelled. He does not think that anybody or anything will interfere with his plans, but accepts that such obstacles are a possibility because people can always be led in the wrong direction.

His younger sister got married and his grandparents now have enough money to look after themselves. Therefore, Rashid does not have any dependents needing financial support. In ten years' time when he will be 33, he sees himself living in the same house, but he will have built an extension to accommodate his family. The current orchard on his land will need to have the trees replaced because they are now old and he will probably expand his current stock of five or six cows into a livestock business. Alternatively, he could go into the construction business.

At the end of the interview, Rashid repeatedly indicated a wish that he could be the subject of a probation appeal, having had an application rejected for his sentence under Article 243. He provided a contact for his uncle, Tahir, through whom it was possible to speak with his grandparents and mother.

Yahya – Rashid's Uncle

Context

At the time of Rashid's departure to Turkey with the intention of going to Syria, his uncle, Yahya, was in Russia. An acquaintance told him about it and Yahya was surprised because he thought that Rashid was working in South Korea. The following is a summary of the interview with Yahya.

Rashid's Childhood and School

Yahya raised Rashid from when he was two years old. He ensured that Rashid did not have a hard time because he grew up without a father, so he spoiled him. Rashid used to pray from time to time with Yahya and his grandfather when he was young. Yahya reflected that those boys who pray can easily be deceived. Rashid learned to read the Quran, but only completed one or two of its 30 parts.

Rashid behaved and studied well at school. Nobody complained about him. He was a perfect student, although sometimes stubborn. If he decided to do something, he did not give up until he achieved it. He was friends with the boys in the village, but he never went about with strangers.

After School

Yahya wanted Rashid to continue his education and become a lawyer after leaving school, but he was not interested in studying. Instead, he worked on the family land. His family wanted him to marry, but he did not want to. They later found out that the reason for this was because he had loved a girl who had married to another man.

Rashid was a good, diligent worker who always finished what he started. He was not impacted by the political upheavals of 2010. The village in which they lived was peaceful: Kyrgyz and Uzbeks lived together in harmony.

Departure to South Korea

Yahya was planning to find work in South Korea, but met an acquaintance who advised him not to go there but to send someone younger instead. Hence, he decided to send Rashid. For approximately seven to eight months Rashid kept in daily touch with the family before cutting off contact. Yahya used to advise him to "Be sensible, behave yourself. You are in a foreign country."

Rashid's salary was approximately $2500, of which he used to send $700-$1,000 home to Yahya. When Yahya later asked a friend in South Korea to investigate details of what Rashid had been doing, he found out that Rashid used to give the rest of the money to the group that had radicalised him and who behaved like his "sponsor." They operated out of a two-storey building where they taught about two hundred boys late into the night. They lived, studied and went to work in the morning from this place. Azerbaijani and Ingush people taught him. According to Yahya these people "fully prepare them [the boys] there, take their money and finance Syria from there." As a rule, each boy had to give them, partly to pay rent on the building.

In addition to Kyrgyz, there were many nationalities in South Korea, including Tajik, Uzbeks, Azerbaijanis and Russians too. The preparation did not include any fighting training. It simply involved teaching religion to the point at which the boys would say with confidence "I will go there." At this stage they would be sent to Syria to fight. That is what happened with Rashid.

When Rashid had left for South Korea, another boy also departed from the neighbouring village. He was the one who recruited Rashid. "He went there and got crazy," says Yahya. He was here for two or three years. The evening Rashid left South Korea, Yahya got a text message saying, "He is absent." The message was from the boy from the neighbouring village. Even though he knew everything, having brought him to the recruitment centre and later sent him off to Turkey, the boy gave no details to Yahya.

Turkey

Yahya received a message along the lines of "I am in Turkey now." He immediately called some acquaintances in Turkey and asked them to find Rashid. They tried many things, but it was difficult to get any information about him in Turkey. Eventually, after about a month, they found him in a training camp in Istanbul. That is where the men spent three months of preparation, including weapons training, after which they are smuggled into Syria inside containers lined with foam rubber. Between six weeks and two months later, Yahya sent money to his acquaintances within Turkey and they bought Rashid a flight back to Kyrgyzstan via Russia.

Return to Kyrgyzstan

When Rashid returned to Kyrgyzstan, Yahya brought him back to the village. He was annoyed with Rashid as it was the first time that something like that had happened. He had brought him up well and could not understand how he had become involved in this. After he got back, Yahya did not say anything until he had rested for one or two days. He then scolded Rashid and swore at him. "I let you go there because I have always believed you. You have dishonoured me." Rashid did not say anything at first then he said, "I also don't know." It was "like magic." "You don't notice how you become enrolled," "Everyday… they do magic, they say different things… they speak through the book only." By this he meant the Quran. According to Yahya, this is how he became interested and entered their group. "They easily fool the young," he said. Rashid told him "they hypnotised me…" it "seems just like I had a dream," "I almost forgot about you all…" he said. "I thought only about that place. I was brainwashed," "I didn't think about parents, home, anybody." Yahya confronted him with what would have happened to his grandparents if he had gone to Syria. It would probably have killed them with worry. As it happens, they did find out from people in the village and were greatly concerned.

To help him resettle, Yahya got Rashid a job in construction work with him in Bishkek for almost a year before his arrest. The family had found him a girl and there were plans for them to get married. Yahya was unhappy with the way his nephew was arrested. A large number of armed police cordoned off both his and his brother's houses. Rashid was made to curl up on the ground. When Yahya protested about the aggressive way in which Rashid was arrested, the police responded that they had received information from the local government that he was a terrorist and he had weapons. Yahya says that Rashid was betrayed by his mother's stepdaughter. He had travelled to Russia from Turkey and his mother had confided in her stepdaughter about his attempt to fight in Syria. The stepdaughter and her husband decided that they would inform the police in the hope that Rashid's mother would be deported for supporting terrorists and they would become owners of her property. The Russian police found no evidence against Rashid's mother and so they reported Rashid to the Kyrgyz police.

Yahya is certain that if he had not rescued Rashid when he did, Rashid would certainly have crossed the border and would not be able to come back. The first thing the terrorist groups do when recruiting is to burn passports, without which it is almost impossible for individuals to return to their home country unless the government brings them back. It was only because Yahya had good contacts, amongst influential people, that he was able to bring Rashid back.

Rashid in Prison and after Release

Although Rashid was in prison in the company of convicts who had also been radicalised, Yahya did not believe that he would revert to their way of thinking. He dismissed the danger of the convicts' heroic talk and weapons discussions as well as Rashid's own desire to become a hero as youthful bravado. Yahya believes that there are books that can mislead people, but did not believe that Rashid had access to them. Radicalising inmates were isolated in prison from those who could be misled and Yahya had made sure of this by asking Rashid to be moved to a prison where he could more easily monitor him. He felt prison life was conducive to laziness through inactivity. There was nothing to do except eat, sleep and watch television. Prisoners should have to work in prison workshops or be taken to brick factories. This would ensure there was no time to radicalise each other. Prison reform was needed. Yahya had not seen anyone "become a better person after jail." Many returned to crime and some even accepted regularly returning to prison as a normal occurrence.

After release, Yahya was determined that he would keep a close watch on Rashid to ensure that he never again went astray. He had built a five-bedroom house for Rashid and planned for him to get married upon his release from prison. Rashid should not have any financial problems in the future, just as he had not in the past.

Yahya's view on Radicalisers and Radicalisation

Yahya knew the terrorist leader who left to fight: Siradzhidin from Kashkar-Kyshtak, now known as Abu Salah. He had spoken to Abu Salah and knew his grandfathers, one of whom had, like Abu Salah, also been an imam in the mosque at Kashkar-Kyshtak. He thought Abu Salah was a "good guy" but lamented the number of young men who had died because of him. He blamed Abu Salah for not doing anything much himself, while sending young men who did not understand, to fight. He was able to do this because these young men had low levels of religious knowledge. He said that "Even if they press me a thousand times to go there, I will never leave." Because "I know what's happening there. I can understand everything." This was because he was mature. That is why these people "recruit young, single boys, who are full of energy." These boys are recruited not through videos but through interpretations of the Quran which speak of the end of times, of Armageddon, for which they believe the signs are now apparent.

Neither Abu Salah nor some of the individuals who were recruited suffered poor conditions in life. Some of the recruits were very well off. Yahya often wondered how young people are persuaded to leave their comfortable lives to go and fight in the difficult conditions of Syria. He had lived in Russia for a long time. While there he had met several people who had been to Syria and knew of their difficult conditions. He knew of a woman who had gone with her family. Her husband had died and she and the children were left without food for many days.

He also knew of a man from Kashkar-Kyshtak village whose only two sons were recruited and killed in Syria. They were recruited by a man called Rashid Kamalov who also sent his sister's sons to fight and is now in prison. The father of the two boys from the village became an alcoholic on hearing of his son's death. These boys did not attend prayers despite the fact they were recruited.

Although the events in Syria were now over, he felt that should something else happen in another country, there would still be people ready to go and fight. In order to prevent this, parents need to be close to their children. They should know where their children go and where they get their information from, particularly when it comes to religion. He knew of the case of a woman who used to take a daughter to a madrasah by herself to ensure that she was not influenced by people on the way, but it turned out that she was radicalised within the madrasa and went off to Syria. Young boys are a particular target because they are hot blooded and "want to be like in a movie... with weapons, they want to be heroes."

Radicalisers visit mosques to see which young people attend regularly and then slowly and patiently target them. Once an individual is recruited, that individual will target his friends and acquaintances to join him. If they are interested in religion, they are easily swayed by someone they know or a recommendation of the best place to study their faith. This is how they expand their recruitment targets.

In South Korea and in Russia, where Kyrgyz workers are alone and need each other's company, the recruiters are very active. He had spent 15 years in Russia and had been approached there by the recruiters. They would arrange social gatherings and make Kyrgyz food to attract them to attend and then they would turn the conversation to religion. Fortunately, he had a good religious education as a young man and knew that they were wrong and told them not to bother him. They would say that we need to establish the caliphate and he would respond by saying that this would not happen with soldiers but only when the Muslims are united. Many young people do not know that and become interested and are easily recruited. This was happening even before ISIS came on the scene.

Yahya has four children and is concerned for them as they grow up. He is always checking on the whereabouts of his eldest son. If he is slightly late, he calls him although this annoys his son. Even his father laughs at him saying: "I never asked you where you were." Yahya explains that things were different then. Nowadays it is necessary to control who children are talking to. They are still young. If the recruiters tell them not to tell anybody at home, young people will do that. Then it becomes too late. Our responsibility is to put young people on the right path. So, parents are most

important, but many parents are now migrant workers in Russia. Their children could be brainwashed and parents do not know, because they are in Russia. Grandparents, who mostly look after the children. do not know what is going on and children do not listen to grandparents anyway. If boys go out late at night, grandparents often go to bed early and do not notice their absence.

Yahya felt that current youth projects designed to instil critical thinking skills were effective, but these needed to be augmented by sport centres because it was essential to increase young boys' interest in sport. He felt parents should call teachers and ask about their children's performance. He makes ash (traditional food) and asks his son to call his friends around so that he can meet them and find out what they discuss. It is dangerous not to keep an eye on them. Mobile phones spoil them the most. There are many things on phones, including YouTube. Yahya wonders why these things cannot be banned as they are in Uzbekistan. It is possible to do it in Kyrgyzstan and so they should do it so that children are unable to watch them. Anyway, Muslims will become angry when they watch those types of videos. They will get angry when they watch videos about things happening in China. Yahya said "We are Muslims. You will get upset, when you watch videos where women and relatives are tortured. That kind of videos must be banned." He claims the failure to ban such videos is the reason why many people are involved through using their mobile phones.

Yahya found extortion by law enforcement agencies to be a constant life experience. He felt there was no justice in this country. He claims to have seen individuals receive better conditions in prison or even be set free after murder if they have money. On the other hand, people who do not have money will rot in prison for "stealing a hen." Radicalisers, however, do not use these political arguments and concentrate only on using religion to attract the youth.

In the early days, many women and children accompanied their husbands to Syria. The women were not forced to go and could have refused to follow their husbands. However, they were radicalised with stories about religion and attracted to Syria with the prospect of martyrdom for them and their children. Given the way things deteriorated, they are not likely to want to go there anymore. Yahya thought this idea of going to heaven as a martyr in Syria was laughable because in reality they were going to end up in hell for the destruction they had caused. Syria was a beautiful country before the war. Its condition now makes him want to cry. It is totally destroyed. A peaceful country has disappeared. This was done by people from Kyrgyzstan and from other countries. How could these people consider themselves martyrs? "Innocent people died; Muslims died. They don't understand it."

Yahya believes that the women regret their decision now. Many admit that they were wrong. He had come across people who said the behaviour in Syria was not that of true Muslims. "Women are not respected there. If a husband dies, after three days they marry her to another man by force." There is nothing like that in Islam. It was a "mockery" if someone likes another's wife, they will kill him to marry her.

Most men were killed and there were many women and children stranded in camps in the region. The men in the camps can be left, according to Yahya. There is no certainty with men. Their brains are affected by the experience of fighting and seeing blood "nothing good should be expected from them." Boys of 14 or 15 who have not killed are young enough to reform and rehabilitate in society. Yahya believes women understand the errors of their ways, they are more open to positive influence and should be brought back, not least because they are Kyrgyz citizens. Their children should also be brought back, even the children of their second or third husbands who may not have been Kyrgyz because "children are innocent" and a mother cannot leave her own child behind. Of course, nobody will like these children initially but over time, with education, they will be accepted in society. Separation from society is not good. Integration is important. There are those who say, "No need to bring them back...let them die there." But neighbours will soon change their mind and treat them well. It is possible to educate these people and they should be educated and controlled. They are human and they will understand. If they apologise for what they have done, then they should be forgiven.

Geopolitics

Yahya sees the conflict in Syria as a Jewish conspiracy to have Muslims fight each other and feels that Rashid cannot see this. He believes that the Russians are motivated by money and politics in Russia. For him, both they and the Americans are playing a game in which Muslims are just toys for them: Five or six 'Jewish people' plan things including Syria. They humiliate Muslims and "they do all this bullshit to make Muslims look bad." The majority of the people who left Kyrgyzstan for Syria were from Kara-Suu, Kashkar-Kyshtak, and were mostly Uzbeks. One of the arrested leaders, Rashid Kamalov, left with many of his students. Yahya believed he used to receive money from Syria. People believe that it was because of this money that his father was shot dead. Money plays a big role here. Otherwise, "why do they need to send people?" he questions. Money is the reason why many people are converting and becoming Ahmadi. According to Yahya, the Ahmadis have money deposited for them from India.

The Ruslan Case Study

Background

Ruslan is now 25 years old, Uzbek by ethnicity and originally from Osh. He was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment on 10 February 2019. He graduated from the 9th grade and after school helped his father in a store. He was into sport, specifically taekwondo, and also worked as a taekwondo coach. He has three sisters, a mother and father and is married with one child.

Childhood and youth

Ruslan wanted to become an athlete, but after becoming religious, he has an understanding that religion would not allow him to compete because getting points for fighting hits is contrary to Islam. More significant is that he has become acquainted with Islam since he was a child. He attended the mosque on Fridays and studied the Quran. One of his objectives was to gain Sharia knowledge. After finishing school, he wished to continue his studies, but family and economic circumstances did not allow him to do so. From his childhood memories in the village where he lived, his best ones are of games and football. He did not encounter ethnic discrimination, and 2010 did not affect him in any way on this basis, moreover, representatives of different ethnic groups in his village helped each other. But 2010 took away many young friends, and after that Ruslan wondered what could be done to live an eternity with dignity, so he began to study religion more consciously. He had friends, but as time flew by their paths gradually diverged because his friends followed earthly temptations and his views began to differ from the lifestyle of some of them. His

mother always instructed him to be more serious, think before speaking, whereas his father encouraged him to think well before starting to do anything.

Trip to Turkey

Ruslan went to Turkey in 2014 at the age of 19, to study at a madrasah. He was not interested in receiving religious education in Kyrgyzstan, as he believed that it did not meet the quality. He made attempts to attend local madrassas, but that did not work out well. Ruslan heard that getting an education in the Arabic language in Turkey is easier than in some Arabic countries. He applied to an Islamic educational institution in Turkey and went there to study. He had plans to leave for Medina for further education but in 2017, after finishing his studies in Turkey, he ended up travelling to Syria since there were many people in Turkey he knew who had already been to Syria.

He met his wife in Turkey. Her father is Tajik and mother is Uzbek, originally from Tajikistan. Now his wife is in Tajikistan in an apartment with her parents. She was also in Syria with her husband.

Understanding the situation in Syria

By going to Syria, Ruslan did not choose a specific grouping, His knowledge of JN and ISIS was equal, and his main desire was to live under the Caliphate and Sharia. He was part of a small jamaat of Syrian Turkmens (about 500 people) who did not obey anyone, fought against Assad and wanted to establish Shariah law. In Syria, he realised that everything contradicted Sharia. He spent eight months in jail due to his disagreement with JN and believes that now there is no Sharia anywhere, ISIS could not build it because it is wrong in its interpretation of Islam. ISIS and JN, because of the war among themselves, considered each other to be apostates, but he considers their *manhaj* (the path leading to ideology) to be the same. During his stay, Ruslan came to the conclusion that various groups within Syria were trying to make as many people as possible join them. If an individual refused to join, they were forced to do so or were punished. This constant struggle for wealth and influence caused inter-group violence and crime. There was a lot of ignorance amongst the Syrians, says Ruslan, even though all of them are Muslims. He did not see pure Islam there, judging by the lack of washing facilities among many Syrians, which is a fundamental requirement for Muslims. In general, the people there are against the government. JN in Syria calls only for a martial Jihad, other types of jihad (spiritual) are not considered, unlike ISIS, which tried to explain the foundations of the faith to some extent. Regarding the future of Syria, he claims that operations are ending and many groups are also beginning to split up. Only time will tell - everything is in the hand of Allah.

Democracy

When Ruslan realised that people invented democracy, he took the decision to go to Syria. What Allah has forbidden - democracy allows. He felt that living the way many people live is not the correct way to live. He understood that democracy is a system of *'kufr'*, of unbelief, of a law invented by people. People have come up with what is allowed and what is not allowed. For example, Allah says that a woman and a man are not equal, but democracy says that they are, or after the age of eighteen a woman can do what she wants to do. But there is no such thing in Sharia, no matter if a woman is under or above 18 years. Prohibited means prohibited. He believes that the current democracy is completely contrary to Islam, the Quran says that the legislator is Allah, but in the world of democracy, it is not considered so.

Attitude towards various theologians

Local theologians are not particularly taken into his account, since they cannot speak openly about religion, they are under the control of the state or government. These individuals adapt religious law to fit with democratic laws, which is a contradiction to Allah. Ruslan believes that in Europe there is still some freedom of speech, but not here. He recognises only a few religious authorities, including Arab sheikhs, Abu Umar and Al Hazimi.

The person who influenced Ruslan's fate is the Prophet and his life stories. Of the current influences, he admires his first educator – imam Abdullah Bukhari, who taught in a madrasah, but was killed by an unknown in Turkey. His teachings and lectures were also translated from Uzbek into Russian. With regard to the videos of Abu Salah, Ruslan feels that he attracts followers through his emotional speeches about the salvation of brothers and sisters, but does not consider him to be religiously literate.

Attitude towards other groups

There is no Sharia in Iran. Iranians are Shiites and Shiites are lost. Ruslan considers them unfaithful. The Shiites aim to conquer Palestine, believing that if they die from the Sunni hands, they will enter paradise. Ruslan considers this to be incorrect. Overall, he believes that nowadays Muslims bring each other more harm than anyone else. He now does not support either JN or ISIS.

In Turkey, as well as in Syria, there is very little Islam. There are many grave-worshipers: Sufis, who worship their sheikhs as idols and pay less attention to Allah. Sufis and their dances are an innovation, there is no such thing in Islamic Sharia. *Zhikr* (remembrance) of the Prophet and attitudes in Turkey today are completely different and Ruslan sees it as an innovation.

For him, untrue Islam expresses itself in many different currents as Shiites, Sufis, Hawarijs, Murjeets, Jamhilits, and those who pulled "word and deed/action" out of *iman*/faith. Hizb-ut-Tahrir is described as follows: they kept the "word", removed the "action", they do not build the Caliphate themselves, but prefer talking about how to rule, and deal with politics. Ruslan's position on Murijits is that they kept only "faith," taking out "words and actions," which he thinks is not enough, so both a Jew and a Christian can be considered as a Muslim. *Shaitan (Iblis)* on the same principles recognised Allah, without "words and actions." This is how he classifies untrue Islam.

The basics of religious doctrine

Ruslan has an understanding that if there are disagreements on *fiqh* issues, then divisions occur among *mazhabs*, and if it occurs in *akyidah*, then this is a completely different religion, not Islamic. Disagreement in *akyidah* is impossible among Muslims, but possible only in *fiqh. Akyidah*, according to him, is the basis of Islam. It is one for all Muslims, but disagreements are already taking place in matters of *fiqh*, meaning details of Islam.

Akyidah for all is *"ahl-sunnah.,"* From Ruslan's explanation, it consists of the "words, deeds and faith in Allah.." If the *akyidah* differs from the one described, this is a different creed. However, the details may differ. For example, it is said that "Allah, the creature gave life with its hand." It may be considered as a similar hand to a human one, although this is more of a figurative statement, where it is more the concept of "*qudura* – ability." Another example is that some claim that Allah has risen above us, some represent him on the "throne above." others consider his presence everywhere. These interpretations are different, but they are one *akyidah*.

Islam today

It is not only about identifying oneself with the religion of Islam, asserts Ruslan. The main problem today is ignorance of Islam. Believers take some steps towards religion, for example, jihad, but they do not understand why everything is done in a particular way. They can believe in the "Huris," but they are unable to see what stands beyond. Ruslan observes that many people follow "blind faith" according to the principle that "it is necessary to do." People do not know the basics of religion and do not even understand the basic meaning of the testimony "la ilaha illalah." Ruslan mentions his fellow inmates who did not get to Syria, but he can certainly prove that their knowledge and understanding is limited. For the most part, they are also blind believers, *Jihad* for them is to help Muslims, getting closer to Sharia lifestyle, but they have little knowledge of what *jaamats* are in religion and do not understand complexity. He says that people believe that the most religious Muslims are Arabs, but this is also not so. In our time, people do not understand the very foundations of religion. One does not need to mention all the details to understand Islam, but it is a painstaking task to study it.

Self-reflection

Ruslan does not like the fact that he allows himself to waste time and is sometimes lazy. In his free time, he reads the Quran and hadith. He likes the constancy in himself that throughout this disruptive time he has not deviated from the path of Islam. He cannot list the unpleasant feelings he has experienced because it all comes down to the predetermination of God and that one should not regret anything. Even his anger, which is undesirable in Islam, was predetermined for him by God.

Ruslan considers himself obliged at all costs to stand steadfastly believing, and keep his pure intentions, in order to please Allah in all senses. With regard to regrets, he lists his blind faith back in Turkey, but he was able to accept his mistakes. He does not consider those who deceived him to be harmful, having led him to another wrong path, but sees them as simply ignorant. For him, the highest happiness is to be a believer. One of the strongest memories and sensations in life was an understanding of "tawhid," the monotheism, where he understood what Islam is, that it is not only attributing oneself to religion. He realised that the laws and the Islamic state are all invented by humans and the truth lies deeper. This realisation came to him when he read and pondered over Islam and asked himself many questions. Ruslan does not recognise the mixture of Kyrgyz traditions (evil eyes, traditional healers) and Islam and narrows them down to *"shirk."* According to his conviction, only Allah is able to protect from everything. He considers his being in prison as an infringement, considers it wrong to imprison and even kill people for their desire to live according to Sharia. But this does not break him, as he claims, the great scientists and prophets suffered in captivity. He hopes to be reunited with his family, wife and children as soon as he is free.

Ruslan's mother

Ruslan's mother was convicted under Article 375 (Mercenary) of the Criminal Code and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Her family is from Osh, and she has been divorced since 2014. Her husband was a heavy drinker: "he would last two to three weeks, then he would drink again." He did not support her religious beliefs.

She worked in Russia from 2013 to 2014, together with her children (two daughters born in 1989 and 1991 and a son born in 2002, who is currently imprisoned). She also went to Turkey to earn money. Her daughters are married, and her son is also married to a girl from Tajikistan. The daughters stayed in Turkey. She has six grandchildren, one of whom is her son's child (a boy who lives with his mother in Tajikistan).

She went to Syria to get her son back when he was imprisoned in Idlib. She went to Idlib and lived in a community of Central Asians. There were a lot of trashed buildings. For seven months she visited her son in a Syrian prison, taking him food. During this period she cried a lot. When he was released from prison, they crossed the Syrian-Turkish border together and were arrested. They were told there was a "legal border crossing" and by paying $2,000 the authorities would not have a claim against them. However, they had no money and so they crossed the river by wading across illegally. They were deported from Turkey to Kyrgyzstan. She and her son were convicted.

She takes the imprisonment hard and considers it as unfair "This is a test for us, Allah will reward us. We have to endure it" She prays a lot for her son and asks for him. She reads only religious literature, no fiction. She says it can be hard on the soul to be in prison and have her son in prison too, but she cannot complain in public (there is a lot of shame inside), she can only cry alone with herself.

Aybek's Case Study

Background

Aybek is 24, originally from Jalal-Abad and Kyrgyz by ethnicity. He is in a civil marriage. He has a wife and a three year old daughter living in Kazakhstan. He grew up with his two sisters and a younger brother. His sisters are now Russian citizens. He lost his father as a child, and his mother lives in his hometown with his younger brother. As a child he was highly active, was into sports and was a part of a wrestling team, attending competitions in Osh and Bishkek. After nine years of education, he applied to join a military school. In terms of physical training, he was 3rd out of 1200 applicants, but to study there he had to pay a bribe. His family could not afford it, so he entered a law school in his town and after the first semester in 2013 he went to Russia.

Memories

His early childhood impressions are of his well to do position; his father had a personal chauffeur. His second memory was that he was able to have the food he liked, rather than the food that was served in the kindergarten. His third memory is that he was the leader of his group of friends. The next memory was his drunk father beating his mother (it happened once), causing her to fall into a coma. After this, Aybek did not drink alcohol, even when he was in difficulty or stressed. His final overwhelming memory was the death of his father, who hanged himself: "He was a coach, an athlete, but weak because he committed suicide." His father had moved to Russia, everything was good, he promised to call his family to join him, but at some point something went wrong. Aybek does not know what happened. but his father broke down, started drinking and committed suicide. His mother remarried and Aybek accepts her second marriage, but he does not like his stepfather.

Aybek has unpleasant memories of school. He was a bully and had problems that led to a dislike of his teachers. Rather than discussing any incident with him, they would instead immediately call his parents and humiliate them in front of his classmates. Aybek believes that school does not provide proper education.

Aybek considers himself to be the most important person in his life because he often had to stand up for himself or rely on himself when abroad. As a teenager, he would often get into fights, gather his mates and go out to fight the older boys because they were hurting the younger ones. He did not like such an injustice. In his youth, his mother taught him not to drink and steal. His father taught him to remain firm and strong.

Motives for the trip

Aybek considers himself to be vulnerable. The violence described against children and women in Syria had a lot to do with his trip. He admits he was so affected by these accounts that it pushed him over the edge and made him realise that he was a bad Muslim, living a good life here while others were suffering. He wanted to promote some kind of justice. He had imagined himself helping women and children, but he did not expect to sacrifice himself on the battlefields against Assad. He thought he was going to fight the Americans. He did not understand the idea of the Caliphate at the time of his departure.

Ways to Syria

In December 2014, Aybek went to Syria. He was approximately 18 years old, and stayed there for a year. Firstly, he was a part of the Sayfullo Shishani group, then he joined JN, and finally ISIS. At the time when he was becoming acquainted with Islam, he had been living in Moscow for about a year. He went there with his uncle and worked as an antenna installer. He didn't like Moscow, because the citizens were prejudiced towards migrants. From time to time he passed by the Central Mosque and often saw two Daghestani men with whom he soon became acquainted. They recruited him and gave him video material through the "Odnoklassniki" social site. They inspired him with the idea of helping his brothers. Aybek says the recruiters themselves do not go to Syria; they are engaged only in recruitment. Then, in 2014, the Russian FSB did not conduct raids in mosques, as the problem was just beginning. The night before leaving for Syria, he attended clubs and played billiards for the last time, remembers Aybek with a grin.

In Syria

When he arrived in Turkey, he and other newcomers were met by a bus that took them to the border. He crossed the border on foot and was met by Syrians. After this he was assigned to a Russian-speaking Caucasian international group consisting of around 240 people. According to him, there were many more Kyrgyz in JN than in ISIS. There, new arrivals take a new name. If anyone asks someone's real name, they will be suspected of being a spy.

As Free Syrian Forces (Jaishul Hur) (ex- Syrian Army forces), started losing their strength and territory, they gave an ultimatum to the Iraqi Jamaats to withdraw to Iraq and for other FTF to go back to Turkey within 10 days or join the Free Army. They then began to assassinate those outsiders that didn't go back. During those days, the newly arrived Aybek underwent military training. These were his first weeks in Syria and he was totally unaware of the situation there. When the ultimatum expired, an extensive war broke out between the outsiders, Free Army, Iraqi Jamaats and other insurgents. FTF forces were under attack from all sides. To help them survive, Sayfullo Shishani deployed a detachment of 15 men, including Aybek, to a small ISIS group of 200 men controlling a street in Aleppo. For four months his ISIS group had been trying to survive with a promise that support would arrive from Raqqa, but that proved to be a lie. Then ISIS forces decided to leave Aleppo and began to break through. They lost almost all their soldiers in the battle to leave the city. When they broke through, however, they were joined by 800 ISIS men who had previously deserted because they did not want to be involved in defending the siege. All these deserters joined the remaining ISIS fighters and headed for Iraq.

While talking about this part of his life story. Aybek mentions that he met most of the high-profile individuals, except Abubakr Baghdadi. He knew Abu Salah when he was just a driver for Sayfullah Shishani, but he became an amir when Shishani was killed. Then all the Chechens joined ISIS.

The strength of ISIS was the loyalty they gained from their strong vision of establishing an 'Islamic' system expressed through their slogan "Let the Sharia be over any territory we step in!" In words, everything sounded impressive, but in fact, no Sharia was observed. *"In reality they just demonstrated all these things on video. It has no truth. I lived inside it. All shisha shops were open and you could even find prohibited things; everything was there. Those nice things they were showing on video never existed. I am telling you, Bashar used to sell weapons to ISIS and ISIS was selling oil to Bashar Assad. Jeish ul-Islam was selling weapons to ISIS. And such things. Oil was sold to Turkey. Turkey attacked ISIS aircraft and such mess everywhere. War is when one fights to the last ditch and another gets rich and this is the truth. Infantrymen, like us, are the pawns, who fight and die. And the top makes money."*

There was also an ethnic issue in Syria. Uzbeks were indignant, saying that "we are humiliated in Moscow, and humiliate here again." There were tough battles over it. Even though there were a lot of Uzbeks and Russian-speaking people, they still put the Arabs in important positions, they controlled the finances and organised everything. There were few Uzbeks in ISIS, and even less in Kyrgyz. They were mostly in JN, and in all kinds of groups like the Bukhari group. Only a small number of Turkmens were there, and they were fanatical. Many Turkmens came from Turkey where they had political asylum because they are persecuted for their religion in Turkmenistan. It was the same everywhere. In Kyrgyzstan too, many people told Aybek that they were constantly harassed for their religion and not allowed to live as they pleased. While living in ISIS camps, he was given free food and lodging and only received a small allowance for personal expenses, no more than $50.

Attempts to escape

Aybek participated in combat operations three times. He observed that those who attempted to refuse came under suspicion. He was disappointed with the situation in Syria and so he renounced ISIS and stopped fighting although this was not easy. The Jamaat he was in (Tapka town, near Raqqa) was forced to move to Iraq with their leader. He promised the leader that he would leave later that day, but he stayed, surviving in the city on his own. Over time, communicating with the locals, he improved his Arabic, and that helped him understand the Quran better without the need for any other interpretations.

Three months later, he was tracked down by the *'almiyats,'* the local 'ISIS Search Units' that were engaged in surveillance and executions of infiltrators. He was accused of

spying and preparing an assassination attempt on Al Baghdadi and was charged for being an FSB agent because he came to Syria from Russia. However, Aybek persuaded them that he had no such intentions. Spies, he knew, were killed and their organs sold. Not wishing such a death, he openly stated that he did not support the idea of the Caliphate and his expectations of the desired Sharia order had not been met in reality, so he wanted to leave the country. His accusation therefore was reclassified as *"Murtad"* (apostasy). In that case he was sentenced to death by being shot, at which he was frankly happy. After being charged, he was sent to a special jail for four months, as is normal practice, before being sent to be executed. He spent these four months in the basement of a jail, where he stayed with two FSB agents (a Russian and a Kazakh) who were subsequently shown executed on a video. This basement was reserved for those who had been sentenced to death.

While in prison, Aybek met a Kurd who helped him make a false passport. This Kurd had previously been part of the ISIS elite and had good contacts on the outside. ISIS, according to Aybek, had been killing its own people for minor mistakes, in order to maintain discipline and loyalty. His Kurdish neighbour was in jail because he suggested stopping these killings within ISIS.

At that time, the Kurds had declared Kobani their capital. There were American drones over that territory, and 3,000 ISIS soldiers. ISIS wanted to defend the city, but there were not enough fighters. Because of the high risk of missile attacks, the fighters had fled from there. Then Aybek's prison was visited by Muhammad Ali Baghdadi from Iraq who proposed that the prisoners went out to fight and die as a shahid (martyrs). The 30 men, including Aybek, agreed and were given ten days to complete their 'earthly affairs.' Aybek took advantage of this opportunity to get out of prison with false documents and head for a base where he could legally cross the Turkish border. At the base he met Chechens from ISIS who knew he was supposed to be in custody. He told them that he had been acquitted. They decided to check the information in the morning and sent him to a room with others who were waiting to receive the new arrivals from the border. Early in the morning, before they could discover the validity of the acquittal claim, the bus left for the border. Aybek took a risk and joined those going to the border; the border was across a narrow path; the rest of the field was mined. As they approached the Turkish started shooting at them. Their guide told them to go back to the base. Aybek, realising that this would lead to his execution, decided to run through the 500 metres of minefields in winter. Behind him, also hoping to survive, ran three Dagestanis men. This escape left an indelible memory in Aybek's mind. When he reached the border there were cars (local businessmen) that took him and others to the nearest town for $75. He had acquired this money from the Kurdish man that he was in jail with. Aybek spent a year in Turkey, where he began to study the biographies of various Islamic personalities, such as the medieval scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah.

Other memories of Syria

Upon arrival Aybek found Syria to be a beautiful marble country but felt deeply sorry that the war ruined that beauty. After those pleasant impressions of the beauties of Syria he wanted to live by the sea. When he went to Ukraine after Turkey, he wanted to move to Egypt. He watched travel programmes and was disappointed at how polluted that country was, even worse than Kyrgyzstan.

Aybek had witnessed examples of human trafficking and slavery, once having seen a man bringing out three children for sale, their parents having been killed in front of them. The buyer made an assurance that he would look after all of the children equally well. He saw how young women were taken as concubines, but Aybek is certain there was no equal treatment for them, as stated in the Hadith. The cruelty of torture by ISIS shown in various videos is true but torture was mainly applied to spies. Children aged 13 or 14 were also being trained as fighters.

The ISIS media groups took pictures of Aybek in combat operations in Syria. These were used for social media work and divided into different languages to target particular audiences. Sometimes scenes were constructed and corpses were purposefully brought for those photoshoots. The fighters could not refuse to have material about their participation on social networks. Aybek believes that these photos were also made with the purpose that police in the countries from where FTF came would be able to identify them. This would mean that the FTF would have to remain in Syria to escape prosecution. Being in Syria, Aybek was assured that "There is no futility. If you die you go to heaven, if we win, there will be victory."

Expectation Vs Reality

Aybek was inspired by the idea of life under Sharia and made the long journey to Syria, but the reality brought him face to face with a life-style that did not correspond to Shariah. Aybek wonders at how this contrasts with ISIS' emphasis on creating high-quality videos about the intentions of the Caliphate with the goal of unification of Islam and a Sharia-based life.

He says there was not much religious education, there was more promotion of an aggressive militant ideology, one that people are not free to escape both physically and mentally. If they do escape, they have a strong sense of guilt. There are about 45 jamaats in Syria and each of them "pulls the blanket over itself" (is self-interested). When teaching the Quran to newcomers each quotes the fatwa of different scholars. Aybek realised that he had to study the original source (Quran) on his own without the interpretation of others. After this he stopped attending mosques, as the mosque was where he had been drawn to Syria and his life had started to go wrong. Aybek was extremely disappointed by the following: the hypocrisy of people; the blind absorption of religion without explanation or studying; the self-proclaimed Caliphate of certain groups; killing and torture, which are forbidden in Islam.

About the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict is more than an internal conflict, it is also a struggle between several powers such as Russia, the US, Turkey, England, Israel and the Kurds. Russia was assisting Assad by selling them weapons. Assad threatened Israel to take back the Golan Heights, so Israel, in turn, started sending rebels to Syria with the help of the US. The US trained and distributed weapons to these free rebels, and Aybek thinks it still does. Russia's interest was in the military bases in Syria. America started assisting Israel because it wanted to push Russia out. The Pentagon openly intervened in Syria and wanted to remove Assad by claiming: "ISIS is out of control." The third power was the European coalition, as their interest was in oil, which was more profitable and closer to get from Syrian territory than from Russia. Aybek argues that after such confrontations it will be difficult for Assad to recover, and that Syria would not have survived so long if it were not for Russia's help. The threat to Israel is no longer there. Aybek is convinced these powers were practicing [testing] the effectiveness of their weapons on Syrian territory. And those who come to fight as he did are "pawns on the chessboard." Each of the parties involved is brutal and uses the most sophis-

ticated methods of fighting and torture, and he cannot single out which one was better than the others. He is convinced such brutality is generated by injustice and hate. He sees a similarity with his imprisonment in Kyrgyzstan where convicts feel hatred for the country, being in disadvantageous conditions, unheard of and forgotten.

Discourse on the Caliphate

ISIS, in his opinion, is no longer a threat. The formation of the Caliphate is already unlikely. He believes in the Caliphate that will come with the arrival of the Mahdi prophet, but not the one created by humans. He is convinced that religion should be outside the jamaats and groups, without references to quotes from sheikhs and scientists. Religion is able to save a person without disturbance and interference. Aybek is sure that those who adhere to a strong religious belief are more resilient to extremism.

Ukraine

Aybek's original documents were taken away in Syria, so he could not escape. Since then, he often had to falsify them in order to travel to Ukraine. With falsified documents in Ukraine, he went on to work in Poland. When he left Syria, an Uzbek living in Ukraine helped him with the documents. As it turned out, he was a representative of ISIS, and he himself had intentions to go to Syria, but Aybek managed to talk him out of it. This Uzbek told the recruiters about Aybek and this angered them. They found him and attempted to kill him, but he managed to avoid them and escape. Later, this Uzbek was caught by the SSU (Security Service of Ukraine) for overstaying his passport, and his interrogation revealed information about Aybek. The Uzbek was released free of charge.

Aybek claims that the SSU do not send people to jail for travelling to Syria. For example, HT is not banned in Ukraine, Ukraine accepts the presence of an ideology if there are no illegal actions. Thus, according to Aybek, there is an unofficial agreement among Syrian jaamats and groups "not to touch" Ukraine. When Europe invited Ukraine to intervene in Syria, Ukraine refused. In Turkey, the same rule was in effect, but after the terrorist attack at Ata-Turk airport, Turkey turned aggressively against ISIS. The motive for the terrorist attack was because Turkey had closed its borders, it had stopped the flow of newcomers to Syria. Turkey also closed the borders to women and children, because those who came through Turkey posed an ideological threat to Turkey.

After leaving Syria, Aybek followed developments on news channels. He truly wished ISIS ceased to exist. While staying in Ukraine, he felt lonely and depressed due to a lack of money and communication with friends and family. He avoided local Muslims and did not want to have any contact with them. His overall impressions of Ukraine and Europe are positive. He also did not want to return to Kyrgyzstan.

Appeal to the UN

In 2015 Aybek had been in Turkey working with UN personnel to help women and children escape from Syria as well as preventing four people from entering Syria to fight. He continued to help in this way until Syria tightened control of the borders and it became more difficult to get people out of Syria. Aybek is offended by the fact that Kyrgyzstan does not take these facts into account and claims that for the authorities all those who have been to Syria are just terrorists.

Detention

According to Aybek, the SSU detained him not according to their policy, but on the instructions of Interpol. This was his first detention outside Syria. The SSU offered him a deal. If he voluntarily confessed, he would be given a six month sentence. However, he thought that would be too long because in those days Kyrgyzstani courts only sentenced people to house arrest for 'Syria travels.' In that hope, he refused the deal and decided to return to Kyrgyzstan.

After arriving there, he confessed everything to GKNB (State Committee for National Security of KR). He did this because he did not want strangers to be the sources of information about him. He even showed the GKNB photos of himself taken in Syria, which they would not have found for themselves. Local law enforcement agencies were surprised at such a detailed and open confession. Aybek decided to confess voluntarily because of the example of his friend in Turkey who had confessed to everything and received a short term. Aybek was expecting a moderate sentence, taking into account all his confessions, but instead he was sentenced to four years. Currently, he has served a year and three months. On return to Kyrgyzstan, the media presented him as a militant from Ukraine who was preparing to commit a terrorist act in the Kyrgyz Republic, although he had no such intention. After arrest he was severely tortured. He believes that many prisoners are imprisoned under the Articles of Terrorism and Extremism and receive unfair punishment.

In prison

Aybek is in the same prison cell with those who supported different ideologies: HIT, JN and others. Prisoners do not refer to each other by the name of their organisation, but by colour; for example, ISIS is black, JN is green. He does not identify himself with anyone and has positioned himself as separate from others and prays separately from them. Those who still adhere to their organisations get help, for instance, food from outside. The connection is not so strong anymore, but the remnants of adherents on the outside keep in touch with them.

Aybek complains about conditions in prison. Prisoners' needs are totally ignored and he calls the stay in prison 'mental torture.' According to him, if they want to go on strike against the conditions and if journalists come to report on it, the authorities will claim that they are just terrorists. Such a response will make others calm down and their interests will not be protected. This is unlike other convicts whose interests will be taken into account to some extent and dialogue with them might be possible. Aybek says the 'Terrorist' label is a huge stigma and many are not guilty of terrorism. There is also a problem for their relatives visiting them in prison. They risk being accused and prosecuted for complicity with the prisoners. Common law wives cannot come and visit them, only those who are officially married have that opportunity. When temporarily in the Ukrainian pre-trial detention facility, he noted more humane conditions than those he currently experiences.

At the moment Aybek does not recognise any religious authority himself, despite the fact that some religious convicts still see imams or sheikhs as authorities. He considers his HT cellmate as a blind believer. He is interested in historical literature and wants to learn English and plant a flower in his cell. He keeps a diary where he writes his thoughts and conclusions.

Self-Reflection

He regrets a lot about his life choices especially that he was unable to fulfil his mother's hopes as the eldest son. For this he feels a great sense of shame, which for some time made him want to stay in Syria and die there. Because of this guilty feeling he believes he is unable to build a relationship with his mother and siblings. During arguments with his family he often hears "we did not force you to go" which irritates him greatly. His mother and brother work in the agricultural sector and believe that they do not have major financial problems. He bears a grudge against his mother, who does not support his daughter and his wife, even though she has the ability to provide some financial assistance. One of his consolations is his wife, who knows his hardships and still stands by his side. After being released from prison, he expects to often receive lectures on life from his relatives.

He does not like himself, he does not like life because of everything he has gone through, but he believes the world is interesting. He considers himself to be a whiner and pessimist and regrets that he missed his youth because of all that occurred. Religion is the only thing that helps him. He says he can't expect anything bad from it, so he is forced to live the time that Allah has given him - disappointed in people, but not in faith. He got close to religion after Syria, but had no time to think and he cannot say that he was overly sincere about religion before he was detained. He admits that he went there as a religious fanatic and did not understand how he was involved in Syria. If the question of going to Syria were to arise now, Aybek's response would be definite "no." Regarding other religions and Sufism, he believes that every man has chosen his own path. Being here, he thinks of how war and death psychologically affected him. He recalls those events with fear and wonders how he survived.

Plans for the future

Aybek is waiting for the day of his release and believes that his identification documents will be restored. He would like to go to Jailoo (mountain areas) and live alone in the countryside with his family – he considers this to be a blessing. He also wishes to live in developed countries, either in France or Ukraine. He attempted to go to France as a political refugee in 2015 and considers it easier to live in developed countries than in the Kyrgyz Republic. He believes it will be difficult to live with his relatives as they may have different views, and his mother is not particularly religious. He is also afraid that if he stays in the country, the security forces will follow him forever. He doesn't particularly want to live in constant poverty after all this suffering.

ANNEX D – SIGNIFICANT IDEOLOGUES

Rashid Kamalov

Rashid Kamalov was the imam of Al-Sarakhsiy mosque in Kara-Suu city, Osh province of Kyrgyzstan; ethnic Uzbek, son of famous religious figure Muhammadrafik (Rafik-kori) Kamalov (Leonard, 2015).

According to the authoritative French Islamic scholar, Professor Stephane Dudu-anon, Rafik Kamalov and his missing relative, Abduvali-kori Mirzaev, were leading figures in so-called reformist Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia. Kamalov Sr. has been suspected of aiding terrorists since early 2006 and was summoned for interrogation, but was released after there being insufficient grounds for his arrest. In August 2006, Muhammadrafiq Kamalov was shot dead by special forces as he crossed the military checkpoint at the border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Authorities later claimed that there had been a joint Uzbek-Kyrgyz special anti-terrorist operation in the Osh region. Like his father, Kamalov Jr. reportedly allowed members of various Islamic parties, including HT, to pray in his mosque, but has publicly stated that he is not affiliated with the organisation and does not support its goals of establishing an Islamic caliphate (Program: Central Asia, 2015).

On February 9, 2015, Rashid Kamalov was arrested and charged with incitement of religious hatred, and storage and dissemination of extremist materials (Global Freedom of Expression, 2015). DVDs and CDs found during the search of Kamalov's home at the time of his detention formed the basis for the charge. These were recordings of imam Rashid Kamalov's sermon on the meaning of 'caliphate.' According to Kamalov, he gave a sermon in July 2014 during a Friday prayer attended by nearly 5000 people. He answered questions about the caliphate's meaning, ISIS, and his involvement in the war in Syria in his sermon (Global Freedom of Expression, 2015).

Kamalov's lawyers argued that his sermon was based on the Quran and Hadiths, and that it did not include speech that incited violence or extremism. Kamalov's defence is that he had not been directly supporting ISIS but provided support for the concept of a caliphate based on his interpretation of Scripture. On October 08, 2015, Rashid Kamalov was sentenced to five years for distributing extremist materials. He was accused of "inciting religious hatred using his official position" and "distribution of extremist materials during public events." During the trial, it was found that Kamalov had not been officially appointed as an imam of the As-Sarakhsiy mosque in Kara-Suu city as required by the Muftiat. Taking this into account, the court reclassified the charge's article, removing the aggravating circumstance "with the use of official position" (Global Freedom of Expression, 2015).

Conflicting views exist about Kamalov. His supporters believe his crime was being too independent, in that he was critical of government, especially the Uzbek government. A few weeks before his arrest, a witness said he had publicly criticised the GKNB for using the threat of extremism charges to extort money from young men from the Uzbek minority in Osh. The charges against him are considered retribution by his followers (Trilling, 2015). One supporter claims that Rashid Kamalov did a great job of reducing the appeal of radicalism, and by arresting him, the authorities damaged themselves. Many young believers are disappointed by his arrest and radicalisation.

According to Vitaly Ponomarev, it could be a political order coming from a neighbouring country (Uzbekistan); there was a story about the attempt to organise the murder of imam Kamalov, which was not reflected in the Kyrgyzstan press. Moreover, when one way to neutralise this man, a prominent public figure, failed, they tried to undertake it differently (Program: Central Asia, 2015).

On the other hand, a number of interviewees in this research claimed they knew Kamalov and that he was involved in radicalizing young people and allegedly sending them to Syria, including two of his own nephews. There are also claims that he was the mentor of the region's most prolific terrorist leader, Abu Saloh.

Abu Salah

Abu Saloh/Abu Salohiy/Abu Salah (Original name: Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov), organization "Katibat tawhid val-Jihod"

Abu Salah is generally regarded as the most popular and aggressive propagandist of jihad in Kyrgyzstan. At least eight of the interviewees either directly or indirectly referred to him as being involved with their decision to go. Former Head of Jamaat/ Katibat at-tawhid wa-al-jihad (till the end of 2019), which was based on Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but also included other Central Asians. He was born in 1991 in the village of Kashkar-Kyshtak in Karasu District of Osh Oblast. He is an ethnic Uzbek and is fluent in Uzbek, Uighur, Russian and Arabic. He studied in one of the madrassas of Osh. In the early 2000s, he received his theological education at the al-Fath al-Islamiya Islamic University in Syria. After graduation, he returned to Kyrgyzstan and worked as an assistant imam at a mosque in the Osh region. Rashid Kori Kamolov was a spiritual mentor to Abu Salah. In 2012, Abu Saloh travelled to Syria where he joined the Al Nusrah Front which was then the local branch of al Qaeda. In 2014, he created KTJ as a sub-unit within the Al Nusrah Front primarily for Uzbek jihadists.

He was active both as an amir (combat commander) and a jihadist ideologue, calling in several dozen of his video messages for others to join the jihadists in the Middle East, or to contribute financially (ishtirak bi-l-mal). Among the known attacks associated with Abu Saloh in Kyrgyzstan are when at 2.00 am on 17 September. 2015, members of his group attacked the Head of the Ahmadiyya community in the Osh region, Ulugbek Turdakhunov, stabbing him twice in the chest and smashing his leg. He was seriously wounded but survived. On 22 December, 2015, the group attacked another Ahmadi, Yunusjan Abduljalilov, who was shot by two of three men in a Mercedes car as he was talking to a friend outside his house. They shone a torch light into his face and shot him repeatedly, nine bullets entered his body, killing him on the way to the hospital.

These attacks were part of a special mission organised by Abu Salah in Syria involving the dispatch of men and material to Kyrgyzstan (kyzy, 2015). Although reports claim the team was dispatched to steal money from rich people, there appears to be no public evidence for that. Instead, the testimony of the individuals involved indicate that the aim appears to have been to stop what was perceived as an effective campaign of dissuasion of potential recruits for his 'jihad.' The leader of the assassination mission, Giesdin Jamoldinov, said:

"I came here for a special task. I was given the task of killing those Ahmadis who were dissuading (people) from going to Syria. They are becoming an obstacle for us from all sides. I brought weapons and some money with me. Soon after coming here, after making enquiries, we found (them) and started our attempts" (KTRK TV, 2016).

These attacks represent a possible unique event in the modus operandi of Islamist extremists. It seems to be the first recorded incident of an FTF team sent back from abroad to conduct a specific assassination mission. It is also the first indication that a preventing violent extremism or deradicalisation effort may have been of such operational significance that a terrorist group has felt it necessary to invest such capital in terms of men and money to try and stop the process.

On August 30, 2016, Abu Salah masterminded a terrorist attack in Bishkek. The Uighur suicide bomber who blew up the Chinese embassy in Bishkek came to Kyrgyzstan from Turkey with a Tajik passport. Abu Salah is also alleged to have been behind the terror attacks in St. Petersburg on 13 August, 2017 when 15 people were killed by a suicide bomber. Abu Salah denies any involvement in the St Petersburg attack, saying that it was an al Qaeda operation.

After six years of leading the 'Katibat,' group, HTS leaders insisted that Abu Salah be removed from his position as amir, leaving him with the status of "imam." This led to a split in the Katibat. Abu Salah himself and his supporters created a new group in Idlib, Jaish ul-Muhajir. The new leader of "Katibat," Sheikh Abdulaziz (Weiss, 2020), invited his associate from Turkey - Ahlidin Novkatiy to become the new imam of 'Katibat' raising questions about Abu Salah's fitness to be an imam as well as appearing to confirm that the ability to interpret sharia in terrorist organisations is related to political power rather than righteousness, as prescribed in scripture.

According to the Uzbekistan-based Centre for Studying Regional Threats, Abdulaziz's motivation – Abu Salah came out from under control, insisting that he is the only one with extensive combat experience, "clean before Allah and before his brothers-mojahideen". In fact, he insisted on running the financial affairs of Katibat independently. Both new Katibat leaders managed to discredit Abu Salah and soon achieved his arrest. He was taken into custody in Idlib by representatives of the Sharia court of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The formal charge was embezzlement (Botobekov, 2021). However, these reports are disputed by his supporters who insist that he was not charged and is a free man (Research Manager, 2021). Abu Salah has not made any broadcasts in recent months to verify this version of events.

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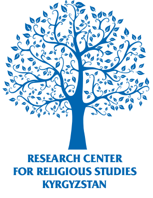

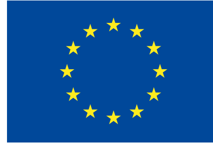

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