



Photo: Timothy Harris

# VULNERABLE TO MANIPULATION

## Interviews with Migrant Youth and Youth Remittance-Recipients in the Kyrgyz Republic

MAY 2016

# Executive Summary

Research conducted by Mercy Corps and Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) in Kyrgyzstan<sup>1</sup> reveals a number of risk factors related to violence that exist within the studied youth population of southern Kyrgyzstan. This research was conducted between March and May 2016 in the southern provinces of Osh, Jalalabad, Batken, and in the northern province of Issyk-Kul. In 2010, southern Kyrgyzstan saw an outbreak of violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek citizens. Known locally as the Osh Events, this violence resulted in mass casualties, displacement and destruction of physical infrastructure in the South. In addition, southern Kyrgyzstan is a known origin of people migrating to Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra or the so-called Islamic State, with official figures citing fewer than 500 people from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>2</sup> While this research did not specifically seek out people who migrated to join the fight in the Middle East, some respondents were directly aware of neighbors, friends, acquaintances or people from their communities who had gone. Issyk-Kul was selected as a comparator province for this study due to its multi-ethnic composition and lack of conflict history.

Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a young, rapidly expanding population, high levels of rural poverty, insufficient domestic jobs for working-age people, and a high dependence on Russia as a source of remittances. The precipitous reduction in remittances from Russia due to contractions in the Russian economy in the last two years and changes in the ruble/som exchange rate have spurred questions about the population's vulnerability to destabilization or recruitment to jihadi organizations.

Researchers interviewed 159 people in these four provinces of Kyrgyzstan, including migrant youth, remittance-receiving youth, and key informants drawn from the communities. Perceptions, regardless of accuracy, create a reality for the people who hold those views. This paper does not seek to comment on the truth or falsehood of those perceptions. Rather, this research hopes to shed light on the consistency of themes of note. Vulnerabilities to manipulation appear to exist in the three southern provinces studied—Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken—as well as Issyk-Kul in the North. However, the frequency and texture of interview responses supports the view that there is enhanced risk among youth populations from the southern provinces. Additionally, the extent of combined factors would seem to indicate that while there are some differing risk factors confronting ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority in the South, both warrant attention.

## Key Findings

Violence and recruitment to violent groups are neither inevitable nor predictable based on our findings. While southern Kyrgyzstan has a history of communal violence and is the origin of some people who have become involved in the conflict in Syria and Iraq, the interview responses in this research provide no clear indication that there is either an imminent risk of future violence or expansion of recruitment to violent extremist organizations among these youth. However, a number of common themes of frustration, anger and animosity across migrant and remittance-receiving youth raise concern of the potential for manipulation toward violence. Of particular note is the identification of themes through this research that align with the recruitment messages used by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in Syria and Iraq and consistent with findings from Mercy Corps' multi-country research into youth attraction to violence, particularly related to corruption, inequality and injustice.<sup>3</sup> Though it is unlikely that any single risk factor in isolation is sufficient to cause devolution into violence or recruitment into violent jihadi organizations, the combination of any of the

<sup>1</sup> For brevity, Mercy Corps uses the term Kyrgyzstan throughout the report, rather than the official "Kyrgyz Republic."

<sup>2</sup> <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-return-from-syria>; <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kyrgyzstan-fighters/26969666.html>

<sup>3</sup> Tucker, N., (2016), "Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging," CERIA Brief No. 14, Central Asia Program. Mercy Corps (2015), Youth and Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence: [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps\\_YouthConsequencesReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf)

identified factors suggests the potential for youth to be successfully manipulated by those seeking political, economic or ideological gain within Kyrgyzstan and beyond its borders. Based on our data, we have no reason to believe, however, that there is greater risk of jihadi violence versus political or pre-electoral violence versus inter-communal violence. If manipulation towards violence does occur, any and all of these levers could be pulled in stages or simultaneously.

The purpose of this type of research is to provide policy makers and key stakeholders timely analysis so that evidence-based interventions can be made to prevent vulnerabilities from manifesting into crises or further attraction to violent extremist agendas. Five specific themes emerged in the course of the research that illuminate the conditions that place youth in Kyrgyzstan at risk of manipulation towards violence.

### **Divisions between majority and minority ethnicities are evident and fraught.**

A substantial number of respondents identified animosities or distrust towards another ethnic group in Kyrgyzstan, exacerbated by physical and social separation of ethnicities. While southern Kyrgyzstan has long had both homogeneous and heterogeneous communities, our conversations indicated that there are increasingly fewer places where the ethnicities meet: Often ethnic Uzbeks are pursuing education in Uzbek schools; ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks frequently worship in different mosques; private sector employment, when available domestically, is only accessible through family and acquaintance networks, often ethnically-based. In addition and related is the social separation that occurs with circles of friends, family and acquaintances. Critical and derogatory comments were directed in both directions between ethnic minority youth and majority youth. Further, approximately one-quarter of ethnic minorities interviewed described perceptions or experiences of exclusion and injustice related to ethnicity, including a belief in inequitable application of laws. A notable portion of ethnic majority Kyrgyz in this study articulated sentiments that demonstrated concern of threats to their national identity and culture from ethnic minorities.

The separation between ethnic groups is, in part, exacerbated by language differences. In an apparent effort to redress this issue, Kyrgyzstan has taken the step of requiring Kyrgyz language proficiency for entry into university or for entry into state jobs. While the long-term hope is undoubtedly for linguistic integration to facilitate greater national harmony and identity, the short-term result, voiced by young people we spoke with, is exclusion of ethnic minorities in higher education or into the few steady salaried jobs that exist in southern Kyrgyzstan.

### **Fault lines are emerging along differing patterns of religious expression and perceived piety.**

Religiosity is broadly perceived to be on the rise among young people across ethnicities. However, perceptions of differences in piety expressed by respondents shows that there are fault lines emerging on two fronts. The first is along ethnic divisions, particularly between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz, where differences in behavior and dress are creating visible separations and voiced animosities. A number of youth interviewed equated more conservative religious appearance and behavior *a priori* with extremism. This type of association risks further dividing youth across religiosity, marginalizing more conservative groups, which could ultimately lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Simultaneously, the narrative, conveyed

initially by the Kyrgyz government, that the majority of those from Kyrgyzstan who have joined Islamic State are of Uzbek ethnicity, seems to be embedding itself in public perception.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of accuracy, the perception that a specific minority ethnic group is dressing differently, displaying differing religious behaviors, and is demonstrating attraction to extremist violence abroad and potentially back in Kyrgyzstan risks creating identification of this group as deviant and a threat. An actual or perceived affinity for participation in violent extremism due to ethnicity can further exacerbate ethnic tensions, harden ethnic identity, and risk destabilizing communities, particularly if targeting on the basis of identity is allowed to occur.

The second front exists between the practice of traditional cultural Islam and more conservative Islam. The perceived disproportionate number of madrassahs compared with public schools; the appearance of wandering *daavatchi* missionary preachers; the avoidance of cultural celebrations like Nooruz; and wearing Middle Eastern or South Asian attire is an affront to those who see Central Asia's syncretic form of Islam as part of the national culture and heritage. For many youth, particularly among ethnic Kyrgyz, Islam seems to play more of a cultural role in their identity than a religious role. Globally, Salafi jihadi groups have demonstrated that exploiting divides between true believers and apostates is fertile ground for strategic gains.<sup>5</sup> Most commonly, this division is realized along the Sunni and Shia divide (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Yemen) or along the Salafi and Sufi divide (e.g., West Africa, Horn of Africa), with Shia and Sufis both being depicted as apostates.<sup>6</sup> The growing divide between visibly conservative Muslims and less overtly observant Muslims has the potential to be exploited in Kyrgyzstan, particularly with the overlay of ethnicity.

### **Lack of confidence in democratic processes and government is eroding the credibility of the state.**

The concept of a unified pluralistic state appears to be deeply fractured among a notable portion of the youth interviewed in this research. The lack of confidence in elected officials to productively engage with the people and to equitably govern is a strong theme across youth in all geographic regions and includes perceptions from both migrants and remittance-recipients. And while there were some noted differences in issues of equity and justice across ethnic groups as mentioned above, criticism of elected officials and state entities to satisfactorily serve the people was evident in voices across ethnicities and regions. There is strong articulation and indignation by respondents of perceived systemic corruption across various levels of government and service deliverers, including schools and hospitals. With many youth from this research not having voted in the most recent parliamentary elections and other youth stating that they willingly accepted money to vote a certain way, legitimacy of the electoral process in the eyes of many of these youth is low. The lack of legitimacy of state actors and processes undermines the integrity of the state as a whole and serves to create a fragmented national landscape. Further, Kyrgyzstan lacks a conceptual construct of what it means to be a Kyrgyzstan national. There does not appear to be a compelling or internalized narrative to convey a uniform sense of national pride across ethnic groups, religious adherents, or northerners and southerners participating in this research. In pluralistic societies, the role of and confidence in the function of state is essential to realize national cohesion. In absence of a unifying identity through trust and confidence in shared citizenship in the State, there is a potential that alternate identities will emerge to supersede or supplant the concept of State.

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<sup>4</sup> Kudryavtseva, T. (2015), *More than 70 Percent of Kyrgyz Citizens Went to Fight in Syria – Representatives of Uzbek Nationality*. Retrieved from <http://www.eng.24.kg/community/176140-news24.html>

<sup>5</sup> Salafi Jihadist groups emphasize that it is essential to return to the Islam as practiced by the Sala (ancestors); and that defense of Islam through jihad is a duty. Promotion of the use of sharia under territories of control is a common feature. For a more detailed discussion on Salafi-Jihadi organizations, see: Jones, S.G. (2014), *A Persistent Threat: Evolution of al Qa'ida and other Salafi Jihadists*, Rand National Defense Research Institute.

<sup>6</sup> United States Institute for Peace (2015), *Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan*.

## **Youth are frustrated by unmet economic expectations and the pressure to migrate.**

In spite of the deep economic crisis in Russia, young people continue to migrate abroad for work, recognizing that job availability and incomes are higher outside the borders of Kyrgyzstan. While work is still available in Russia, it is less predictable and less regular than previously. The net result is that many economic migrants are realizing decreased income while abroad. Frequently working multiple jobs as unskilled labor, young people described the recent difficulties to make ends meet abroad. Decreased incomes are causing migrants to send fewer remittances back home. Compounding this challenge is the substantial drop in exchange rate between the Russian ruble and the Kyrgyz som, resulting in a negative change in the value of those remittances. Young people described dissatisfaction with sudden and profound decreases in disposable income and living standards and the inability to find adequately-paying work at home. Further, some respondents described a “lost generation,” with concerns that the skill level and education level of an entire generation is decreasing. Some young people are recognizing that if education does not equate with higher earning potential, then there is no logic in remaining in school.

The concerning aspect for stability, however, is not likely the result of dire absolute poverty from these remittance reductions, though that undoubtedly exists in southern Kyrgyzstan. The real issue revealed in conversations with youth and key informants alike is the experience of relative deprivation that seems to be pervading all corners of the southern population. People may be better off today than they were in the 1990s, but these young people have keen awareness that they are far worse off today than they were just two years ago.<sup>7</sup> It is the unmet expectation of purchasing power, quality of life and growth that is a source of economic frustration revealed in the interviews.

## **Counter-narratives on the risks of going to Syria are being heard...but not fully understood.**

Across all regions, researchers heard frequent stories of how teachers, police, or imams have been highly visible in conveying the dangers of going to Syria. People were aware of public outreach events by the Ministry of Interior in Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad in 2016. Multiple respondents talked about the active engagement of the 10<sup>th</sup> Department of the Ministry of Interior in raising awareness among the population, including through meetings and roundtables. The breadth of outreach from these stakeholders and from the media is apparent from the numerous references throughout this research.

However, nearly half of the youth interviewed in this study overtly stated that while they may have heard of radical organizations or could name specific groups like Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida, ISIS, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or others like Taliban, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Ahmadiyah or Akramiyya, they only know that these groups are illegal, yet are not really aware of the motivations or intentions of these groups or the specifics on why they are a threat.<sup>8</sup> Youth also largely stated that they did not know much about who is fighting against whom in Syria. In absence of information pertaining to *why* groups are a threat, there is a risk that extremists can fill in those narratives in a way that appeals to young people who are ill-equipped to consider counter-narratives.

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<sup>7</sup> The physical asset base of quality housing stock, large number of imported vehicles, and enhanced infrastructure is notably advanced from those early post-Soviet years. It would be hard to deny that the flow of remittances created a significant level of favorable economic conditions for many people.

<sup>8</sup> ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan follow Salafi-Jihadi ideology. Akramiyya also follows Salafi beliefs, however the extent to which jihadi violence is part of their philosophy is unclear. The Taliban follow Deobandi ideology. While Hizb-ut-Tahrir has some features in common with Salafi groups, they pursue a broader view of pan-Islam.

# Recommendations

- **Build greater trust in government through community engagement.** While many people in this research described Kyrgyzstan as a “democracy,” few articulated that their interests were well-represented by government. There appears to be a wide gulf between those who govern and the governed. Youth particularly feel the inattention of elected officials to their needs and the needs of their communities. Elected officials should be encouraged to conduct listening tours with their constituents in periods outside of election cycles. Open forums and round-tables sponsored by parliamentarians and local government officials can enhance the perception that government is taking an active interest in the needs of the population. And responding to some of the needs that are articulated in these dialogue events can go a long way towards confidence-building in government.
- **Strengthen a shared sense of national identity through a national integration plan.** National dividers abound: young people noted the lingering Soviet-style designations by ethnicity within passports, the challenges with access to jobs and higher education because of Kyrgyz language requirements, and the different worldviews developed through public schools, Uzbek schools, or madrassahs. The creation of a comprehensive national integration plan is essential to assess these dividers, to seek broad public participation, and to craft tangible and meaningful steps towards government-sponsored integration efforts. Special attention needs to be given to redressing the insufficient Kyrgyz language skills among ethnic minorities and ensuring that some form of temporary language accommodation is given to ensure greater minority access to government jobs and education.
- **Use community development to promote stronger inter-ethnic connections between youth.** Community-development initiatives can serve as substantive ways to bring youth from ethnically different groups together. Jointly identifying shared challenges and working to design and implement solutions can alleviate those issues while simultaneously fostering deeper relations between people, groups and communities.
- **Enhance confidence in the electoral process and greater involvement of migrant youth.** Enhancing trust in government requires improving confidence and participation in the electoral process. The present administration is taking important steps in eliminating election fraud, including the incorporation of biometric data and public statements against vote-buying. Legal enforcement against officials who buy votes should be swift and well-publicized. Encouraging migrant youth to vote will require not only confidence-building, but also mechanisms to facilitate absentee-voting, registration of biometric data, and awareness campaigns to enhance voter literacy around party platforms. Strengthening civic education at the primary and secondary school level can instill an appreciation of personal responsibility, an understanding of the function of government and a commitment to working towards a vibrant democratic state.
- **Build awareness and tolerance of differences in religious traditions at school.** The state should work with religious leaders and schools to develop a nation-wide curriculum on religious differences and cultural practices within Islam and across other world religions. All schools, including public and private, religious and secular should incorporate this curriculum, not only as part of religious-literacy,

but as a mechanism for promoting greater understanding of legitimate differences in lawful forms of religious practice.

- **Provide youth with greater coping skills to resist the influence of violent groups.** Civil society organizations and schools can effectively combine their effort to provide youth with transferable life skills before they have the possibility of migrating in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. A focus on life skills can help young people to not only more confidently navigate life's social, political, economic, and personal transitions, but also be more resilient to messages of violence - whether along ethnic lines or for recruitment to international groups.
- **Expand counter-narratives on violent extremism to create more specificity on risks.** An absence of sufficient specificity about motivations and threats posed by extremist groups can create curiosity from young people about those groups. Social media, rumors, and active extremist recruiters fill the void with details that serve their own agenda. While the government should be commended for its robust outreach efforts on dissuading people from migrating to Syria, adjusting the message to include more details about the particular threats posed by these groups can serve to create greater negative impressions about them and combat the narrative that they can create viable alternatives to the existing government. Using civil society and youth peers to amplify the message can help reach a broader audience.

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# Introduction

Research conducted by Mercy Corps and Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI) in March and April 2016 in Kyrgyzstan reveals that there are a number of risk factors related to violence that exist within the studied youth population of southern Kyrgyzstan. While it is unlikely that any of these factors in isolation is sufficient to cause devolution into communal violence or recruitment into violent extremist organizations (VEOs), the combination of any of these factors could increase the potential for youth to be successfully manipulated by those seeking political, economic or ideological gain within Kyrgyzstan and beyond its borders. This research, covering four provinces, indicates that while vulnerabilities to manipulation exist in both southern Kyrgyzstan as well as Issyk-Kul in the north, the frequency and texture of interview responses suggests that there is comparatively enhanced overall risk of manipulation among youth populations from Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken. Additionally, while there are some differing risk factors confronting both ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority in the south, both groups of youth are expressing a commonality of many frustrations. One should not conclude, however, that the interview data reveals that there is a certain probability of violence or that respondents in this research are predisposed towards violent action or recruitment to VEOs. However, the expressed themes emerging from conversations with these youth point to many of the same set of frustrations and issues that are reportedly being used by recruiters to attract Central Asians to participation in VEOs, including ethnic exclusion and marginalization.<sup>9</sup>

Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a young, rapidly expanding population, high levels of rural poverty, insufficient domestic jobs for working-age people, and a high dependence on Russia as a source of remittances. Evidence, supported by these research findings, suggests that an enormous number of young people travel abroad for work at any given time: Official statistics place the number near half a million; with unofficial reports substantially higher.<sup>10</sup> During this research, it was not uncommon to find communities devoid of nearly all young men between the ages of 18 and 25. Layered on top of these predominantly economic considerations is a history of conflict and divisions along ethnic and geographic boundaries, particularly in southern Kyrgyzstan. The precipitous reduction in remittances from Russia due to contractions in the Russian economy in the last two years and changes in the ruble/som exchange rate have spurred questions about the population's vulnerability to destabilization or recruitment to Salafi jihadi organizations.

## Research Questions

The goal of this study was to understand the vulnerability of youth to be mobilized towards violence within the borders of Kyrgyzstan or beyond. Under the heading of violence, this research considered the vulnerabilities to communal and political violence, as well as Salafi jihadi violence.<sup>11</sup> The rapid change in household remittance income in Kyrgyzstan and employment status of migrants related to the deep economic crisis in Russia had raised speculation that there may be changes in attitude among youth related to violence. Simultaneously, the reported participation of youth from southern Kyrgyzstan in the war in Syria and Iraq raised further questions about whether economic and social conditions were playing a notable role in vulnerability of youth to attraction toward Salafi jihadi organizations. Additionally, while considered to have greater freedom of religion in Kyrgyzstan, compared with neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life designates Kyrgyzstan as having "high" level of government restriction on religion, with 32 percent of respondents indicating that they did not feel free to practice their

<sup>9</sup> Tucker, Noah (2015), Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses, MSI.

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.rescue.org.ru/1108\\_the-number-of-kyrgyz-labor-migrants-in-russia-has-increased-due-to-the-eeu.html](http://en.rescue.org.ru/1108_the-number-of-kyrgyz-labor-migrants-in-russia-has-increased-due-to-the-eeu.html) <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/migrants-rejoice-kyrgyzstan-joins-russia-led- Eurasian-economic-union/ri9627> and <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15838&LangID=E>

<sup>11</sup> Salafi Jihadist groups emphasize that it is essential to return to the Islam as practiced by the Salaf (ancestors); and that defense of Islam through jihad is a duty. Promotion of the use of sharia under territories of control is a common feature. For a more detailed discussion on Salafi-Jihadi organizations, see: Jones, S.G. (2014), *A Persistent Threat: Evolution of al Qaeda and other Salafi Jihadists*, Rand National Defense Research Institute.

religion.<sup>12</sup> Further, given public statements by former Prime Minister Temir Sariev about the need to remove “foreign adaptations” of Islam from Kyrgyzstan, such as the hijab, there exists the potential that changes in some aspects of religious freedom may emerge.<sup>13</sup> To this end, we sought to examine:

- To what extent does rapid-onset household-level economic deterioration affect acceptance of violence?
- To what extent does perception of religious freedom, including political voice, affect acceptance of violence?
- To what extent does attitude toward the national government change as economic conditions and perception of religious freedoms, including political voice, change simultaneously?
- To what extent does attitude toward Salafi jihadi organizations change as economic conditions and perception of religious freedoms, including political voice, change simultaneously?

Perceptions, regardless of accuracy, create a reality for the people who hold those views. This paper does not seek to comment on the truth or falsehood of those perceptions. Rather, this research hopes to shed light on the consistency of themes of note. The purpose of this type of research is to provide policy makers and key stakeholders timely analysis so that interventions can be made to prevent vulnerabilities from manifesting into crises. As these interviews are a snapshot in time, they do not provide insight into changes in risk over time nor do they provide a comparative level of urgency at present. Despite the comprehensive nature of this qualitative research and the key themes, one should not conclude that the country has reached an irreversible tipping point toward instability. There are signs of concern, however, that need to be addressed in the short to medium term. Based on the findings of this research, it is strongly recommended that a quantitative survey be administered in the near term and subsequent annual quantitative surveys be utilized precisely as a tool to gauge changes in attitudes and perceptions and, in turn, vulnerability among youth.

The report concludes with recommendations that emerged from analysis of the data, as well as related suggestions from the youth and key informants interviewed.<sup>14</sup>

## Methodology

This research was conducted in Kyrgyzstan between March and May 2016 in the southern provinces of Osh, Jalalabad, Batken, and in the northern province of Issyk-Kul. In 2010 southern Kyrgyzstan saw an outbreak of violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek citizens. Known locally as the Osh Events, this violence resulted in mass casualties, displacement and destruction of physical infrastructure in the South. In addition, southern Kyrgyzstan is a known origin of people migrating to Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra or the so-called Islamic State, with official figures citing fewer than 500 people from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>15</sup> Issyk-Kul was selected as a comparator province due to its multi-ethnic composition and lack of conflict history. While this research did not specifically seek out people who migrated to join the fight in the Middle East, some respondents were directly aware of neighbors, friends, acquaintances or people from their communities who had gone.

<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center (2014), *Government Restrictions Index*, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/appendix-2-government-restrictions-index/>

<sup>13</sup> Tucker, N., (2016), “Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging,” CERIA Brief No. 14, Central Asia Program.

<sup>14</sup> During May 2016, Mercy Corps conducted roundtable meetings with a broad set of stakeholders in Jalalabad, Osh, Batken, Issyk-Kul and Bishkek to review findings and refine recommendations. The recommendations in this report reflect those conversations. Additional detail from those roundtable meetings can be found in the appendix to this report.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State Country Report on Terrorism: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239408.htm>; and <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyzstan-return-from-syria>; <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kyrgyzstan-fighters/26969666.html>

Respondents were identified through a snowball (chain-referral) technique, with initiating points for the snowball in rural and urban areas and ethnically homogenous and heterogeneous communities spread across the four provinces. Quotas were established to ensure that the voices of ethnic majority and ethnic minority youth as well as male and female youth were captured. Trusted key-informants were asked to nominate potential respondents. Respondents were then, in turn, asked to nominate further respondents until the quotas were met. While this non-probability methodology means that that the findings cannot be generalized beyond this particular group of respondents, they provide important considerations of risks and vulnerabilities confronting youth in Kyrgyzstan.

A team of male and female researchers led the face-to-face interviews in the relevant local language (i.e., Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian), using a common interview guide containing three separate semi-structured instruments for use with migrant youth aged 18 through 24, youth aged 18 through 24 who had not migrated but were from remittance-receiving families, and key informants, drawn from community leaders, civil society leaders, religious leaders, police and government officials. Researchers had the latitude to probe for additional relevant and informative data. Researchers interviewed 159 people across the four oblasts, with 129 people in the South and 30 people in the North. Of these, 99 were youth and 60 were key informants.

In total across the four oblasts, sixty-five percent of those interviewed were ethnic Kyrgyz; thirty percent were ethnic Uzbek, and five percent were other (ethnic Tajik, Dungan). Thirty-three percent of all interviewed were female; sixty-seven percent of all interviewed were male. All interviews were manually coded and stored using NVivo 11 software. No names were recorded throughout the research process to protect anonymity of the respondents.

Given the highly sensitive topic and illegality in Kyrgyzstan of involvement in inter-ethnic violence, participation in extremist groups, or acting as a foreign terrorist fighter, researchers did not identify or intentionally seek out youth involved in acts of violent extremism inside of Kyrgyzstan or abroad.

# Key Findings

The major themes that have emerged from the interviews raise concern of a base set of grievances across youth in southern Kyrgyzstan, compounded by polarizing elements related to ethnic differences and perceived religious divergence. Specifically, youth interviewed for this research in southern Kyrgyzstan show evidence of ethnic divisions; with ethnic minorities, primarily Uzbeks, perceiving exclusion and injustice and ethnic majority Kyrgyz perceiving a threat to their national identity and culture [**Infringement of Ethnic Honor**]. This dynamic seems to be exacerbated by the perception of differences of religiosity between these groups and, in some cases, equating minority ethnicity with a *priori* gravitation towards Salafi jihadism [**Perceived Divergence of Religiosity**]. Physical separation of ethnic groups, either in

neighborhoods, homogenous communities, schools, mosques or otherwise, and yet proximate to each other is indicative of insular communities with decreasing opportunities to interact and counter negative perceptions. [**Separation and Isolation**]. Youth who have migrated are exposed to new people and ideas; often living, working, and worshipping with other central Asians, Russian speaking migrants, or Turks and being exposed to both new people and networks. In some cases, this exposure brings youth in contact with recruiters [**Migration Abroad**]. Based on our data, we have no reason to believe, however, that there is greater risk of Salafi jihadi violence versus political or pre-electoral violence versus inter-communal violence. If manipulation does occur, any and all of these levers could be pulled in stages or simultaneously.<sup>16</sup>

Violence and recruitment to violent groups are neither inevitable nor predictable. While southern Kyrgyzstan has a history of communal violence and is the origin of some people who have become involved in the conflict in Syria and Iraq, the interview responses in this research provide no clear indication that there is either an imminent risk of future violence or expansion of recruitment to Salafi jihadi organizations among these youth. However, a number of common themes of frustration, anger and animosity across migrant and remittance-receiving youth raise concern of the potential for manipulation toward violence. Of particular concern is the identification of themes through this research that align with the recruitment messages used by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in Syria and Iraq and consistent with findings from Mercy Corps' multi-country research into youth attraction to violence, particularly related to corruption, inequality and injustice.<sup>1718</sup> Yet there is no indication that the risk of Salafi jihadi violence outweighs the potential of political, pre-electoral or inter-communal violence in this data. Depending on who does the manipulation, any and all of these levers could be pulled in stages or simultaneously.

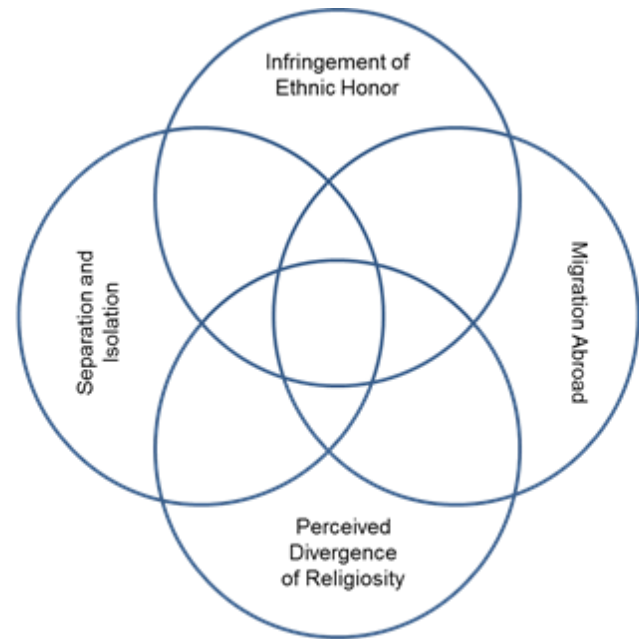


Figure 1: Kyrgyzstan Youth: Risk of Engagement in Violence

<sup>16</sup> A focus on grievances as a key underlying factor leading to instability is insufficient: Conflict entrepreneurs with greed as an underlying motivation must be taken into consideration. Predation, whether by organized crime, separatist leadership, or terrorist group plays a critical role in instability. See Collier, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Tucker, N., (2016), "Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging," CERIA Brief No. 14, Central Asia Program.

<sup>18</sup> Youth and Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence, Mercy Corps, 2015: [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps\\_YouthConsequencesReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf)

Some migrants from Kyrgyzstan have found their way to Syria, though their exact number is highly debated.<sup>19</sup> While this research did not specifically seek out people who

migrated to Syria, some respondents were directly aware of acquaintances, neighbors,

or people from their communities who had gone to Syria. The communities of origin of these youth included two in Batken Oblast, two in Jalalabad Oblast, four in Osh Oblast, and two in Issyk-Kul Oblast. According to the acquaintances, some of these young people migrated to Russia first and then subsequently traveled to Syria. Others, however, had never been in Russia and traveled directly from Kyrgyzstan to Syria. In some of the cases, people cited a change in religious observance and behavior in Kyrgyzstan or in Russia just prior to departure for Syria, implying a relatively rapid change. In other cases, people did not notice any outward changes in behavior. The people who traveled to Syria were described as either average income or poor. A few people suggested that the motivation of their acquaintances was driven by economic factors, including the repayment of loans. Others, including someone who attended mosque with a Syria migrant said that motivation was to speed entry to heaven through jihad. One could surmise that a variety of motivations are at play, with none dominant. References to recruiters and access to finances for travel, however, suggest that these people each interacted with someone who facilitated or encouraged travel. Mercy Corps also knows through global research that third-party accounts of why youth choose to participate in violence often diverges from what participants themselves say about their decisions; thus, these perspectives should be considered as some of many possibilities.



*“When your honor is hurt, when wrong is called right, then we can use force.”*

- Youth Migrant from Jalalabad

Five specific themes emerged in the course of the research that illuminate the conditions that place youth in Kyrgyzstan at risk of manipulation towards violence:

- Ethnic divisions between majority and minority ethnicities are solidifying.
- Fault lines are emerging along differing patterns of religious expression and perceived piety
- Lack of confidence in government is eroding the credibility of state.
- Youth are frustrated by unmet economic expectations and the pressure to migrate.
- Counter-narratives on the risks of going to Syria are being heard, but not fully understood


## **Divisions between ethnic majority and minorities are evident and fraught**

The events of 2010 seem to have left a legacy of caution between ethnic groups, with ethnicities gravitating even more so than before to their own linguistic and ethnic circles. Underneath the surface calmness, inter-ethnic animosities and distrust are evident from numerous comments made throughout this research. With the shadow of the 2010 events still present in people’s minds, open conversations about inter-ethnic relations remain difficult for some people, particularly among key informants. Invocation of undefined “third parties” as agitators and manipulators of youth into violent action is a common narrative. Similarly, there is an expressed sentiment from some that there is no inherent problem between the ethnicities, rather only between some “bad people” or as a result of political forces. Many expressed hope that at with the passage of time, people will “forget” the events of 2010 and that tolerance, if not harmony, will prevail.

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<sup>19</sup> Montgomery, D. and Heathershaw, J., CEDAR (Communities Engaging with Difference in Religion), “Who Says Syria’s Calling? Why It Is Sometimes Better to Admit That We Just Do Not Know” <http://www.cedarnetwork.org/2015/02/17/who-says-syrias-calling-why-it-is-sometimes-better-to-admit-that-we-just-do-not-know-by-john-heathershaw-and-david-w-montgomery/>

However, the extent and tone of comments among respondents, particularly migrant youth and youth remittance recipients, belies a more complex story. More than one-third of all respondents mentioned continued tensions between ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority or made overtly negative statements about another ethnic group. The greatest frequency of comments and depth of tension in the interviews occurred between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in the three southern Oblasts. Literature suggests that large diaspora communities preserve the memory of conflict and thus slow down the healing process in a country.<sup>20</sup> The enormous number of economic migrants from southern Kyrgyzstan who are under 25 years old experienced that difficult period in 2010 during an impressionable time in their lives.



*“I do not support violence in terms of attacking. If the question is about [defending] your family, ethnicity or faith, it is not only possible, but also necessary that this will not happen again in the future.”*

- Youth Migrant from Jalalabad

Distrust and animosity, while perhaps in part a legacy of the 2010 events, is noted in various forms from ethnic Kyrgyz towards ethnic minorities and from ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Dungans towards ethnic Kyrgyz, suggesting a broader division between majority and minority ethnicities. The bravado of ethnic honor plays out in the very few explicit statements where youth affirm that violence can be justified. Additionally, we found that ethnic honor presented itself at times in a form of inter-group jealousy. Not only did it emerge in conversations related to exclusion and injustice in access to jobs or equitable treatment from minorities, but also in descriptions about superior economic and living conditions of certain ethnic groups or superior ability of minorities to start businesses or access less-labor intensive trade jobs abroad. Related to the above discussion on relative deprivation, Stewart found that inter-group inequalities in the social, political and cultural dimensions can be predictive of instability.<sup>21</sup>

Our conversations further indicated that border tensions between Kyrgyzstan and neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and related cross-border tensions between ethnically homogenous communities is potentially having a negative impact on the attitude of ethnic groups towards each other within the border areas of Kyrgyzstan. Among the 27 comments about the borders, people discussed their perception that the tensions along the border not only reflects poorly on the State’s ability to protect its people, but also how inter-country animosity is also realized through local expression between ethnic groups, particularly in Batken and Jalalabad provinces.

While southern Kyrgyzstan has long had both homogeneous and heterogeneous communities, our conversations indicated that there are increasingly fewer places where the ethnicities meet: Often ethnic Uzbeks are pursuing education in Uzbek schools; ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks frequently worship in different mosques; private sector employment, when available domestically, is only accessible through family and acquaintance networks, often ethnically-based. In addition and related is the social separation that occurs with circles of friends, family and acquaintances. Whereas intermarriage between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz was not uncommon in the past, some respondents highlighted challenges that they have faced due to a mixed marriage or attempts at inter-ethnic dating, including threats from young people from a different ethnicity.

<sup>20</sup> Collier, P. and Hoeffler, A. (2004) “Greed and Grievance in Civil War.” in: *Oxford Economic Papers*. 56(4): 563-595, p. 589.

<sup>21</sup> Stewart, F. (2000) Crisis Prevention: Tackling Horizontal Inequalities. *Oxford Development Studies*. 28(3): 245–263; and Stewart, F. (2008) *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

The separation between ethnic groups is, in part, exacerbated by language differences. In an apparent effort to redress this issue, Kyrgyzstan has taken the step of requiring Kyrgyz language proficiency for entry into university or for entry into state jobs. While the long-term hope is undoubtedly for linguistic integration to facilitate greater national harmony and identity, the short-term result, voiced by young people we spoke with, is exclusion of ethnic minorities in higher education or into the few steady salaried jobs that exist in southern Kyrgyzstan. For ethnic Uzbeks who often study at Uzbek-language schools, the hurdles of acquiring these necessary language skills are high. Further, some ethnic Kyrgyz youth described their strong dissatisfaction that ethnic minorities speak in their own language, rather than the language of the state.

Beyond minority exclusion through academic and workplace language requirements, some youth expressed perceptions of injustice in the uneven application of rule of law, manifested both through police interactions and through the courts. All but one of the explicit comments made by youth about unfair treatment by police officers came from ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Tajiks. Further, the perception by some that the police are predominantly, if not exclusively, ethnic Kyrgyz, creates the impression with some that bias is inevitable.

The combination of physical and social separation of ethnicities and perception of group inequity can foster insular communities, particularly in rural areas, further hindering national reconciliation and integration. Taken to extremes, these sentiments can call into question the very essence of a national identity and the overall concept of Kyrgyzstan as an organizing principle for all.

## **Fault lines are emerging along differing patterns of religious expression and perceived piety**

The evolving expression of Islam in southern Kyrgyzstan is broadly noted by youth and key informants and readily observable. While there is some debate on what constitutes religiosity, the increasing number of mosques, enhanced attendance at Friday prayer, reported decreases in alcohol consumption by youth, compared with older generations, change in dress, elimination of music at weddings and earlier marriage for girls suggests that piety is increasing. But while religiosity is perhaps on the rise overall, it is neither perceived as homogenous nor ubiquitous. Importantly, the increasing practice of Islam qua Islam is not necessarily viewed by those interviewed as problematic, with a number of people highlighting the stabilizing and calming effect of Islam. The differences in perception of piety or perceptions of what constitutes appropriate understanding of Islam, however, serve as emerging fault lines that risk using religion as a galvanizing point for manipulation to violence. These fault lines are manifesting on two fronts.



*“Uzbeks are more religious than Kyrgyz. Sometimes when you go in the city, you can see a crowd of women wearing hijabs and mostly they are all Uzbeks. I think Uzbeks are more illiterate. Because of this, they are probably more religious.”*

- Youth Migrant from Osh


The first is along ethnic divisions. The driving impression, often tinged with negativity when articulated by ethnic Kyrgyz, is that ethnic Uzbeks appear more religious than ethnic Kyrgyz; more young girls wear hijab; males are dressing like Arabs or Pakistanis; many boys are educated in madrasah rather than public school; and weddings are following a more conservative style. Simultaneously, the narrative, conveyed initially by the Kyrgyz government, that the majority of those from Kyrgyzstan who have joined Islamic State are of

Uzbek ethnicity, seems to be embedding itself in public perception.<sup>22</sup> Uzbek attraction to extremism or the fight in the Middle East was echoed repeatedly by non-Uzbek interlocutors during the course of this study with numerous mentions of how Uzbeks have a different view of Islam.

Regardless of accuracy, the perception that a specific minority ethnic group is dressing differently, displaying differing religious behaviors, and is demonstrating attraction to extremist violence abroad and potentially back in Kyrgyzstan risks creating identification of this group as deviant and a threat. The outlines of this were notable in a number of comments from people we interviewed. An actual or perceived affinity for participation in violent extremism due to ethnicity can further exacerbate ethnic tensions, harden ethnic identity, and risk destabilizing communities, particularly if targeting on the basis of identity is allowed to occur. Actual or perceived ethnic association with violent extremism indicates the need to better understand the needs and grievances of minority communities, and ensure that greater understanding exists between minority and majority populations. Researchers have suggested that groups with distrust and a perception of vulnerability from another group are at enhanced risk of conflict.<sup>23</sup>

The second front exists between the practice of traditional cultural Islam and more conservative Islam. Certainly there is near uniform agreement in the interview corpus that, unlike Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan protects freedom of religion. But some are expressing concern that there is too much freedom of religion and that with such an accommodating legal structure, Kyrgyzstan opens itself to risk of growing the Salafi/Wahhabi presence. The perceived disproportionate number of madrassahs compared with public schools; the appearance of wandering *daavatchi* missionary preachers; the avoidance of cultural celebrations like Nooruz; and wearing Middle Eastern or South Asian attire is an affront to those who see Central Asia's syncretic form of Islam as part of the national culture and heritage. For many youth, particularly among ethnic Kyrgyz, Islam seems to play more of a cultural role in their identity than a religious role. And in these cases, youth self-describe as Muslim, following some religious traditions because they are part of their understanding of being Central Asian, but not abstaining from alcohol consumption or necessarily adhering to the pillars of Islam.

Globally, Salafi jihadi groups have demonstrated that exploiting divides between true believers and apostates is fertile ground for strategic gains. Most commonly, this division is realized along the Sunni and Shia divide (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Yemen) or along the Salafi and Sufi divide (e.g., West Africa, Horn of Africa), with Shia and Sufis both being depicted as apostates.<sup>24</sup> While some analysts consider Kyrgyzstan less opportune territory for such divisive strategies, believing the practice of Sunni Islam there to be homogenous, the growing divide between visibly conservative Muslims and less overtly observant Muslims has the potential to be exploited, particularly with the overlay of ethnicity.



***“I support the idea of using Sharia as a legal framework for Kyrgyzstan... Compared to the national constitution, which has been changed several times, the Sharia norms are the same since the moment of their creation. They are more stable and universal.”***

- Key Informant from Batken

<sup>22</sup> Kudryavtseva, T. (2015), *More than 70 Percent of Kyrgyz Citizens Went to Fight in Syria – Representatives of Uzbek Nationality*. Retrieved from <http://www.eng.24.kg/community/176140-news24.html>

<sup>23</sup> Eidelson, R. J., & Eidelson, J. I. (2003). Dangerous ideas: Five beliefs that propel groups toward conflict. *American Psychologist*, 58(3), 182-192.

<sup>24</sup> United States Institute for Peace (2015), *Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan*.



Further, Kyrgyzstan lacks a conceptual construct of what it means to be a Kyrgyzstan national. There is no reflection through our conversation that there is a compelling or accepted narrative that is being used by the State to convey a uniform sense of national pride across ethnic groups, religious adherents, or northerners and southerners. In absence of a unifying identity through shared citizenship in the State, there is a potential that alternate identities will emerge to supplant the concept of State.

Some discussed the power of religion, specifically Islam, to serve as a unifying idea. Our interviews showed that nearly half of the respondents spoke positively about sharia, with some describing how Islam and sharia could be a potential complement to the current governance structure. Interestingly, however, many young people conveyed their interest in Sharia, while simultaneously stating that they are insufficiently educated in understanding sharia. While perception-oriented, when discussing the topic of violent extremism or migration to Syria, many youth respondents and key informants speculated that low religious-knowledge is one reason why recruiters may be successful in attracting people. Recent examination of 4,600 Islamic State personnel records, including that of 65 residents of Kyrgyzstan, revealed that approximately 70% of these people self-certified only basic knowledge of Sharia.<sup>25</sup>

The narrative of the caliphate, potentially offers a concept of state that transcends ethnicity and nationality, promotes a transparent and consistent legal framework, albeit brutal, punishes corruption, and promulgates inclusion under the banner of Islam. For those who see government as distant, corrupt and failing them, any credible option may be valid. For those who can look past the brutality of Islamic State or see that brutality as an important part of the cause, this narrative may become appealing.

## **Lack of confidence in democratic processes and government is eroding the credibility of the state**

The concept of a unified pluralistic state fractured among a notable portion of the youth interviewed in this research. The expressed lack of confidence in government and state bodies to be in touch with the people and to address economic challenges top the list of issues raised by many youth who were interviewed, with no discernable difference between comments made by youth migrants or youth remittance-recipients on this topic. And while there were some noted differences in issues of equity and justice across ethnic groups as mentioned above, criticism of elected officials and state entities to satisfactorily serve the people was evident in voices across ethnicities and regions.

Beyond the, perhaps predictable economic issues, other common themes of frustration emerged. Approximately thirty percent of all respondents raised the topic of corruption and nepotism, both generally, as well as citing specific examples of situations that they have encountered in day-to-day life. Approximately the same proportion of migrant youth, remittance-recipients and key informants expressed indignation




*“Another problem which may lead to conflict is “injustice” in all spheres of our society. For example, today the police work unfairly; the population’s mistrust of their work is growing. Tomorrow there will be conflicts.”*

- Youth remittance-recipient from Batken

<sup>25</sup> Dodwell, B., Milton, D. and Ressler, D. (2016), The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

towards apparent systemic corruption experienced at the hands of school teachers, traffic police, doctors, and other state officials. More than one-third of all respondents made statements related to lack of confidence in political parties, state entities or officials, with common remarks repeating around elections and the perception of unfulfilled promises. While some of the youth from this study stated that they voted in the recent parliamentary elections, many did not. For some, work abroad or a missing passport or biometric data prevented them from voting.<sup>26</sup> Others did not vote, simply expressing a lack of belief that their vote would bring changes. It is unclear the extent to which apathy is playing a role in not voting. But if there is indeed a significant portion of youth not exercising their right to vote, yet expressing substantial frustration with issues of governance and limited substantive contact with elected officials, then there is a gap in this key democratic process that should be addressed.

Despite efforts by Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev to discourage the population from selling votes during the parliamentary elections, a number of youth we spoke with raised the point that politicians use money to buy allegiance and votes from constituents.<sup>27</sup> According to some youth, they received 1,000–1,200 som to vote for a particular party or candidate. Though macro-level evidence from Collier and others indicates that poorer countries have a higher risk of conflict as a result of attraction to financial compensation for participating in political violence, the evidence regarding individual attraction to violence based on poverty is mixed.<sup>28</sup> The fact that some young people in southern Kyrgyzstan are willing to accept money to vote a certain way, does not necessarily mean that they would also be willing to commit acts of violence for money. But the presence of money in the political process does demonstrate the potential for mobilization through monetary means.



*“It can be said that there is a great risk of repeating of the great conflict again. For instance, [here] the Mayor's Office should distribute land for the construction of houses to minorities, and the majority. Kyrgyz receive plots while Uzbeks remain without them.”*

- Youth Migrant, from Batken

There is a belief, expressed by 23 people interviewed for this study, that “third parties,” “third forces,” or “influential people” were the catalyst of political instability in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan and have the potential to ignite instability in the future by actively encouraging young people towards violence. While merely impressions, the large number of comments is noteworthy since it indicates a belief that there is both a history and presence of conflict entrepreneurs and that young people continue to be susceptible to this type of influence.

When the belief in governance is fractured, there is a risk that young people will be attracted to alternatives.<sup>29</sup> If there is confidence in the transparency and accountability of government and assurance that election processes are honest, then there is a hope that young people will be encouraged to seek those alternatives through peaceful change at the polls. Steps taken by the government of Kyrgyzstan related to polling transparency and discouraging vote buying and selling are important. Confidence-building in such democratic processes is invaluable. The notable distrust and critical assessment of the political processes

<sup>26</sup> Biometric data reading devices and electronic ballot boxes were mandated by the Government of Kyrgyzstan prior to the 2015 Parliamentary elections to help minimize the possibility of voting irregularities.

<sup>27</sup> <http://tass.ru/en/world/821551>

<sup>28</sup> Collier, Paul (2007) *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford University Press: New York. See also: Mercy Corps (2016), “Motivations and Empty Promises: Voice of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth”

<sup>29</sup> Goldstone et al note that “most states have potential insurgents with grievances and resources, but almost always possess far greater military power than do insurgents. A united and administratively competent regime can defeat any insurgency; it is where regimes are paralyzed or undermined by elite divisions and state-elite conflicts that revolutionary wars can be sustained and states lose out to insurgencies.” See: Goldstone, J (2010), “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 54(1), pp. 190-208.

in Kyrgyzstan suggests that, at least for some, the voting booth has not demonstrated tangible improvements in the issues that are meaningful to the youth population. It would seem from comments made by respondents that those who bring the promise of a different future and inspire trust have the potential to galvanize populism.<sup>30</sup>

## Unmet Economic Expectations

Kyrgyzstan is experiencing economic shock as a result of external conditions related to Russia’s economy. A profound drop in remittance flows and value are adversely affecting household spending, according to the youth and key informants that we spoke with. The primary identified household impact is related to the drop in exchange rate for Russian rubles. Many described the previous long-term consistent exchange rate as approximately 1 ruble for 1.5 som and the more recent rate dropping to approximately 1 to 1. This perception matches current and historical exchange rate figures (See Figure 2). For those relying on remittances from Russia as a supplement to income, the impact is tangible and described extensively by nearly every person interviewed.



*“We were in debt and had to look for a job in a city. The money I earn now hardly covers living expenses [and] apartment rent, and we are repaying our debts in small amounts.”*

- Youth Migrant from Jalalabad

The second impact of the Russian economic crisis highlighted by migrants is related to the increased difficulty in finding steady employment in Russia. While work is still available, it is less predictable and less regular than previously. The net result is that many economic migrants interviewed are realizing decreased income while abroad. Frequently working multiple jobs, predominantly as unskilled labor, young people described the substantial increase in difficulty to make ends meet abroad. Decreased incomes are causing migrants to use a relatively larger percentage of their income to support their own living conditions in Russia. They report that they are still sending money back to their extended families in Kyrgyzstan when they have some surplus. But those transfers are happening less frequently and at lower levels according to both migrants and remittance-recipients. Research by Regan and Frank suggests that high levels of migrant remittances can have a dampening effect on the risk of instability for a country. Conversely, a substantial reduction in the value of remittances reduces this dampening effect.<sup>31</sup>

The concerning aspect for stability, however, is not the result of dire absolute poverty from these remittance reductions, though that undoubtedly exists southern Kyrgyzstan. The real issue revealed in conversations with youth and key informants alike is experience of relative deprivation that seems to be pervading all corners of the southern population. People may be better off today than they were in the 1990s, but these young people, born between 1991



likely  
in  
the  
and


<sup>30</sup> Bodea, C. and Elbadawi, I.A. (2007), “Riots, Coups and Civil War: Revisiting the Greed and Grievance Debate.” Policy Research Working Paper 4397. The World Bank.  
<sup>31</sup> Regan, P and Frank, R. (2014), “Migrant Remittances and the Onset of Civil War,” *Conflict Management and Peace Sciences*, 31(5), pp. 502-520.

1998, have keen awareness that they are far worse off today than they were just two years ago.<sup>32</sup> This finding holds across all ethnicities and geographies in this study. The years of high remittances, ability to remodel or build homes, celebrate weddings or purchase higher-end commercial goods created both an overtly stated and implied expectation among these youth that is no longer achievable at the same level. Further, the overwhelming majority of southern youth migrants and remittance recipients described primary uses of remittance money for housing improvements, consumables and events, with scant mention of investments in future income-producing assets, such as cattle or businesses, raising concern about household resilience.<sup>33</sup> It is the unmet expectation of purchasing power, quality of life and growth that is a source of economic frustration revealed in the interviews. Relative deprivation theory highlights that large differences between expected and actual economic and living conditions can be a factor that fuels instability and increases the chance of rebellion.<sup>34</sup>

## Youth feel heavy pressure to continue to migrate

Despite the deep economic crisis in Russia, young people from Kyrgyzstan continue to migrate abroad for work. Those we spoke with recognize that their earning potential abroad is still superior to that in Kyrgyzstan, even in the face of challenges in the Russian economy. In fact, interviews suggest that people are leaving at young ages, often foregoing completion of their studies to maximize their earning potential abroad. Russian Central Bank data shows that while the remittance value sent to Kyrgyzstan has dropped, the number of migrants has actually increased in the past year.<sup>35</sup> It appears that this is, at least in part, a reflection on the expansion of family members traveling abroad to fill the gap left by remittance reductions.

Interestingly, 15 percent of the youth respondents in our research indicated that work abroad was a necessity to pay off their debt, sometimes for specific unexpected needs such as agricultural losses, sometimes for planned expenditures like weddings and home renovation or construction. Some key informants stressed that indebtedness is extensive among the population. In a handful of statements, some of the people we spoke with who knew community members who had migrated to Syria or Iraq said that recruiters used loans as a way to bring in new recruits, particularly among people who were already indebted. While this information is neither directly verifiable, nor can one extrapolate from the likely presence of broad indebtedness to enticement to extremist action, it is noteworthy because of consistency with interview information received during recent Mercy Corps research in Nigeria with former Boko Haram combatants. In that research, many youth described either accepting loans prior to joining Boko Haram or joining with the hope of receiving capital, primarily for their small informal businesses.<sup>36</sup> This was not the exclusive motivation noted, but rather one of a number of entry points.

 *“Recruiters are everywhere, including in Moscow. They tried to handle me in Moscow. But I said that I do not need this. How many other guys can they process and deceive?”*  
- Youth Migrant from Osh

<sup>32</sup> The physical asset base of quality housing stock, large number of imported vehicles, and enhanced infrastructure is notably advanced from those early post-Soviet years. It would be hard to deny that the flow of remittances created a significant level of favorable economic conditions for many people.

<sup>33</sup> A few Youth respondents in Issyk-Kul mentioned purchase of land or animals with remittance money. But the evidence is insufficient to draw conclusions on whether there is a difference in consumption patterns in the north and south.

<sup>34</sup> Gurr, Ted (1970), *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

<sup>35</sup> IWPR (2016), “Russian Crisis Continues to Bite for Labour” Migrants. Retrieved from: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/russian-crisis-continues-bite-labour-migrants>

<sup>36</sup> Mercy Corps (2016), “Motivations and Empty Promises: Voice of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth”

At times, due to the so-called “black list” or simply during down periods in labor demand, young people are returning to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>37</sup> The vast majority of respondents indicated that they directly know people who are or have been on the “black list,” including in some cases, the respondent him/herself. While placement on the “black list” occurs ostensibly for civil or criminal violations in Russia, a number of respondents indicated that they believe the “black list” is often arbitrarily used to decrease the overall number of Central Asians in Russia.<sup>38</sup> When a family member is unable to return to Russia, a standard coping mechanism described by the youth is to send a different family member abroad. This in and out migration of workers creates a cycle of people abroad at all times.



*“I have friends who went to Syria. They worked in Russia. When they arrived they started praying in a different way. The majority of those who left to Syria are returned migrants from Russia.”*

- Youth Migrant from Batken

While some youth choose to wait out the duration of their penalty on the “black list” it appears highly common that some young people find ways to return to Russia, most typically by changing their names and paying to obtain a new passport. Illicit payments of as much as \$200 were noted by respondents for this process. Where migrant youth have been forced to return to Kyrgyzstan because of the “black list” or job shortages abroad, their massively redundant skillset in construction-related industries has created surplus supply which is met by a profound lack of absorptive capacity. Even if work is found, there is a clear recognition that salary levels are comparatively low in Kyrgyzstan. Most youth migrants and many remittance-recipients stated their intent to go abroad as soon as they are able.<sup>39</sup>

## Migration is exposing youth to skills, people and ideas, some positive and some negative

While the absence of so many young people undoubtedly creates some social negatives for a country, having a large number of young people outside of the borders has the likely potential benefit of minimizing malcontents who can become active participants in violence. There is much speculation, however, that it is precisely during this time abroad that some youth from Kyrgyzstan are in fact coming into contact with networks and individuals that draw them into violent extremism. According to Tucker, arrest reports, martyrdom statements and social media accounts created by Central Asian recruits show that they come to Syria and Iraq almost exclusively from a third country.<sup>40</sup> This narrative was echoed by a number of community leaders, religious leaders, government officials and other key informants we met during our research.<sup>41</sup> And external parties are similarly messaging the same belief, which is summed up well by this quote from U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Rosenblum:

“...once in Russia, Central Asian migrant workers are often subject to ghettoization. Many regularly experience discrimination, harassment, and humiliation from both the public and the authorities. The absence of mitigating factors such as social, familial and spiritual bonds together with the presence of aggravating factors such as marginalization and disenfranchisement create fertile ground for

<sup>37</sup> Russian Federal Migration Services place prevent people from entering Russia who have previously committed certain infractions in the Russian Federation. Duration on the so-called black list can vary from a few months to a few years.

<sup>38</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union was referenced by 26 respondents with mixed opinions on its effect on ability to migrate and avoidance of bureaucratic and legal hurdles in Russia. While accession to the EEU is still recent, the actual impact will likely only be visible after an additional period of time.

<sup>39</sup> A portion of migrants returned to Kyrgyzstan for health or family commitments, such as caring for aging parents.

<sup>40</sup> Tucker, N. (2015), “Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses,” MSI.

<sup>41</sup> Two key informants mentioned that they knew people who had never been in Russia, but had travelled to Syria, demonstrating that there may be multiple recruitment avenues.

extremist recruiters. Recruiters are able to traverse migrant-labor heavy neighborhoods in Russia's cities and use social media to find and target their quarry – isolated and lonely individuals who want to feel connected to something empowering and larger than themselves, often including individuals who were not previously religiously observant or educated.”<sup>42</sup>

There were certainly clear expressions of dissatisfaction with having to travel abroad to find adequate work and pay. But there were many voices that described the benefits of being abroad; not least of which is the deepening of a work ethic and on-the-job skills. Descriptions indeed showed that travel and work abroad results in young people being exposed to new people, new networks, and new world views. Some articulated a gained awareness of the contrast between the standard of living of places like Russia compared with Kyrgyzstan. Some migrants described having settled into a good life with family and friends with an eagerness to return to Russia. However, there were descriptions by migrants of having experienced prejudice in Russia or having been deported or blacklisted for unknown reasons, implying injustice in Russia. But critical comments about the migration experience were not particularly robust among the interviews, save for the description of long-hours, hard work, and sometimes cramped living conditions.

Certainly not all migrants in our study are encountering isolation and lack of sense of belonging during their time in Russia. Many migrants we spoke with described living with extended family members or friends from their communities in Kyrgyzstan. Interview data shows that familial and acquaintance networks are important determinants of the types of jobs that many migrants obtain, particularly during this current economic crisis

in Russia. Clusters of school classmates, family members, and communities from Kyrgyzstan working in the same industry, company or geographic location are frequently noted in the interviews.<sup>43</sup>

## ALL TYPES OF LABOR PERFORMED BY YOUTH MIGRANTS IN RESEARCH

**Construction:** loader, warehouse worker, laborer, handyman, tractor driver, asphalt paver, foreman, plumber, carpenter, electrician

**Food:** Waiter, Waitress, cook, chef, baker, café worker, dishwasher

**Cleaning:** Janitor, cleaner, street cleaner, car wash

**Transportation:** Private driver, public bus driver, mini bus driver;

**Other (single mention):** Shop worker, guard; babysitting; concierge; courier, auto mechanic, manufacturing lumberjack, nurse

This raises a question about the applicability of these same types of clusters towards more nefarious pursuits, such as joining the efforts of Islamic State. In multiple statements by acquaintances or community members who knew people who travelled to Syria, often more than one person from the same area, such as 21 people from Jalalabad city or an entire family from Aravan were known to have gone. Many scholars have identified clusters and social networks as a common source of influence on participation in violent extremist groups.<sup>44</sup> A Mercy Corps study of foreign terrorist fighters from Jordan demonstrated that social ties were a strong factor in recruitment.<sup>45</sup>

Our interviews also provided plenty of examples of migrants who were living and working with strangers, mostly from other Central Asian countries or Turkey, and separated from traditional family and community

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Rosenblum Testimony

<sup>43</sup> There is some perception that there is a difference in job type acquired in Russia based on ethnicity, with ethnic Uzbeks presumably working disproportionately in sales, trade, and cooking. The interviews from migrants and remittance receiving families, however, did not indicate a clear pattern of employment along ethnicity in this set of respondents.

<sup>44</sup> Atran, S. (2010), *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Value, and What it Means to be Human*, Penguin Books: London.

<sup>45</sup> Mercy Corps (2015), "From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups." <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/jordan-jihad-lure-syrias-violent-extremist-groups>

networks. The respondents who knew people who joined the fight in Syria conveyed that these young people had spent time living and working in Russia, prior to migrating to Syria. Some of these acquaintances noted changes in behavior and attitude subsequent to their time in Russia, including changes in religious behavior. Many speculated that these young people, who were separate from their family and community networks, had fallen in with people who influenced their behavior. Some scholars have described how displacement or economic migration can create a sense of having a foot in two worlds but really fully in neither. It is argued that this can be a critical factor in driving individuals to find a community that gives them that sense of belonging and purpose.<sup>46</sup>

But even our sample of acquaintances of people who had been recruited does not reveal a clear or unique recruitment pattern abroad. In at least two examples noted in the interviews, recruiters in Kyrgyzstan reportedly approached people in their own community who had never travelled to Russia or elsewhere abroad. So while it appears accurate that some migrants in Russia are being actively recruited for violent extremism, this is not the only channel for engagement.

## As youth are incentivized to work abroad, their options shrink

The draw of relatively high wages abroad has created a vicious cycle for the youth we spoke with: As those with secondary and higher education recognize that their degrees do not command the requisite salary levels domestically, migration abroad becomes inevitable. For the limited few, the application of learned knowledge and skills is possible in Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey or elsewhere. But for the vast majority interviewed, the path to good wages comes through long hours and hard work in menial unskilled tasks. Out of 71 migrants interviewed across the four regions, 24 described themselves as having at least partial secondary education. The remainder described having received at least partial technical or university education. Regardless of education level, nearly all youth migrants in this study found themselves working



*“My husband works in Russia, he has a higher education degree, but he could not find a job here. He was working as a carpenter, but money was not enough.”*

- Youth Remittance-recipient from Osh

in unskilled positions in Russia. In total, 32 different types of employment were specifically noted for migrants from Kyrgyzstan interviewed for this study. All but a very limited few are categorized as unskilled labor, with a heavy emphasis in the construction industry (See Figure 3).

Other family members and acquaintances are reportedly seeing this reality and are recognizing that if education does not equate with higher earning potential, then there is no logic in remaining in school. Some young people in this study found the quickest pathways out of school, including in limited examples, the use of bribes to fulfill requirements and acquire diplomas. For those who enter into the university or technical schools, skills acquisition is primarily to facilitate greater access to jobs abroad, rather than in the domestic market. But still, many recognize the opportunity cost of foregoing wages to study. We heard multiple mentions of a “lost generation,” with concerns that the skill level and education level of an entire generation is decreasing.

A number of respondents, including school and local officials, noted with concern that an increasing number of girls are truncating their learning. For girls, early exit from school often means earlier entry to marriage

<sup>46</sup> Sageman, Marc, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, p. 6. For a discussion on youth motivation toward violence, see Mercy Corps research: Mercy Corps, *Youth and Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence* (2015), Retrieved from [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps\\_YouthConsequencesReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf). See also Blattman, C. and Ralston, L. (2015)

and children. Since it is culturally inappropriate for girls from southern Kyrgyzstan to travel abroad on their own, marriage affords the opportunity to attach to a migrant worker, either to accompany abroad or to receive remittances at home. Further, traditional family social structures are being stretched: Numerous examples emerge of both parents migrating to Russia, leaving their children in the care of the grandparents or other relatives, with questionable opportunities for quality education and social development.

Acquiring specific technical and vocational skills is not a guarantee that young people will stay in Kyrgyzstan. Despite an articulated desire by some key informants for qualified technicians to work in communities, such as agriculturalists, plumbers, and electricians the clear absence of regular well-paying jobs in Kyrgyzstan makes staying far less attractive than migrating and likely obtaining higher wages abroad, whether in the learned technical field or not. The effect of these decisions goes beyond the individual and affects the present communities and the future development of Kyrgyzstan. The absence of skilled and technically knowledgeable workers in Kyrgyzstan has an impact on the quality of services felt across the population. Moreover, the absence of technical specialists such as engineers and agronomists deeply hinders the ability to develop industry and capitalize on Kyrgyzstan's assets.<sup>47</sup>



*“Recently my daughter-in-law, a teacher, told that school students, children from the 11th class said that it is possible to earn up to \$5,000 monthly, if you go to Syria. My daughter-in-law explained to them that they go there to die... I don't know where they get such information.”*

- Key Informant from Jalalabad

## Counter-narratives on the risks of going to Syria are being heard...but not fully understood

Across all regions, researchers heard frequent stories of how teachers, police, or imams have been highly visible in conveying the dangers of going to Syria. People were aware of public outreach events by the Ministry of Interior in Osh, Batken, and Jalalabad in 2016. Multiple respondents talked about the active engagement of the 10<sup>th</sup> Department of the Ministry of Interior in raising awareness among the population, including through meetings and roundtables.

Similarly, media reports of arrests of people in connection with Syria migration or having affiliation with groups like Hizb-ut Tahrir were commonly mentioned. The breadth of outreach from these stakeholders and from the media is apparent from the numerous references throughout this research. Young people readily demonstrated awareness of the illegality of being involved with extremist groups or operating as a foreign terrorist fighter. And they also appear to understand that death is a potential outcome of migrating to Syria.

However, nearly half of the youth interviewed in this study overtly stated that while they may have heard of Wahhabis or Salafis or could name groups like Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida, ISIS, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or others like Taliban, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Ahmadiyah or Akramiyya, they only know that radical organizations are illegal, yet are not really aware of the motivations or intentions of these groups or the

<sup>47</sup> When considering the effect of jobs in the context of attraction to violence, policy-makers often link unemployment and conflict, believing that where there is large supply of unemployed youth there is a readily available pool of potential recruits. And in an effort to redress this issue, governments and aid agencies alike have frequently focused on employability and acquisition of skills to match market gaps. However, the findings on the connection of violence to unemployment are mixed, with some researchers finding a negative relationship between unemployment and attacks on government and others finding that employment-generating programs somewhat reduce crime in cases where the violence is materially motivated. See Blattman and Ralston (2015) and Berman et al (2009).



specifics on why they are a threat.<sup>48</sup> Youth also largely stated that they did not know much about who is fighting against whom in Syria. There is, of course, the possibility that some of these youth were being disingenuous for fear that they would be perceived to be adherents of these movements if they demonstrated in-depth knowledge. But the number of similar comments made by young people interviewed by a variety of teams in the four provinces supports that the preponderance of these are genuine statements of ignorance.

In absence of information pertaining to why groups are a threat, there is a risk that extremists can fill in those narratives in a way that appeals to young people who are ill-equipped to consider counter-narratives.

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<sup>48</sup> ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan follow Salafi-Jihadi ideology. Akramiyya also follows Salafi beliefs, however the extent to which jihadi violence is part of their philosophy is unclear. The Taliban follow Deobandi ideology. While Hizb-ut-Tahrir has some features in common with Salafi groups, they pursue a broader view of pan-Islam.

# Recommendations

A potent combination of factors in southern Kyrgyzstan poses risks for youth to be manipulated by political elites, conflict entrepreneurs or extremists. While the government effort is squarely focused on discouraging involvement in Syria, there is an absence of effort to address the root issues that resonate with youth and can serve as entry points for manipulation by a variety of actors. The narrow focus on the attraction to violent jihadism and groups like Islamic State or Jabhat al Nusra obscures the potential risks and the levers of manipulation through inter-ethnic, political, or communal violence. Addressing root causes and divider elements are essential for diminishing the potential of youth to be recruits for violence in any form.

Below are key recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to support evidence-based programming to help protect youth from engagement in violent agendas in Kyrgyzstan or beyond its borders.

## **Build greater trust in government through community engagement**

Young people expressed deep dissatisfaction with the lack of involvement of the government in solving problems that affect people and communities. While many people in this research described Kyrgyzstan as a “democracy,” few articulated that their interests were well-represented by government. There appears to be a wide gulf between those who govern and the governed. Youth particularly feel the inattention of elected officials to their needs and the needs of their communities, conveying that they only see officials during elections.

Officials should be encouraged to conduct listening tours with their constituents in periods outside of election cycles. Open forums and round-tables sponsored by parliamentarians and local government officials can enhance the perception that government is taking an active interest in the needs of the population. Naturally, the government cannot solve all problems confronting the population, particularly related to the depth of economic needs. However, to the extent that the population can voice their needs and feel heard, the more the government will have the opportunity to understand how the population priorities its own needs. The more that young people can be directly involved in conversations related to decisions that affect their lives, the better.

When appropriately engaged, youth can serve as a tremendous source of innovative ideas and fresh perspectives. Local, regional and national government departments should deliberately expand opportunities to hire young people. In doing so, not only will government, and in turn the people, benefit from the involvement of the next generation, but young people will have a greater sense of how government functions and have a vested interest in seeing positive change.

## **Strengthen a shared sense of national identity through a national integration plan**

National dividers abound: Young people noted the lingering Soviet-style designations by ethnicity within passports, the challenges with access to jobs and higher education because of Kyrgyz language requirements, and the different worldviews developed through public schools, Uzbek schools, or

madrassahs. Educational, religious, and social circles are reinforcing a sense of separateness. The country is in desperate need of a shared sense of national identity that transcends ethnicity and religious beliefs.

Under the leadership of the President's office, a comprehensive national integration plan should be developed to assess these dividers, to seek broad public participation, and to craft tangible and meaningful steps towards government-sponsored integration efforts. As the language gap among ethnic minorities appears to be particularly concerning, it is recommended that early efforts be made to identify opportunities to expand the study of Kyrgyz language in schools, particularly where Uzbek is the primary language of instruction. Similarly, to ensure greater minority access to government jobs and university education, legislators should consider a temporary accommodation that would bridge between the current reality of weak Kyrgyz language ability among ethnic minorities and the aspiration for universal fluency in Kyrgyz.

## **Use community development to promote stronger inter-ethnic connections between youth**

While dividers exist between ethnic groups, the people in neighboring communities often share the same issues, like lack of water, insufficient land, deteriorating schools. Community-development initiatives can serve as substantive ways to bring youth from ethnically different groups together. Jointly identifying shared challenges and working to design and implement solutions can alleviate the shared challenge while simultaneously fostering deeper relations between people, groups and communities. The Ayil Okmotu would be well-positioned to play a leadership role. Cooperation with non-governmental organizations can also help leverage expertise to strengthen relationships between communities and to advocate effectively for common needs with government.

## **Enhance confidence in the electoral process and greater involvement of migrant youth**

Enhancing trust in government requires improving confidence and participation in the electoral process. The present administration is taking important steps in eliminating election fraud, including the incorporation of biometric data and public statements against vote-buying. Legal enforcement against officials who buy votes should be swift and well-publicized.

Encouraging migrant youth, in particular, to vote will require not only these trust-building steps, but also mechanisms to facilitate absentee-voting, registration of biometric data, timely update of voter lists and awareness campaigns to enhance voter literacy around party platforms. Expanded access to polling stations in the Russian Federation and voter engagement abroad can help increase participation of youth. Similarly deliberate get-out-the-vote campaigns, both within Kyrgyzstan and abroad, should be made in anticipation of upcoming elections.

And equally important is fostering in the young generation a sense that their vote counts and that they have a responsibility to vote in a way that will put that vote to best use. Strengthening civic education at the primary and secondary school level across secular and religious schools can instill in children an appreciation of their personal responsibility, an understanding of the function of government, and a commitment to working towards a vibrant democratic state.

## **Build awareness and tolerance of differences in religious traditions at school**

Religious differences between the overtly devout and others and between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz are already amplifying inter-group tensions. As more devout people within ethnic minority groups are perceived to have extremist beliefs, there is a risk of manifesting tension and persecution.

Religious leaders and schools, with the support of the State, should develop a nation-wide curriculum on religious differences and cultural practices within Islam and across other world religions. All schools, including public and private, religious and secular should incorporate this curriculum, not only as part of religious-literacy, but as a mechanism for promoting greater understanding of legitimate differences in lawful forms of religious practice.

## **Provide youth with greater coping skills to resist the influence of violent groups**

Efforts should be made for providing youth with transferable life skills before they have the possibility of migrating in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. A focus on life skills can help young people to not only more confidently navigate life's social, political, economic, and personal transitions, but also be more resilient to messages of violence - whether along ethnic lines or for recruitment to international groups. Specifically, efforts should be made to enhance critical thinking, decision-making and problem solving tools, interpersonal skills, negotiation and refusal techniques, empathy building, and advocacy skills.<sup>49</sup> Equipped with these tools at an early age will help prepare young people to be self-assured and confident in rebuffing attempts at recruitment.

## **Expand counter-narratives on violent extremism to create more specificity on risks**

The government of Kyrgyzstan should be commended for its robust outreach efforts on dissuading people from migrating to Syria. Whether delivered by government officials directly, via television or in partnership with imams, teachers, and police, the message of the illegality and danger of going to Syria is reaching youth. An absence of sufficient specificity about motivations and threats posed by extremist groups, however, can leave a vacuum of information. For some young people this can create curiosity about those groups. Social media, rumors, and active extremist recruiters fill the void with details that serve their own nefarious agendas.

Adjusting the counter-narrative message to include more details about the particular threats posed by these groups can serve to create a more holistic impression of why these groups should be avoided. Further, the message can be well-amplified by working closely with civil society and youth peers to reach a broader audience, either through grassroots messaging or through the use of broadcast media.

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<sup>49</sup> For a discussion on the application of life skills, see: [http://www.who.int/school\\_youth\\_health/media/en/sch\\_skills4health\\_03.pdf](http://www.who.int/school_youth_health/media/en/sch_skills4health_03.pdf)

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# Appendix I: Sample Matrix

Sample Matrix	Rural		Urban	
18-24 Years Old	Migrant Returnee	Remittance Recipient	Migrant Returnee	Remittance Recipient
<b>Male</b>				
Ethnic Uzbek	1-3	1-3	1-3	1-3
Ethnic Kyrgyz	1-3	1-3	1-3	1-3
Ethnic Tajik / Other	1-3	1-3	1-3	1-3
<b>Female</b>				
Ethnic Uzbek	1-3	1-3	1-3	1-3
Ethnic Kyrgyz	1-3	1-3	1-3	1-3
Ethnic Tajik / Other	1-3	1-3	1-3	1-3
Number to be achieved	5-7	5-7	5-7	5-7

# APPENDIX II: SNOWBALL INITIATING GEOGRAPHIES

Snowball initiating geographies display evidence of high remittance-recipients; rural and urban; ethnically homogenous and ethnically heterogeneous

- **Osh oblast:** Osh city, Mady village, Tepe-Korgon, Chek-Abad and Mirmachmudova ayul okmotus
- **Jalal-Abad oblast:** Jalal-Abad city, Yrys village, Suzak village, Bazar-Korgon village, Ala-Buka rayon (center).
- **Batken:** Batken city, Isphana and Kyzyl-Kya towns, Uch-Korgon v., Andarak v., Masalieva ayil okmotu, Samarkandek ayil okmotu

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### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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