CENTRAL ASIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA AND IRAQ: DRIVERS AND RESPONSES

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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

ANF	Jabhat al Nusra
AQ	Al-Qaida
AQMM	Al-Qaida Media Machine
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEDAR	Communities Engaging with Difference in Religion
CERIA	Central Eurasia — Religion in International Affairs
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
ICSR	International Center for the Study of Radicalization
IJU	Islamic Jihad Union
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRPT	Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham
JMWA	Jaysh Muhajireen Wal Ansar
KIB	Imom Buxoriy Katibasi
MSI	Management Systems International
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RFE/RL's	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SMS	Short Messaging Service
TSJ	Transnational Salafi Jihadist
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VE/I	Violent Extremist or Insurgent
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization

MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current estimates indicate that as of January 2015 the total number of foreign fighters in the Syria/Iraq conflict exceeded 20,700 – a figure that now surpasses the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s and makes it the largest mobilization of foreign fighters to a Muslim-majority conflict zone since World War II. Like the Afghan conflict before it, the war in Syria and Iraq appears likely to drag on for years, and has become one of the defining issues of a generation of young Muslims in Europe, the Middle East and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – a large number of whom respond to the narrative that they are personally implicated in this foreign conflict because of their shared membership in what they see as a transnational religious community. The conflict has attracted multiple foreign groups, including both Sunni and Shi'a violent extremist groups, who view the disputed territory taken from the states of Syria and now Iraq as the primary staging ground for their vision of re-shaping the Middle East and, in some cases, the entire world. Competition between these groups frequently descends into fratricidal violence, particularly since al-Qaida's (AQ) Syrian affiliate and its allies disavowed the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2013 and tensions escalated into open warfare in early 2014.

The View from Central Asia

For most Central Asians watching the war from afar, the details of the conflict and the frequently warring factions that fight it are obscure. But for a minority of Central Asians the conflict is a very real -- and accessible -- manifestation of powerful narratives that offer meaning to their lives. This is particularly the case for marginalized Central Asian migrant workers, who are the core target audience for recruiters. The states of the former USSR provide the third largest proportion of foreign fighter recruits behind Western Europe and the Middle East. Exact estimates for the number of Central Asians mobilized into the conflict very widely, and there are many incentives on the part of regional security services and their favored commentators to exaggerate the level of threat to the region. Regardless of these uncertainties surrounding exact estimates, it is clear that Central Asians are playing a noticeable role in the conflict and that foreign recruiting for the war has surpassed even the Afghanistan/Pakistan conflict at its height.

Today, the focus of Central Asian violent extremism had shifted to the Syrian conflict and away from Afghanistan/Pakistan, and this shift is shaped in part by geography: it is far cheaper, easier and more feasible for recruits – especially those drawn from the up to seven million Central Asian migrant laborers working under difficult conditions and facing rampant discrimination and tightening immigration laws in Russia – to enter Turkey and go from there to Syria than to travel to Pakistan. As the focus of the global Salafi-jihadist movement (and its funders) shifted to Syria, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) statements admitted that many veteran fighters were abandoning the Afghanistan/Pakistan zone as well as the mountains of Dagestan and Chechnya within the former USSR for Syria and Iraq.

Once they arrive in Syria, these fighters appear to be distributed into two broad affiliations, mirroring the larger fault lines of the Syrian conflict. The first, the "Aleppo Uzbeks," comprises several smaller brigades (and an independent violent extremist organization (VEO) led by ethnic Uzbeks) allied with or part of the al-Qaida affiliated *Jabhat al Nusra* and based around the opposition stronghold of Aleppo in Northern Syria. The second are those Central Asians fighting as part of ISIS, based in ar-Raqqa in Syria and in Mosul in Iraq.

Drivers of Central Asian Violent Extremism

Migration – primarily economic migration – may be the single most important factor for Central Asian recruiting to the Syrian conflict. No detailed surveys of foreign fighters from the region have been done or are likely to ever be completed because of the difficulty accessing the groups. However, all sources of available information show recruits come almost exclusively from outside the borders of the Central Asian states and that an important part of messaging and recruitment happens online. Migration and subsequent

marginalization or ghettoization breaks important community bonds for the migrants and removes them from positive mitigating factors – family, community, religious leaders – that all work to prevent militant mobilization at home. In Central Asia in particular, strong community pressure by family and elders work to restrain younger members from engaging even in peaceful political activity or participating in religious groups that might draw negative attention from the authorities.

This study finds that mobilization for the conflict among Central Asians can be grouped into three basic narratives that resonate with recruits. The most common – and most resonant – narrative deployed by the Aleppo-based groups allied with al-Qaida's *Jabhat al Nusra* has nothing to do with AQ ideology or global vision, but argues that the armed opposition against the Assad government is a "just war" and a defensive conflict – jihad to defend against the slaughter of innocents.

The narratives deployed by supporters of the Islamic State, on the other hand, exploit feelings of resentment among marginalized Central Asians and promote the idea that are mistreated or disadvantaged specifically because of their Muslim identity. The Islamic state is portrayed as a "Muslim utopia," a place where a radically different social order creates a paradise on earth that has a place for every Muslim who will support its ideology regardless of their background or status.

The third primary narrative emphasizes the power of a "Muslim" state as a counterforce to the West and the United States in particular, which are portrayed by ISIS recruiters in the Central Asian languages as the parties responsible for the oppression experienced by the migrants in Russia and other destination countries and at a home. These arguments are sustained by a constant stream of misinformation and conspiracy theories that populate both the social media information environment inhabited by Central Asian migrants and the steady drumbeat of Russian media propaganda that reinforces many of the same themes.

Central Asian Responses

Responses to this mobilization by Central Asian governments have focused almost exclusively on their own narrative that the Islamic State has territorial ambitions in Central Asia and presents an imminent existential threat – a view that very few outside analysts share. However, policy changes by the governments suggest that, rhetoric aside, they understand the real threat that the conflict in Iraq and Syria poses. But most of these policies fail to address the issue of migrant recruiting or the domestic factors that drive migration. No matter how effective they may be at preventing the spread of Syria- or Iraq-based VEOs from expanding their recruiting or military operations into Central Asia, these policies may fail to counteract the problem of recruitment since most of it appears to happen when citizens are pushed outside the territory of their home states and their supportive home communities. Without changing this fundamental approach, current measures may fail to have any real effect on violent extremist mobilization.

Much of the Central Asian public reaction to the rise of ISIS has been spurred by conspiracies alleged in the press and by Central Asian politicians that promote the belief that ISIS is an American "puppet" created to hinder the development of Muslim-majority countries. Central Asian governments frequently choose to fuel, rather than correct, these conspiracies. Promoting the narrative that the economic and social problems that cause migration in the first place are the fault of the United States unwittingly plays directly into the recruitment narratives promoted by ISIS supporters. Refusing to acknowledge the local roots of fundamental problems that spur migration is likely to only deepen the economic and political marginalization experienced by migrant workers that makes them vulnerable to violent mobilization along religious or ethnic lines.

Possible USG/USAID Programmatic Responses

At the level of broad strategy, identifying potential responses to the drivers of violent extremism identified in this report is relatively straightforward: Economic development and job creation efforts, training, and re-education for unemployed or returning migrants, community-building for migrants living abroad and counter-messaging programs are all potential programmatic responses to the drivers described above.

But implementing these or other programs in Central Asia and especially in Russia is a far more complex and difficult undertaking. Any USG countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts intended to address these issues would face at least three serious challenges. First, remittance-dependent governments are unlikely to adopt any measures that would have the effect of reducing out-migration. Second, even if political will exists, addressing migrant radicalization by trying to change the dynamics of labor migration would require both significant scale and fine-grained targeting. To design and implement successful programs would require a major investment of USG and other donor resources. Third, there is the challenge of a lack of Central Asian government receptivity to USG interventions. The USG faces increasing resistance to engagement in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, even at the development level.

These caveats need to inform consideration of potential USG responses, but they are not intended to support the conclusion that nothing can or should be done. In the event that USG resources (human as well as financial) are made available to address the problem of VE among Central Asian migrants, USAID and the USG more broadly should explore programming in the following four areas.

1) *Economic development and improving standards of living.* While poverty does not itself drive extremism, economic problems in the region drive labor migration. Programs that focus on economic development and improving the standard of living in Central Asia can help mitigate specific drivers identified, including both the economic problems that drive labor migration and the perception that development programs sponsored by the United States are mostly designed to engineer social or political changes. While suspicious of civil society building, Central Asians (and their governments) remain open to programs that help with economic development, assist them in improving their public services and offer education opportunities. Language education in particular can help address the problem of disinformation, giving Internet users the ability to access perspectives other than those available in the Russian-language media. In areas where it has become more difficult for USAID and the USG to work directly, programs may encounter less political resistance when they can be publicly led by the World Bank, OSCE, the Asian Development Bank or local organizations.

2) *Helping migrants build community support structures.* Programs that help migrants build community support structures for one another to help them navigate migration systems, acquire new job skills, and build supportive social communities that can help replace family and community structures left at home could play a key role in mitigating the marginalization and resentment that serve as key drivers for VEO recruiting. The Central Asian governments, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are wary of independent political movements formed outside their borders to address migrant grievances -- in no small part because many of the grievances the migrants cite are directed toward their home governments. Some of these organizations, however, have adopted a less confrontational approach and focus on building communities and addressing migrant worker needs inside Russia and could potentially be important local partners inside Russia. Within Russian, where the vast majority of Central Asian migrants take up temporary residence sometimes in multi-generational families, there is potential to work with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or United Nations projects that remove a direct link between the USG and the public. While it is highly unlikely that USG-supported development programs would be welcomed in Russia, opportunities might exist in Turkey, which is the central conduit for recruits from Russia and has its own large population of economically marginalized ethnic Uzbek immigrants vulnerable to recruiting. Turkey could be a good site for pilot programs of this nature.

3) *Capacity building for religious counter-messaging to VEO recruiting and community support.* Fear of external influences like ISIS and the recognition of their inability to produce and control the narrative on social media will likely continue to force Central Asian governments to allow popular and safely loyal independent religious actors to occupy a greater role in the public spotlight. This may represent a window in which Central Asian states are again willing to engage in programs like imam exchanges and accept support for anti-VEO messaging programs conducted by local religious authorities, who appear to represent by far the most effective counter-weight to VEO propaganda among Central Asians. Counter-messaging programs that could amplify credible voices of returnees and victims from the Syrian conflict could be a powerful

deterrent and help raise awareness of the realities of life inside the Islamic State, for example, and especially of the conflict between Muslims in Syria and Iraq -- of which the vast majority of Central Asian potential recruits appear to remain unaware. Each government should be encouraged to pursue policies that help returning fighters who want to lay down arms to re-integrate into civilian society and see them as potential allies rather than criminals to be imprisoned.

4) Broadening US Engagement. Central Asian responses to the Syrian conflict illustrate the need for the United States to work to actively rebuild trust with the people of Central Asia. The United States faces a highly coordinated and well-funded information assault in the region. This situation presents a major public diplomacy challenge for the USG, recommendations for which are beyond the purview of this analysis. However, one possible form of engagement that could help to address the problem of migration-driven VE in Central Asia would be for the USG to support a conference or series of conferences on labor migration issues that would involve Central Asian governments, academic experts and, if possible, non-governmental actors. These meetings would allow for US engagement with Central Asians on an issue that presents a major challenge for Central Asia as well as for the US. The meeting or meetings also would help to identify and disseminate more effective policy responses for Central Asian governments, including how to deal with migrant radicalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

This report aims to add an evidence-based perspective to the discussion of foreign fighter recruitment of Central Asians to the conflict in Syria and Iraq and to evaluate what the trends identified in mobilization of this specific community might tell us about our understanding of the drivers of violent extremist or insurgent (VE/I) mobilization. The Syrian mobilization, which heavily uses social media networks for its messaging, may also help illuminate ways that the rapid spread of digital communication technology may have shaped some of these drivers since USAID/MSI originally published the *Guide to Understanding Violent Extremism* in early 2009. This report may also provide a useful case study for analysts of extremist mobilization comparing the style, narratives and strategies used by AQ and its affiliate in Syria (the *Jabhat al Nusra* or ANF) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State) — which was disavowed by al-Qaida leadership in the spring of 2014.[1,2]

The Syrian conflict first emerged in the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" movement in March 2011, as brutal suppression of protests led to a kaleidoscopic armed revolt by dozens of rapidly evolving factions formed around ethnic, religious, regional, and political lines against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The conflict has displaced more than 3 million Syrian citizens and attracted multiple foreign groups, including both Sunni and Shi'a violent extremist groups, who view the disputed territory taken from the states of Syria and now Iraq as the primary staging ground for their vision of reshaping the Middle East and, in some cases, the entire world.

As was the case with their involvement in Afghanistan, AQ and its Transnational Salafi Jihadist (TSJ) movement affiliates and associates rely primarily on foreign conscripts to fill their ranks and conduct extensive recruiting operations increasingly facilitated by the Internet and social media. The Syrian conflict has exacerbated long-festering factional tensions inside the global TSJ movement that have caused disagreements on tactics, strategies and theology between al-Qaida central — led since Bin Laden's death by the Egyptian Ayman al Zawahiri — and ISIS, originally founded as *Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 1999.[3]

In April 2013, the Emir of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, unilaterally announced that his authority now extended over Syria and renamed his organization the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). Both the leader of AQ's Syria affiliate, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, and Zawahiri rejected the claim; Zawahiri issued an official order for ISIS to withdraw. Bagdhadi's refusal precipitated the subsequent descent into open warfare between ISIS and ANF and its allied Syrian opposition factions. The fratricidal conflict changed the character of the war and has transformed the global TSJ movement into a competition not only for recruits, but also for the right to define its objectives. When Baghdadi's forces seized the Iraqi city of Mosul in July 2014, he declared himself Caliph (spiritual and political leader) of the Muslim *Umma* and again renamed the organization and the territory it governs "the Islamic State."[4,5]

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[1] JM Berger, "The Islamic State vs. al-Qaida: Who's Winning the War to Become the Jihadi Superpower?" Sept. 2, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/02/the-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda.

[2] Much of the research informing the report is drawn from primary source data collected by the Central Asia Digital Islam Project, a research effort co-sponsored by the University Michigan Islamic Studies Program and George Washington University's Central Asia Program. The project collects data on social and digital media created by Central Asian violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and their supporters in Uzbek, Russian, Tajik and Kazakh, as well as the self-documentation on social media networks by Central Asians who have joined the Syrian war effort. See: Noah Tucker, "The Central Asia Digital Islam Project: How the Internet and Social Media are Reshaping the Islamic Marketplace in Central Asia," Registan.net, May 18, 2014. http://registan.net/2014/05/18/the-central-asia-digital-islam-project-how-the-internet-and-social-media-are-reshaping-the-islamic-marketplace-in-central-asia/

[3] Zarqawi was killed in Iraq by U.S. forces in 2006. Almost since its inception, the organization Zarqawi founded has been at odds with AQ leaders and ideologues because of its emphasis on *takfir* (ex-communication of Muslims) or purifying the *Umma*, its extreme interpretations of Sharia law and zeal for enforcement in territories it attempts to govern, and its emphasis on brutal — sometimes spectacular — violence, including against civilians and noncombatants. See: Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Research Notes No. 20, June 2014.

[4] Berger, "The Islamic State vs. al-Qaida" http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf.

The initially rapid military advance of the Islamic State and increasing international and regional media attention to the fact that a large number of Central Asians (with exponentially varying estimates of exactly how many) had joined the conflict elicited a wave of responses from Central Asian governments beginning in the summer of 2014. During the first years of the conflict, regional leaders had largely avoided mentioning it, save as a cautionary tale to dampen hopes for an Arab Spring-style popular protest movement in Central Asia.[6,7] Following the emergence of the Islamic State and reports later in 2014 that the IMU — the region's most notorious jihadist group — had pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, the rhetoric of Central Asian leaders and their security postures abruptly switched focus to discussion of the Islamic State and its recruiting efforts as the primary military or ideological threat to the region.[8] As this report will outline, however, although the threat of extremist groups to citizens from Central Asia is real, the characterizations of the recruiting process and the nature of the threat appear to be frequently distorted for political purposes. Therefore, policy responses enacted by the Central Asian states to date may consequently do little to mitigate the real drivers of mobilization.

II. CURRENT STATUS OF CENTRAL ASIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

According to the most recent estimate published by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) at Kings College London, produced in collaboration with the Munich Security Conference, in January 2015 the number of foreign fighters in the Syria/Iraq conflict exceeded 20,700 — a figure that now surpasses the Afghan–Soviet war of the 1980s and is the largest mobilization of foreign fighters to a Muslim-majority conflict zone since World War II.[9] Like the Afghan conflict before it, the war in Syria and Iraq appears likely to drag on for years, and has become one of the defining issues of a generation of young Muslims in Europe, the Middle East and the former USSR — a large number of whom respond to the narrative that they are personally implicated in this foreign conflict because of their shared membership in what they see as a transnational religious community.

According to the ICSR estimate, the countries of the former Soviet Union constitute the third-largest geographic block from which foreign fighters travel to the conflict, with around 3,000 active militants (joining an estimated 4,000 from Western Europe and 11,000 from the Middle East). Of these, approximately 1,400 are believed to be Central Asians. Research collected by the Digital Islam Project that tracks claims that Central Asian groups participating in the conflict make about themselves and discussions in jihadist and sympathizer media roughly support these numbers.[10] Higher estimates, made by the security services of Central Asian governments (roughly double these levels for the Islamic State alone) and notably by a recent International Crisis Group report, have been challenged for accuracy, misguided assumptions, and lack of any transparent methodology.[11]

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[5] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Research Notes No. 20, June 2014.

[6] Alexey Malashenko, "Central Asia: The Lessons of the Arab Spring," Carnegie Moscow Center, July 11, 2013. http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=52363

[7] Noah Tucker, "Uzbek Extremism in Context, Part 2: The Internet, Social Media and Religious Speech," Registan.net, Oct. 14, 2013. http://registan.net/2013/10/14/uzbek-extremism-in-context-part-2-the-internet-social-media-and-religious-speech/

[8] Danil Kislov, "Is Central Asia Afraid of ISIS?" OpenDemocracy.net, Nov. 11, 2014, https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/daniil-kislov/is-central-asia-afraid-of-isis

[9] Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s" Jan. 26, 2015, The International Center for the Study of Radicalization, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/

[10] It should be noted, however, that little independent evidence for the numbers used by ICSR for Tajikistanis and Turkmenistanis has been found. This does not imply that the numbers are wrong, just that they are more difficult to corroborate.

[11] International Crisis Group, "Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia" Europe and Central Asia Briefing No. 72, Jan. 20, 2015. http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia

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As scholars John Heathershaw and David Montgomery recently noted, little data exists to allow us to make concrete estimates, but many incentives to exaggerate the level of threat to Central Asia exist on the part of regional security services and their favored commentators.[12] As data is collected from multiple language contexts and published in others — only to be translated again back into regional languages and reported in the Central Asian press — simple translation mistakes can lead to wide variations in estimates. In a recent example, the BBC Uzbek service misread the ICSR estimates (in English from Uzbek and Russian sources) and published a story in Uzbek claiming 500 Uzbekistanis are fighting for the Islamic State alone. This story was republished by Tashkent state-approved media with the same headline, later refuted by an Uzbekistani muftiate official who insisted that by their estimates, only 200 Uzbekistani citizens have joined ISIS.[13,14]

Regardless of the many uncertainties surrounding exact estimates, it is significant for Central Asia that foreign recruiting for the conflict has surpassed even the Afghan war at its height in the 1980s, especially since the focus and activities of VEOs with Central Asian roots and goals remained firmly enmeshed in the Afghanistan/Pakistan theater until the Syrian war began. The VEOs with a focus on recruiting Central Asians and whose goals included long-term expansion of activities into the region, including the IMU, the IJU, Kazakhstan's short-lived *Jund al Khalifah* and Tajik-led *Jaamat Ansarullah,* were all based in Pakistan and, in many cases, like the IMU and the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* (Pakistani Taliban), subordinated to other groups whose primary goals did not extend outside the territory even of Pakistan.[15]

By 2013, however, the focus of Central Asian violent extremism had shifted noticeably to the Syrian conflict and away from Pakistan. The groups there had long dwindled to fractions of their peak strength in 2000–2001 and had not succeeded in conducting significant operations in Central Asia since 2004.[16] Faced with extremely difficult operational conditions and trouble raising funds, in 2013 the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic Jihad Union — the largest of the Central Asian VEOs — both publicly acknowledged that recruits and veteran fighters were being drawn away into the Syrian conflict.[17] The IMU complained that it was far cheaper, easier and more feasible for recruits — especially those drawn from up to seven million Central Asian migrant laborers[18] working under difficult conditions and facing rampant discrimination and tightening immigration laws in Russia — to enter Turkey and go from there to Syria than to travel to Pakistan. As the focus of the global Salafi-jihadist movement (and its funders) shifted to Syria, IMU and IJU statements admitted that many veteran fighters were abandoning the Afghanistan/Pakistan zone as well as the mountains of Dagestan and Chechnya within the former USSR for Syria and Iraq.[19]

In addition to the shift in fighters, the numbers of supporters in "camps" — including families, children, and group members who perform support tasks — certainly far exceeds the number of active fighters, though total numbers are even more difficult to estimate. By many accounts, however, they are understood to now be larger than the total presence of Central Asians ever affiliated with the IMU and the Taliban, which at its peak was believed to be as high as 2,000 people.[20] A Turkey-based non-governmental organization (NGO) that works with Uzbek migrants transiting through the country estimates that the total number of

[12] David Montgomery and John Heathershaw, 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/

[13] "IShID Safida 500 Nafar O'zbekistonlik Jang Qilmoqda," *Kun* [Day]*,* March 25, 2015, http://kun.uz/2015/03/25/ishid-safida-500-nafar-uzbekistonlik-jang-qilmoqda/

[14] "Shayx Abdulaziz Mansur: IShID Safida 200ga Yaqin O'zbekistonlik Qilmoqda" ["Shaykh Abdulaziz Mansur: Nearly 200 Uzbekistanis Fighting in Ranks of ISIS," *Kun* [Day], March 26, 2015, http://kun.uz/2015/03/26/shayx-abdulaziz-mansur-ishid-safida-200-ga-yaqin-uzbekistonlik-jang-qilmoqda/

[15] Noah Tucker, "Facebook Jihad: The IMU's Digital Communications Strategy for the Karachi Airport Attack," George Washington University Central Asia Program CERIA Brief No. 1, July 2014. https://app.box.com/s/gl40afcy4u85cjcbid3p.

[16] Mathew Stein, "The Goals of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Its Impact on Central Asia and the United States," U.S. Army Foreign Military Studies Office, 2012. http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/IMU-Goals.pdf

[17] Tucker, "Facebook Jihad."

[18] David Trilling, "Central Asians Leaving Russia: Flood or Trickle?" *Eurasianet*, Feb. 9, 2015. http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71981

[19] Tucker, ibid.

[20] Brian Glyn Williams, "On the Trail of the 'Lions of Islam': A History of Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 1980-2010," Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 2010. http://www.brianglynwilliams.com/pdfs/Foreign_Fighters_Williams-4.pdf

Uzbekistanis alone in Syria/Iraq is around 3,000–3,500.[21] By these accounts then, the Central Asian presence in militant organizations involved in the Syrian conflict is larger than any since the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997).

As the focus of the global movement shifted, new Central Asian groups and leaders emerged who both attract the preponderance of new recruits and have absorbed many former members of the Pakistan-based organizations like the IMU. ICSR's breakdown of active militants from Central Asia fighting in any of the organizations active in Syria and Iraq in January 2015, by country, follows:

Country	# Active militants from Central Asia
Kazakhstan	250
Kyrgyzstan	100
Tajikistan	190
Turkmenistan	360
Uzbekistan	500

In terms of specific affiliation, these fighters appear to be distributed into two broad affiliations, mirroring the larger fault lines of the Syrian conflict. The first, referred to elsewhere as the "Aleppo Uzbeks," comprises several smaller brigades (and an independent VEO led by ethnic Uzbeks) allied with or part of Jabhat al Nusra and based around the opposition stronghold of Aleppo in Northern Syria. The second are those Central Asians fighting as part of ISIS, based in ar-Raqqa in Syria and in Mosul in Iraq.

The "Aleppo Uzbeks"

Three Uzbek-led groups operate around Aleppo allied with or as part of al-Qaida's Syrian wing, *Jabhat al Nusra*. The largest of these, the **Imam al-Bukhoriy Brigade (*Imom Buxoriy Katibasi,* or KIB)** represents itself at least for fundraising purposes as a distinct VEO led by a self-described veteran of the Afghanistan and Pakistan conflict named "Shaykh Salohiddin."[22] Though exact numbers are difficult to estimate, KIB appears to have 400–700 members and likely surpassed the IMU in 2014 to become the largest Central Asian-led VEO in the world. The organization maintains a highly professional military training camp near Aleppo and promises to equip new members with weapons and specialized training.[23] The group pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar of the Taliban in late 2014[24] (which may indicate prior connections and funding for its veteran commander), but operates in Syria in coordination with larger umbrella originations like the Islamic Front[25] and specifically with ANF, conducting joint operations with the Uzbek brigades that operate inside the al-Qaida Syria affiliate.[26]

The Uzbek Brigade of *Jabhat al Nusra*, which maintains a media and recruiting presence online as "*Jannat Oshiqlari*" ("Those Who Long for Heaven," a common jihadist trope) and at times refers to itself as the "*Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi*" (Tauhid and Jihad Brigade), emerged in August 2014 as a distinct subgroup within ANF led by an ethnic Uzbek commander from Southern Kyrgyzstan named Amir Abu Saloh.[27] Within the

[21]*Ozodlik Radiosi*, "Suriyaga oilasi bilan borayotgan jihodchi o'zbeklar ko'paymoqda," March 25, 2014. http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/25308969.html
[22] Al Fath Studiyasi (Imom al-Buxoriy Katibasi) "Qo'mondon Muhammad Ali aka," May 24, 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6UR6I1ZVjk
[23]Al Fath Studiyasi (Imom al-Buxoriy Katibasi), "Muaskar" July 26, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vSHiHa0z8Q
[24] Imom al-Buxoriy Katibasi, "Bay'at Amurul Mo"minin Mullo Muhammad Umarga," Nov. 7, 2014. http://www.albuxoriy.com/Video_v6927.html
[25] Muslim TV, "Uzbek mujohidlar Zaxro va Liramun janglari," July 27 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPdizJ-i1qk
[26] Noah Tucker, "Research Note: Uzbek Online Recruiting to the Syrian Conflict," Central Eurasia — Religion in International Affairs Brief No. 3, George Washington University Central Asia Program, November 2014. https://app.box.com/s/2Ivkprsdniz6gomzrfjo
[27] Tavhid va Jihod Katibasi, "Abu Saloh Juma ma'ruzasi: 'Jihod farzi ayndir'" [Uzbek: Abu Saloh Friday sermon: Jihad is an obligation of the first order"] Jan. 1, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdNSJ4C-D-s

same larger organization, the **Seyfullah Shishani Jamaat**, a mixed group of Russian-speaking fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia, is currently led by an Uzbek named Amir Ubayda al Madaniy.[28]

The Islamic State

Within ISIS, members from Central Asia are divided into brigades by shared language and ethnicity (the group does not recognize secular states), and has released media that indicates distinct formations of Kazakhs, Uzbeks (who appear to be from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) and Tajiks. In reality, the militants are known to fight in battalions less cleanly divided along ethnic lines (some Uzbeks and Tajiks fight under the Chechen commander Umar Shishani, for example[29]) and estimates of the size for each battalion vary widely. While the Tajik government claims that 190 of its citizens fight in the Syrian conflict, mostly within the Islamic State (the number that appears to have been used by ICSR), a leading specialist on Tajik jihadists in the conflict has stated that online evidence supports only 22 Tajikistanis fighting in either front.[30] Analysis by the Central Asia Digital Islam Project supports estimates that the number of Central Asians in the Islamic State is in the low hundreds.[31]

The situation, affiliations and brigade-level leadership for Central Asians fighting in the conflict in both groups changes rapidly, sometimes so quickly it can be difficult to record. Central Asians participating in the conflict, especially in the Aleppo group, have been involved in some of the worst fighting of the intense Syrian conflict; commanders are frequently killed and groups change names and identities rapidly as leadership changes or alliances shift. A large group (potentially several hundred) Central Asians who fought together with Russian-speaking militants from the Caucasus in *Jaysh Muhajireen Wal Ansar* (JMWA), for example, split apart in late 2013 as the organization divided between those loyal to ANF and al-Qaida (who stayed in JMWA under the command of Chechen Amir Seyfulloh) and those who joined ISIS with Chechen Amir Umar Shishani and an Uzbek subcommander.[32] Through all these feuds and splits, even as Uzbeks on both sides conduct aggressive recruiting for their own groups and produce media on their operations, neither side has ever acknowledged the split, nor the conflict between ANF and ISIS. This is a marked difference between Central Asian recruiting and discussion about the conflict and what takes place in Arabic or even in Russian on the Caucasus-focused jihadist forums like Kavkaz Center or Adamalla.com, where jihadist sympathizers and Syrian war supporters dissect every leadership change or whiff of dissent down to extreme minutiae. For Central Asians, the details of the conflict and the frequently warring factions that fight it are obscure. For those interested in joining, it is a conflict about grand narratives that offer meaning to the lives of marginalized migrant workers.

The Influence of Online Messaging and Social Media

The Internet and social media have begun to revolutionize the Islamic marketplace of ideas for Central Asians. Similar to processes identified by scholars like Peter Mandaville[33] in other contexts, Central Asia's access to digital Islam has been delayed by low Internet penetration, authoritarian controls on media and communication, and in part by Central Asia's peripheral status in the Muslim world. Two recent developments have changed this, especially with regard to global discussion and the spread of information on the conflict in Syria. First, advances in communications technology, especially Internet-enabled cell phone

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[28] "Jamaat Seyfulloh" YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRJRyyXU_BKbMa28VjScUiA; "Abu Ubayda al Madaniy" VKontakte profile, https://vk.com/almadaniy.
[29] Joanna Paraszczuk, "New Video: The History of Sabri's Jamaat," *From Chechnya to Syria*, Aug. 28, 2014. http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22465#more-22465
[30] Edward Lemon, Exeter Central Asian Studies Network, "Profiling Tajik Fighters in Syria," Sept. 15, 2014. http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/excas/2014/09/15/profiling-tajik-fighters-in-syria/
[31] Noah Tucker, George Washington University Central Asia Program, CERIA Research Briefs No. 6, "Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia," February 2015. https://app.box.com/s/rea1h54l9q4qqh3pp5vjdi7ev84e07oi
[32] Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria Spotlight: Insurgent Split — The Dispute Between Abu Umar al-Shishani and His Deputy, Seyfullakh the Chechen," EA Worldview, Nov. 23, 2013. http://eaworldview.com/2013/11/syria-spotlight-dispute-abu-umar-al-shishani-deputy-seyfullakh-chechen/
[33] Peter Mandaville, Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma (Routledge: 2003).
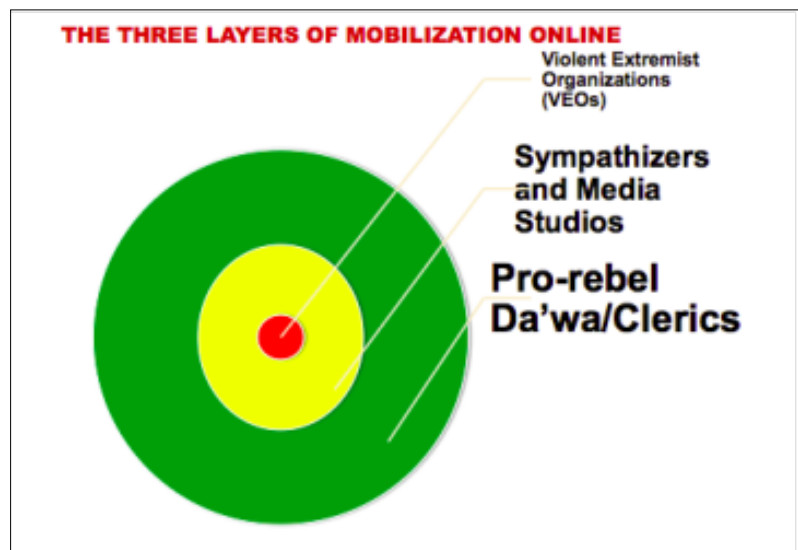
networks, allow much wider participation on social media networks. Second, large-scale migration — particularly labor migration to Russia — gives migrants access to better technology and separates them from their homelands, which increases their level of interest in joining social networks and seeking out social interaction with their peers.

As Central Asians engage with the global Muslim community, debates from other social and political contexts seep into local discourse. Religious quarrels between Saudi Salafi scholars and competing styles of Islam-inspired women's fashion from Turkey or Egypt more often inform debates about how to be a good Muslim among young Uzbeks and Kazakhs who have no personal connection to the Middle East.[34] While most of the content in the marketplace centers around personal piety, Central Asians online are much more likely to be exposed to calls to defend fellow Muslims suffering in Syria or to ISIS-influenced hate rhetoric against other Muslim or religious groups (such as Alawites, Shias or Yazidis), many of which they have never encountered. The process of engaging in this global marketplace remains slow and affects only a minority of the population; but it is growing at a rapid pace, especially among labor migrants in Russia, and has remained mostly undocumented and unmonitored by both academic and government analysts.[35]

The online discourse and wealth of material on the Internet and social media supporting the Syrian opposition and documenting atrocities allegedly committed by the Assad government appears to have a significant influence on mobilization of Central Asian foreign fighters to the conflict. Large-scale studies have not yet been done (and may never be completed, because of the difficulty accessing data) that would definitely show how many foreign fighters mobilized to join the conflict are primarily recruited over the Internet and social media or how primary the role of online information was in their decision. Anecdotal evidence indicates that both active online recruiting and exposure to information portraying both the war against Assad or to expand the territory of the Islamic State frequently play an important role in shaping decisions to join militant organizations in Syria or Iraq and help create community support for those who mobilize.[36]

The Central Asian online media environment can be broken down into the three "layers" of actors whose messaging supports the Syrian opposition and is used by VEO recruiters to draw in interested users, especially on social media. But it is important to note that supporting the Syrian opposition or military resistance against the Assad government does not necessarily equate with support for militant extremist organizations or Transnational Salafi Jihadist ideology. Support for the Syrian opposition is common on Central Asian social media networks and among many prominent reformist clerics in the Middle East, including many who enjoy widespread popularity on Central Asian social media. The process of moving those interested in the war to positive assessments of VEOs or armed Islamist groups is facilitated by networks of jihadist sympathizers, who offer passive and information support to the groups and share their messages but may have

THE THREE LAYERS OF MOBILIZATION ONLINE
Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)
Sympathizers and Media Studios
Pro-rebel Da'wa/Clerics

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[34] "Salafiylikni da'vo qiladigan Yangi Murjia, Xavorij-Madxaliylar haqida" Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/madhaliylar?ref=profile_Салафийликни_даъво_қиладиган_Янги_Муржиа,_Хавориж-Мадхалийлар_ҳақида

[35] Noah Tucker, "The Central Asia Digital Islam Project: How the Internet and Social Media are Reshaping the Islamic Marketplace in Central Asia," Registan.net, May 18, 2014.

[36] Tucker, "Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia"

no formal relationship to any organized group or participate in any mobilization of armed supporters. The VEOs themselves make up the third, innermost layer; their official media studios and recruiters and the material that they produce to raise funds and mobilize foreign fighter support.

Pro-Opposition *Da'wa* Preachers/Clerics

Pro-opposition *Da'wa*[37] preachers and clerics are key figures in mobilizing support for the war effort in general and for understanding the conflict in Syria and Iraq as a jihad in which Central Asian Muslims share a religious obligation (*fard al-ayn).* As Central Asians increasingly participate in transnational Islamic discourses like the *Da'wa* or Piety Movement, they are more frequently exposed to popular online Middle Eastern clerics (what Peter Mandaville has termed "iPod imams"), many of whom vehemently support the Syrian opposition and have issued religious rulings characterizing the conflict as a defensive jihad, often against an Alawite/Shiite alliance (the Assad government, led by minority Alawites, and supported by Iran). Viral videos produced by the popular Saudi Salafist cleric Muhammad al Arifi, for example, calling on Muslims to rage over injustice in Syria cross into Central Asian language networks by multiple vectors, promoted by both Uzbek jihadists as a recruiting tool and by individual users who find the message appealing and meaningful.[38]

The Uzbek exiled independent cleric Shaykh Abdulloh Buhoriy, chief imam of a large Uzbek mosque and madrasah based in Istanbul, rose to prominence and popularity quickly from 2012–2014 among Uzbek Muslims active on social media. This transpired in no small part because of his vocal support of the opposition in Syria and his opinion that all Uzbeks around the world are obligated to support the anti-Assad effort because it was characterized as an attack on Sunni Muslims.[39] Buhoriy's weekly sermons and dedicated social media production studio, which distributed his sermons on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms, made him a notably influential supporting cleric. In some interviews, in material produced by his Ihasanilim madrasah, he came close to openly admitting that his organization helped facilitate recruiting for the war effort particularly among Uzbek migrant workers in Russia, though he declined to offer public support to any particular party or militant opposition organization.[40] In December 2014, he was assassinated in front of the entrance to his madrasah in Istanbul in what many believe was a joint operation of the Russian and Uzbekistani security services; but his sermons and media material remain widely available and even his social media profiles survive him in death.[41]

Jihadist Sympathizers and Media Studios

The second layer of social media mobilization in Syria consists of online sympathizers and "media studios" that increase awareness of the conflict in Syria and Iraq and voice support for the efforts of foreign fighters. Sympathizers, many or most of whom have no direct connection to VEOs or militant groups, promote a mix of materials — from battle footage from multiple groups to mainstream news stories and reporting on the conflict to sermons and videos produced by supportive clerics. These sympathizers are often the middle-ground users that join networks of active militants and recruiters to much larger groups of users interested in the war and sympathetic to the plight of the Syrian people.[42]

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[37] *Da'wa*, or "the call" in Arabic, is the name commonly given (and adopted by participants) to a modern Islamic revivalist movement sometimes also referred to as the "Piety Movement." (For *Da'wa* in Kazakhstan, for example, see Del Schwab, Saba Mahmud and Schmiel Schielke in Egypt and others). The movement stresses individual spiritual piety and personal reform based on adherence to Islamic scripture (the Quran and the Sunna), and intersects in some important ways with other modern reformist movements like Salafism. However, it is not an organized denomination or a distinct theological school like Salafism, and instead could best be compared to broad movements that share a common approach in other contemporary religions, such as evangelical Christianity in the United States and Europe. *Da'wa* preachers are in a sense evangelists or revivalists, but rather than attempting to convert non-Muslims to Islam, the *Da'wa* movement focuses on "purifying" and reviving the faith of Muslims who may consider themselves as such because they were born into a Muslim-majority society or family but who do not personally participate in spiritual disciplines (such as regular prayer and fasting) or study the scriptures.
[38] Sheikh Muhammad al Arifi, "Be Angry!" Dec. 2, 2013. (Uzbek version no longer available.) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2z1oEO86gs
[39] Ihsanilim Madrasasi, "Suriya Mujohidlariga Tuhfa — Shayh Abdulloh Buhoriy," Jan. 13, 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygsS2NV035g.
[40] Interview, Muhammadsolih Abutov and Abdulloh Bukhoriy, September 2014. https://soundcloud.com/tayanch-org/ko9nzb8bsuyn (link removed, transcription available in author archive).
[41]*Ozodlik*, "Turkiyada tanilgan o'zbek imom Abdulloh Buxoriy otib ketildi," Dec. 11, 2014. http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/26736693.html
[42] See, for example: Abu Hanan Media, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxMlohDcf58&list=PLwz_-Aer8s7ccdnE9FDM4fBa1gGEYb-mg

Passive supporters outnumber the official spokespeople and recruiters in the Central Asian media environment exponentially, and serve to amplify the messages of extremist groups or recruiters without necessarily endorsing any specific group or agenda. It was due to the efforts of a social media sympathizer from Southern Kyrgyzstan that most of the world first became aware of Central Asians fighting in Syria at all — in February 2014 "Ammor Rahmatulloh," who has gone on to create his own media studio and become an important online supporter of the Uzbek *Jabhat al Nusra* brigade, posted a cell phone video sent to him by an acquaintance who had gone to fight in Syria.[43] The video, which shows a few masked Uzbek fighters taunting a Syrian government sniper with a crude puppet on the end of a stick, exploded on YouTube and generated its own Reddit thread, receiving at least 1.6 million views and launching the public debate among Central Asians about the war that has only continued to gain attention throughout the last year.[44]

Unlike individual sympathizers, media studios often appear to work in direct coordination with specific violent extremist organizations and frequently choose only one to promote. A "media studio" is frequently a single individual with access to video editing tools and raw footage who creates branded videos, dedicated YouTube channels and social media personas and signature logos or credit sequences. Enlisting, training and equipping independent actors to produce supportive media has been an exceptionally successful strategy first developed by the Al-Qaida Media Machine (AQMM) to make their messaging operations decentralized and ubiquitous, offering individuals creative freedom in exchange for the creation of a virtual army of decentralized, anonymous and disconnected media cells that have proven to be extremely difficult for state actors to combat or censor.

Many Central Asian media studio operators also play a critical role by translating material from Arabic into regional languages, and are critical nodes through which popular videos created by Muhammad al-Arifiy, for example, or personal narratives produced by Arabic-speaking Syrian civilians jump from Arabic language media networks to Uzbek, Tajik or Russian-language social media.

VEO Media Outlets/Recruiters

Finally, at the center of the concentric networks for VEO messaging and mobilization to the war in Syria and Iraq are official VEO media studios and recruiters. The VEO media studios and promoters create their own messages and recruit for their own brigades; but they also translate and distribute the messages of the larger organizations that support them or within which they are embedded, sometimes giving them an impact on the regional language information environment far outside their actual numbers. The IJU, for example, is a tiny Uzbek-led group of embattled militants that split from the IMU around 2004 and has never exceeded a force of larger than a few hundred people. Over the last decade, however, they have translated (into Uzbek) and made publicly available a vast archive of al-Qaida publications, statements and press releases, as well as run a news outlet (Sodiqlar.info and associated social media accounts) whose staff identify themselves as journalists and translators, obscuring their affiliation to the group and the IJU's larger alliance with al-Qaida.[45] The Sodiqlar "journalists" join popular forums on Facebook or the widely used Russian social network *Odnoklassinki* (Classmates) and share stories and posts intended to influence the public toward a worldview resonant with al-Qaida ideology without identifying any affiliation. For example, they share stories encouraging Central Asians to see Shias as demonic sub-humans or the United States and Israel as enemies of all Muslims.[46]

This same tactic is employed by other Central Asian groups, including the al-Bukhoriy Brigade, which operates its own news agency (Fath News) on Twitter and Facebook in addition to the profiles openly recruiting for the organization and advertising its military operations. Through October 2014, ISIS Uzbeks had developed an extremely sophisticated set of media platforms on a similar model, with multiple media

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[43]"Ammor Rahmatulloh," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpJozxQKc-pWzrfKljsFNyg
[44]"Uzbek fighters in Syria driving Assad sniper crazy," Feb. 5, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCeP9iXn2q8
[45] "Kitoblar," [Books], http://www.sodiqlar.info/uzb/
[46] Tucker, "Central Asia Digital Islam Project"

studios and a central "news" site (appropriately called "Khalifate News" — now defunct) with related accounts on multiple social media platforms. When one account is closed for violating terms of service or by request from a state's security services, the accounts on other platforms are used to advise interested followers where to find the next iteration of the media outlet.

The decentralized approach to social media messaging is particularly important because it allows the groups and their supporters to evade censorship and blocking by regional states. Although states like Uzbekistan have developed relatively effective measures for blocking websites, they have no technological capacity to block access to individual profiles on Facebook or information shared through other social media networks. As a large portion of overall Internet activity shifts to social media networks in each of the Central Asian states (with the possible exception of Turkmenistan), their "information borders" have become porous — a prospect at which regional governments and pundits have expressed considerable alarm.

III. CATEGORIZATION OF TYPES OF FIGHTERS AND SUPPORTERS

Some broad inferences can be made about the types of recruits attracted by militant organizations in Syria based on data collected by the Digital Islam Project in surveys and monitoring of militant profiles in Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik and Russian, the material produced by the VEO and sympathetic media studios, work done by other scholars and media reporting by Radio Free Europe's/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Central Asian bureaus. The first and most important of these is that, as found in other contexts, no single type or profile of individuals is attracted to militant groups in Syria — and this is especially true because of the wide variety of groups involved in the conflict.

The evidence available for Central Asian recruits, however, is consistent with trends identified by many other researchers examining other contexts. In spite of frequent claims by regional government officials — whose Soviet-informed approach continues to use "engaging in explanatory work" (*razyasnitelnaya robota*) as the preferred method for counteracting all social problems — level of education does not appear to be a useful predictor.[47] Throughout much of 2014, the Uzbek-language spokesperson for the Islamic State, "Abu Usman," claimed to be a former high-ranking police officer from Andijon who made a point of emphasizing that he had received excellent grades at Uzbekistan's most prestigious law school and cited corruption and nepotism in his homeland as some among the factors that motivated him to embrace religion and eventually the Islamic State's alternative vision of governance.[48]

The war effort in the Syrian conflict is so broad that people of every background are welcomed to join, especially by the Islamic State, which advertises that in its alternative, utopian vision of society there is a place for all people no matter what their background or level of ability — or their disability. A recent video featured deaf police officers serving in the Islamic State, reinforcing the belief of many Islamic State supporters that challenges and disabilities can be overcome through the power of faith.[49]

At the outset of the conflict in Syria, it appears that the first Central Asians to join were those already living in the Middle East, particularly young madrasah students studying in Syria. The first Uzbeks to use social media to advertise their participation in the war, for example, were seminary students from Syria who enlisted with the Russian-speaking JMWA. Some of these, such as the Kazakh brigade of ISIS, appear to have been living

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[47] In spite of variation in findings on the approximate numbers for Central Asians participating in the conflict, the ICG "Syria Calling" report (op. cit.) findings concur with these conclusions.
[48] Khilofat News, "Mujohidlar Hayoti 2-qism" April 7, 2014. http://dai.ly/x1mlfll
[49] Chris Pleasance, "Now Isis is using sign language to try and recruit jihadis: New video shows two deaf-mute militants calling on Muslims to join them saying disability is no excuse," *Daily Mail,* March 8, 2015. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2985804/Now-Isis-using-SIGN-LANGUAGE-try-recruit-jihadis-New-video-shows-two-deaf-mute-militants-calling-Muslims-join-saying-disability-no-excuse.html

in the Middle East with their whole families and took their families with them when they migrated to the conflict zone (or to the territory of the caliphate). There, their children are growing up as part of a new generation dedicated to expanding the "caliphate's alternative political order."[50] The movement advertises that each individual can find a place in the new society being built and recruits from the former USSR even set up a grocery store with familiar signs in Russian and a Russian-language preschool.[51] [52]

The second primary group of initial Central Asian militants consists of veteran fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, some of whom assumed leadership roles in brigades and newly formed ethnic *jamaats* (militant groups). The current commander of the al Buxoriy Brigade, for example, Amir Salohiddin, was likely a member of either the IMU or Taliban in Afghanistan since at least the mid-2000s (based on his limited personal information released in videos). These veteran fighters play an important role in training and leadership for new brigades.

As recruiting gained momentum in 2013 and 2014, however, many sources report that the preponderance of new Central Asian recruits began to come from Russia. There are up to seven million Central Asians working as migrant laborers under difficult conditions in Russia, with better Internet access and relatively more freedom to recruit in person without the resistance of local community structures or omnipresent security services. As a result, migrant workers became the primary target audience for Central Asian groups recruiting for the conflict.

Prominent sympathizers — those who legitimize and praise the actions of others even though they may have no direct personal role in the conflict — also come from the ranks of Central Asians living abroad as economic or political migrants. One of the most active online Uzbek militant sympathizers, for example, works by night as a bartender in Prague and during his free time in the day ceaselessly promotes the activities of militant groups online in Syria. The level of cognitive dissonance and humiliation that comes from being forced by economic circumstances to serve alcohol to Europeans in order to make a living and support family members at home while increasingly embracing a Salafist-influenced Islamic identity is striking but not atypical — many of the strongest supporters of extremist organizations online among Central Asians are those who live in non-Muslim societies and embrace a militant Islamist identity as a source of empowerment.

While they may never travel to fight themselves, the role that online sympathizers play in disseminating and amplifying VEO recruiting material and information about the conflict — and promoting Central Asian commanders as heroes whose example should be emulated — would be difficult to overestimate. Amir Abu Saloh of the Uzbek ANF brigade, for example, was promoted by sympathizers for months before he emerged as the leader of the brigade and its public face. The videos he released through 2014 (promoted by his fans and supporters) show the progress of fierce fighting in and around Aleppo and reinforce the idea that Central Asians are fighting on the front lines of a struggle that each group claims will shape the future of the whole Muslim world and eventually lead to liberation of their families and homelands.[53] [54]

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[50]Tom Wyke and Darren Boyle, "ISIS release shocking new video of child soldiers from Kazakhstan being trained with AK47s," *Daily Mail,* Nov. 22, 2014. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2845531/ISIS-release-shocking-new-video-child-soldiers-Kazakhstan-trained-AK47s.html
[51] Joanna Paraszczuk, "Lokalizatsia: Dagestani Jamaat in ISIS to Open Russian Store in Raqqa," From Chechnya to Syria, May 21, 2014, http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=22053
[52] Firsthand information about the important question of Central Asians joining the conflict in non-combatant roles remains scant. While we can infer that some Central Asians are likely moving to the Islamic State or joining other camps in non-combatant roles (as drivers, teachers, grocery store operators) because citizens from other regions do the same, direct evidence is very difficult to get because of the difficulty of doing research in these combat zones and the fact that Central Asian militant groups have not themselves chosen to recruit for non-combatant roles.. Early Kazakh ISIS videos from the summer of 2014 depict whole families living together in a kind of ethnic commune, and show women there who are clearly working as teachers and raising the children. It does not offer evidence, however, that they came there specifically to serve in those roles or were recruited for them --they appear mostly to be the wives of the fighters, and the questions of whether they had any choice in going to Syria or Iraq or how they feel about the conflict are not addressed in the group's material. There are rumors and some reports about Central Asian women traveling to the conflict area to marry jihadists, as European or American women have, but this has not been a frequent topic of discussion in the networks observed for this project. See: www.rferl.mobi/a/islamic-state-fighter-online-dating-syria-tajikistan/26979106.html
[53] Ammor Rahmatulloh, "Syria (Shom) Liramun shahridan. Abu Saloh," March 24, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOsUdjEL2zs

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IV.   KEY DRIVERS (PUSH AND PULL FACTORS)

Although no single path is common to all who are mobilized into militant and extremist groups in Syria, a number of drivers identified by USAID's *Guide to Drivers of Violent Extremism* continue to be relevant. As previous risk assessments for the Central Asian states have found, however, significant mitigating factors inside the region continue to make the emergence of extremist movements there unlikely. Many of these factors change, however, when potential recruits are removed from their home countries and thrust into a different sociopolitical environment.

Migration — primarily economic migration — may be the single most important factor for Central Asian recruiting to the Syrian conflict. No detailed surveys of foreign fighters from the region have been done or are likely to be completed because of difficulty accessing the groups. However, three sources of information — arrest reports, martyrdom statements and social media accounts created by recruits themselves — show that recruits come almost exclusively from outside the borders of the Central Asian states.

A robust body of literature has shed serious doubt on the idea of a predictive link between poverty and participation in VEOs or interest in extremist ideology. However, in Central Asia, the lack of opportunities for employment and advancement in the battered economies of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as religious repression and discrimination against non-titular minorities (such as Uzbeks in Southern Kyrgyzstan), have resulted in large-scale migration. These migrants live in a very different environment and therefore are more susceptible to being pushed or pulled into militant organizations. Already marginalized in their homelands, they commonly experience discrimination in Russia from both the public and the authorities. Migrants frequently discuss street attacks on others, beatings at the hands of the police, and everyday humiliation for their skin color and religion.[55]

As documented in the *Guide to Drivers of Violent Extremism*, migration and subsequent marginalization or ghettoization breaks important community bonds for the migrants and removes them from positive mitigating factors — family, community, religious leaders — that work to prevent militant mobilization at home. In Central Asia in particular, strong community pressure by family and elders restrains younger members from engaging even in peaceful political activity or participating in religious groups that might draw negative attention from the authorities.[56,57] One of the questions most commonly discussed in Uzbek jihadist literature, for example, is whether or not it is permissible to disobey one's parents to participate in jihad, indicating that the groups themselves recognize that this is one of the biggest obstacles they face in recruiting. Local religious authorities are similarly a deterrent — prominent clerics, including those who operate largely independent of the state-backed muftiates, have not endorsed the Syrian war against the Assad regime as legitimate jihad, and several popular clerics widely regarded as independent, such as Hojji Mirzo in Tajikistan, have condemned Central Asian foreign fighters participating in the conflict.[58]

Once outside Central Asia, however, these mitigating factors play a much smaller role, and many migrants embrace their Muslim identity over national or ethnic identities, even if religion was not a primary focus of their attention or activity in their home country. Without local imams who speak their native language to turn

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[54] It is important to note that among the reasons Central Asian VEOs have always been based in areas outside the region is that they do not appear to have any significant sources of internal funding. All VEOs or brigades in which Central Asians participate in cohesive groups, both in Afghanistan/Pakistan and Syria/Iraq depend on the larger organizations they are allied with for their funding, which means that they are also subservient to the goals of that organization and limiting their freedom to engage in attacks outside the region of primary interest for their funders.

[55] International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)/ Memorial Anti-Discrimination Center, "From Tajikistan to Russian: Vulnerability and Abuse of Tajik Migrant Workers and Their Families," October 2014. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie641uk2014hd.pdf

[56] Sarah Kendzior, "The Curse of Stability in Central Asia," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 19, 2013. http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/19/the-curse-of-stability-in-central-asia/

[57] John Heathershaw, Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order (Routledge, 2011).

[58] Farangis Najibullah, "Tajik Mullah's Remarks On Jihad Spark War Of Words," *RFE/RL*, May 27, 2014. http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-syria-war-words/25400717.html

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to for guidance, many begin to participate in the robust online devotional community. Once they begin to interact with these resources and expand their online social networks to include its active members, they are almost inevitably targeted by extremist recruiters who treat them as their primary audience.

A specific case study may be illustrative: around July 2013, a 20-year-old Uzbek named Shohruh (name changed) from a small town near Samarqand opened a new Facebook profile. In the first six months he was active on Facebook, Shohruh expressed interest in only two topics: meeting women and getting a green card so he could work in the United States. His Facebook wall from the second half of 2013 was full of posts of pensive self-portraits in fashionable clothes and advertisements from a dating service he had joined featuring scantily clad European women. His friend network consisted of roughly two dozen young women that he managed to make contact with and a few male friends, without a single post on religion or reflecting an interest in Islam.[59]

In January 2014, however, his life abruptly changed. Unable to get a green card to go to the U.S., he followed the same path as most other young Central Asian men his age and left that month for Vladivostok, Russia. From that point on, his pattern of social media use changed abruptly. He gave up on meeting women, and began instead to join Islamic devotional groups and interact with their users. By around July 2014, his friend network had exploded from only around 30 to more than 200; he began to study Arabic online and befriended many well-regarded devotional figures whose teaching has no relationship to militant extremist groups. By the middle of the year, however, the VEO recruiters who actively target these groups had found and befriended Shohruh. A "journalist" from the IJU's Sodiqlar website had begun to post articles on his wall promoting *Jabhat al Nusra* in Syria, and by August, he had discovered ISIS Uzbek material and began to promote it himself. In October, he changed his profile picture to a logo commonly used by ISIS supporters that reads, "We are all ISIS," and then a few days later posted pictures of himself wearing combat gear and training with an automatic rifle.

More details are available from the original publication for this case study, from George Washington University's Central Eurasia Religion in International Affairs initiative:

> Shohruh's increasing interest in using online resources to explore his Muslim identity only after moving abroad … appears to represent a common trend, and his exposure to jihadist media and recruiters after showing general interest in devotional sites is a nearly universal experience even if receptivity to those resources is rare. Operators for the al-Buxoriy Brigade, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, the Islamic Jihad Union and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have developed a targeted strategy — with no living charismatic spiritual leaders of their own who can compete with the popularity and depth of knowledge of the great Uzbek imams of the last two generations, they have learned to target new converts drawn to basic Islamic educational resources online. They appropriate the work of respected imams who never supported violence or Islamism but who were cut down — killed, jailed or disappeared — by an Uzbekistani state that feared their influence and popularity.
>
> The recruiters have carefully built large friend networks that target popular and high betweenness-centrality users in the Uzbek Islamic educational networks, causing Facebook algorithms to recommend them as "friends" for users interested in the most popular reformist-leaning devotional sites. A new Facebook persona, for example, that adds a tribute page to the disappeared Andijon imam Abduvali Qori and other popular resources will receive a friend request from jihadist recruiters as quickly as 24 hours after opening a profile. Users like Shohruh are seen as an ideal target: separated from their family, friends and home community, they tend to spend more of their free time online than they might at home, especially when the Internet is their only source for entertainment and information in their native language. Frustrated with thwarted attempts to pursue career and family outcomes they find meaningful and living as a

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[59] The account has now been deleted, but the data is recorded and archived by the Central Asia Digital Islam Project.

subaltern minority in a foreign country, Shohruh's timeline fits what appears to be a typical pattern for successful recruitment — but evidence of successful recruitment is exceedingly rare.[60]

The drivers that motivate some labor migrants (and, according to Central Asian security services, some local residents) to join the anti-Assad coalition of allied groups around Aleppo or the ranks of the Islamic State can also be examined through the mobilization narratives to which they respond. In a particularly insightful approach to understanding ethnic conflict, the sociologist Rogers Brubaker in *Ethnicity Without Groups* has emphasized that group mobilization around ethnic identity cannot be taken for granted and does not happen automatically.[61] Rather, ethnic groups at specific times respond to specific mobilizations by political or violent entrepreneurs who construct a group from individuals that organize themselves around ethnic identity.

A similar approach can be useful in understanding why Central Asians, who traditionally have not seen themselves particularly implicated in events in the Arab Middle East, come to understand the conflict in Syria or the military conquests of a self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq as struggles in which they share a common cause. The contrast between mobilizing narratives and supportive discussions for each of these causes helps illustrate the drivers for this mobilization, and helps explain why an Uzbek from outside Samarqand living in Vladivostok comes to feel that an ultraviolent non-state actor in a foreign state halfway across the world better represents his own identity and interests than do his own community or government.

Primary Narrative One: The Syrian Uprising as a Just War

Because of recent advances in technology and the widespread availability of mobile Internet, even in the zone of conflict, the war in Syria is the most extensively documented large-scale conflict in human history.[62] Never before has raw human slaughter been documented in such excruciating detail, both by participants and by non-combatant victims trapped in the crossfire in block-by-block urban warfare, indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombardment of residential areas — sometimes with non-conventional weapons, including chemical armaments and barrel bombs deployed in densely populated areas.

The most common — and most resonant — narrative deployed by the Aleppo-based groups allied with al-Qaida's Jabhat al Nusra has nothing to do with AQ ideology or global vision. (Indeed, it is likely that many Central Asians who support these groups do not necessarily support the broader goals of AQ.) This narrative, shared by secular militant opposition groups and their supporters as well, argues that the armed opposition against the Assad government is a "just war" and a defensive conflict. From a theological standpoint, Islamic or Islamist opposition groups in which Central Asians lead or participate describe this conflict as a jihad to defend the true religion (Sunni Islam, in this case), but also jihad to defend against the slaughter of innocents.

Operators recruiting Central Asians for the conflict, and their sympathizers attempting to mobilize awareness and support, use uncensored graphic images of the violence, particularly against Syrian civilians and children, to make their case. Many particularly disturbing video clips are cut and pasted over and over again into recruiting material for various groups. One of the most common is a video depicting a young Syrian girl around 10 years old, with the colors of the Syrian flag painted on her face, singing a few bars of a patriotic song in Arabic in a crowded city square.[63] Ten or 15 seconds into the video, a bomb drops into the center of the square, knocking everyone in view on the screen out of the frame. Like the Vietnam war photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phuc by Nick Ut — the iconic image of an terrified naked girl fleeing a napalm attack — images like this have a powerful effect on the public opinion among Central Asian Muslims who view them.[64]

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[60] Tucker, "Islamic State Messaging to Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia," pp. 3–4.
[61] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Harvard University Press, 2006).
[62] Mark Lynch, Deen Freelon, Sean Aday, "Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War," United States Institute of Peace, 2014. http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW91-Syrias%20Socially%20Mediated%20Civil%20War.pdf
[63] "Young girl bombed while singing — Syria," Feb. 6, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pFWyDn0o1o
[64] Nick Ut, "The Napalm Girl," AP Images, June 8, 1972. http://www.apimages.com/Collection/Landing/Photographer-Nick-Ut-The-Napalm-Girl-/ebfc0a860aa946ba9e77eb786d46207e

Those who are mobilized in response to this narrative, or in response to the sermons and arguments of clerics like the murdered Istanbul-based Uzbek cleric Abdulloh Buhoriy, may even join a group like ANF without initially sharing any of their global goals. Once inside the group, however, and after being exposed to the brutality of the war, these recruits may change their views to align with a more extremist agenda that they may not have shared or been aware of upon joining. Particularly for those living a marginal existence as migrant workers, the opportunity to do something meaningful with their lives that better fulfills the cultural dictates of manliness and honor appears to resonate strongly for both recruits and passive supporters and appears to be a more relevant factor than resonance of transnational Salafi-jihadist ideology.

Primary Narrative Two: The Islamic State as Apocalyptic Utopia

The second primary message, promoted by Central Asian Islamic State members and supporters, is a narrative of potent "stateness" that has two complementary parts often visible side by side or within the same message. The first is a utopian vision of life within the "Islamic State" and the second is an unblinking display of the shocking violence employed to advance the territory of this state and establish social order within it.

Rather than fight to defend something or someone, Islamic State supporters claim to have already won a victory. Their eschatology is not a far-off prophecy, but a present reality: The caliph and a new age of Muslim rule is not "coming," he is already here. The caliphate is not a future hope; it has already been founded and is advancing. The Islamic State militants (according to their vision of themselves) are not defenders; they are victorious conquerors, and unsurprisingly they are not above falsifying information to create this impression.

To advertise their vision of a present utopia, for example, they often promote images of *Eid al Fitr* celebration in the Iraqi city of Ninevah, currently occupied by ISIS, portraying a life of happiness and security, in which *mujahedeen* care for the disabled and orphans while children enjoy brightly lit carnival rides. Pro-ISIS materials frequently show Muslims from various nations (including in Central Asia) burning their secular passports and revoking their homelands for citizenship for this utopia.

The twin of this narrative is the sharpest possible contrast: the sheer violence that the state is willing to engage in to show its power. Mass executions of non-combatants, beheadings of prisoners and hostages and using child soldiers — including Central Asians — to execute "spies" are all meant to convey the power of the group in contrast to the marginalization and powerlessness felt by migrant workers in particular.[65]

Primary Narrative Three: Striking Back at Western Oppression

The ideology of the group as it is presented to Central Asians, especially in discussions aimed at migrant workers on the Russian social network *Odnoklassniki* (in Uzbek, Tajik, Russian and to a lesser extent Kazakh and Kyrgyz), is less about jihadist theology than it is about the power of a "Muslim" state as a counterforce to the West and the United States in particular, which are portrayed by ISIS recruiters (in the Central Asian languages) as the parties responsible for the oppression experienced by the migrants in Russia and other destination countries and at home. These arguments are sustained by a constant stream of misinformation and conspiracy theories that populate both the social media information environment inhabited by Central Asian migrants and the steady drumbeat of Russian media propaganda that, perhaps surprisingly, reinforces many of the same themes.

Many pro-ISIS users or self-identified members on *Odnoklassniki* are concerned with migrant worker issues and participate in the same discussions that trend among their peers — they repost or discuss, for example, material about domestic pressure likely to be created by the sudden return of migrant laborers to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, or cell phone videos of migrant workers beaten by police during routine stops. They

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[65] "Shocking new ISIS video claims to show young boy execute two 'Russian spies,'" Jan. 13, 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_FPNmMD3tQ

consistently emphasize a perception of subaltern status and victimization, sometimes directed at Russians but more often at the United States and Israel — attributing hardship that they experience in life to their Muslim identity and portraying the Islamic State as the champion of oppressed Muslims everywhere. The group's call to violence does not endorse defense and honor the way other Syrian groups appeal to Central Asians; instead, it focuses on resentment, anger and frustration, and offers violence as personal empowerment and revenge. One widely shared post taken from a Russian pro-ISIL group quotes a response the group's administrator says he received to a video of a Western hostage beheading: "I watched the film … seven or eight times, and I have never felt so much life-force in myself and so much elevation (*vozvysheniya*) from [the fact] that I am a Muslim."[66]

Central Asians who support ISIS online appear to know very little about the Syrian conflict (or Islam as a religion, rather than "being Muslim" as an identity) and the fragmented factions who fight in it. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that Central Asian users on *Odnoklassniki* appear to promote ISIL because it is the first Islamist organization they have heard of or the first that comes to mind. Many appear to endorse the group as a brand or an idea with little knowledge of what role they play in the Syrian or Iraqi civil wars. The perception that supporting ISIS is the same as opposing Assad or supporting or "the Iraqi people against the United States" is likely facilitated by the intense media attention on ISIS, the group's own success at self-promotion, and the vast amount of misinformation that makes up a significant part of the steady information diet of young people on social media in the region and feeds a sense of resentment.[67]

V. CENTRAL ASIAN STATE RESPONSES

Central Asian governments' understanding of the problem of recruiting to Syria is somewhat difficult to assess based on their statements and actions. In a year with elections in Tajikistan (parliament), Uzbekistan (presidential, shortly following parliament in December 2014), Kyrgyzstan (parliament) and now Kazakhstan as well (snap presidential elections held ahead of schedule), much of the focus of state messaging and state-friendly or -controlled media discussion has — at least in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan — focused almost exclusively on the narrative that the Islamic State has territorial ambitions in Central Asia and presents an imminent existential threat. Few outside analysts or governments share this assessment.

While Central Asian governments may have political motives for unrealistically portraying the threat of the Islamic State as an invasion force, real policy changes indicate that each of the states takes seriously the threat that the conflict in Iraq and Syria poses. Most of their responses, however, fail to address the issue of migrant recruiting or the domestic factors that drive migration. No matter how effective they may be at preventing the spread of Syria- or Iraq-based VEOs from expanding their recruiting or military operations into Central Asia, these policies may fail to counteract the problem of recruitment, since all available data indicates that most of it happens when citizens are pushed outside the territory of their home states and their supportive home communities. Without changing this fundamental approach, current measures may fail to have any real effect on the processes described in this report.

The responses of the Central Asian states can be roughly grouped into three general categories:

Emphasis on the Threat to Domestic Security

Particularly since the beginning of 2015, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have each focused discussion about the war in Syria and Iraq almost exclusively on ISIS with little or no mention of other groups, in spite of the fact that in some cases — in Uzbekistan in particular — the majority of citizens recruited to the

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[66] The post was later deleted by administrators and the page — like many similar ones where content like this is posted — was deleted as well. The post was recorded by the Central Asia Digital Islam Project.
[67] Tucker, "Islamic State Messaging."

conflict appear to fight with factions aligned *against* ISIS.[68] The motivations for this focus may stem from the fact that ISIS gets far broader coverage and attention in the international media, or that their tactics and ultimate goals are more alarming than other more traditional, militant groups with limited goals currently focused on the overthrow of the Assad regime. It is clear, however, that state messaging and state-approved or -supportive media outlets have relied on uncorroborated and sometimes farfetched reporting to create the impression that ISIS has immediate operational ambitions inside Central Asia in a way that closely mirrors difficult-to-confirm previous claims about the regional activity of the IMU or tiny jihadist formations whose existence is never referenced outside of a single prosecution.[69]

The first months of 2015 saw claims in Uzbekistan that ISIS planned terror attacks inside Uzbekistan for the Navruz holiday in March and to disrupt the presidential elections,[70] and a unique allegation that ISIS forces were massing on the border of Turkmenistan[71] to use that country as a staging area for a ground assault on Uzbekistan (two states removed from the nearest territory that ISIS tentatively controls in Iraq). In the same month, Kyrgyzstani press announced — sourced only to a single regional "expert on religious conflict" who could not name any sources for his unique information — that ISIS had devoted $70 million to terror operations in Central Asia,[72] and claimed that five "ISIS/IMU" members were identified operating in Southern Kyrgyzstan, the site of violent ethnic conflict that overwhelmingly targeted the area's ethnic Uzbek minority. At least one of the identified "ISIS members" was subsequently revealed to be an ethnic Uzbek who had been falsely convicted of murder charges in connection with the 2010 violence. A Kyrgyzstani court in Bishkek threw those charges out in 2014 after he had already served three years in prison.[73] A few months after his release, security services in Southern Kyrgyzstan claimed he had fled the country to join ISIS. Just before the parliamentary election in Tajikistan, the Ministry of Defense claimed to have acquired similarly unique information that ISIS forces had gathered across the border of Tajikistan in Afghanistan with "the equivalent of chemical weapons."[74]

Many of these stories, especially those that claim ISIS is actively recruiting inside Central Asia, base their information on interviews from sources who say they "know someone" who was recruited to join the group and offered fantastic sums of money, some specifically citing fears that returning migrant workers who are no longer able to work in Russia because of new regulations will be unable to resist the allure of recruiters offering "$5,000 a month" to fight in Iraq or Syria.[75] First-person accounts from anyone who actually joined the movement or any publicly available evidence that such offers are ever made are noticeably absent from the coverage. The primary sources for the stories are a mix of regional security services, notoriously pro-government think tanks or paradoxical "government-organized non-government organizations."

Criminalizing 'Nontraditional' Religious Activity, Persecuting or Eliminating Islamic Figures and Migrant Labor Organizers

The second basic approach of most of the region's governments is an extension of an already familiar one: criminalizing or eliminating "non-traditional" or non-state religious figures or groups, which are seen — with little corroborating evidence — as potential conduits for ISIS support. Many — particularly Uzbek clerics not

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[68] According to March 2015 statements by the state-affiliated Islamic muftiate, the government estimates only 200 citizens have joined ISIS (op. cit.), leaving 300 fighting in the Jabhat al Nusra coalition allied against ISIS.

[69] Freedom House, *Freedom in the Word 2013: Uzbekistan.* https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/uzbekistan#.VRkGDGaj3Ro

[70] IGIL Planirovalo Teratki v Uzbekistane Vesnoy 2015, CentrAsia.ru, Feb. 3, 2015. http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1422944100

[71] "Afg'oniston-Turkmaniston Chgarasida IShID Jangarilari To'planayotgani Haqida Xabar Berdi," *Kun,* Feb. 6, 2015. http://kun.uz/2015/02/06/afgoniston-turkmaniston-chegarasida-ishid-jangarilari-tuplanayotgani-haqida-xabar-berildi/

[72] "IShID Farg'ona Vodiysida Teraktlar Amalga Oshirish Rejasini Tuzmoqda" *Kun,* Jan. 21, 2015. http://kun.uz/2015/01/21/ishid-fargona-vodiysida-teraktlar-amalga-oshirish-rejasini-tuzmoqda/

[73] Nadejda Atayeva, "Kyrgyz Citizen Dilmurat Khaydarov Did Not Go to Syria," Association Droits de l'Homme en Asie Centrale, Feb. 9, 2015. http://nadejda-atayeva-en.blogspot.com/2015/02/kyrgyz-citizen-dilmurat-khaydarov-did.html

[74] Karim Dovudov, "IGIL: Proyekt Zapadnikh Spetssluzhb," *Tajikistan Migrant Workers Movement Online*, Feb. 20, 2015. http://tajmigrant.com/igil--–-proekt-zapadnyx-specsluzhb.html

[75] "Samarqandlik Fuqaroga Suriyada Jang Qilish Uchun Oyiga 5 Ming Dollar Taklif Qilingani Ma'lum Bo'ldi," *Kun,* Feb. 3, 2015. http://kun.uz/2015/02/03/samarqandlik-fuqaroga-suriyada-jang-qilish-uchun-oyiga-5-ming-dollar-taklif-qilingani-malum-buldi/

closely aligned with their governments — have been eliminated by assassination, attack, or arrest since the mid-1990s, a trend that remains a key grievance exploited by Uzbek extremist organizations. This practice likely includes the assassination of Abdulloh Buhariy in Istanbul in December 2014. And in 2015, Kyrgyzstani authorities arrested prominent Southern Kyrgyzstan Uzbek cleric Rashod qori Kamalov (whose father's 2005 killing in a joint operation of Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani security services prompted widespread public outrage and Kyrgyzstani claims that he was accidentally killed in crossfire) on accusations of supporting a "caliphate" in the Middle East over the objections of multiple human rights organizations.[76] In March 2015, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), the only legal Islamic political party in Central Asia, failed to gain representation in the new parliament in an election widely reported to be unfree and unfair, and which followed months of harassment in state-backed media that included attempts to link the moderate IRPT to ISIL.[77],[78]

Central Asian governments, often with assistance from Russian security services, continue to link religious activity that occurs outside of the direct supervision of the state with militant extremism. This strategy appears to be particularly counterproductive because as each reformist voice that did not support militant Islamism (or political Islamism in general) is removed, VEOs that have failed to draw support of any regional religious figures frequently appropriate the work of these clerics and use their arrest or assassination as a talking point for their own arguments. Immediately following the assassination of Abdulloh Buxoriy, for example, his Facebook page was taken over by IJU operatives promoting al-Qaida in Syria, an endorsement that Buxoriy never made, notwithstanding his support for the Syrian opposition.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have adopted a similar approach to some migrant worker groups that have attempted to organize themselves for political purposes. Migrant-labor organizers and political activists in Russia formed the New Tajikistan movement in 2014 and successfully held demonstrations and organizing meetings in several Russian cities in the summer and fall. In October, a coalition of groups that included Umarali Quvvatov's Group 24 and Maqsud Ibrogimov's Youth for the Renewal of Tajikistan attempted to use social media to mobilize protests in Central Dushanbe, demanding the resignation of the Rahmon government. The call for protest also focused on efforts to defend migrant laborers in Russia on improved economic conditions in Tajikistan so fewer would be forced to migrate abroad.[79] (Tajikistan is the world's most remittance-dependent economy, with nearly half of its GDP generated by citizens working abroad.)

The Tajik government responded by declaring Group 24 an "extremist organization," the same legal designation given to groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, criminalizing participation or support. The government deployed a large-scale police and military presence in Dushanbe to prevent any protest (which did not occur), shut down large portions of the Internet — including most social media services and even SMS messaging on mobile phone networks — and began arresting people suspected of supporting the protest movement and pressing the families of exiled leaders.[80] Within weeks, unidentified attackers beat and stabbed Maqsud Ibrogimov in Moscow and he briefly disappeared, only to reappear in Dushanbe following an apparent extradition by Russian authorities to face trial on extremism charges.[81] Umarali Quvvatov, the leader of Group 24, was shot to death in Istanbul as he emerged to seek medical attention after a dinner at which he and his whole family believed they were poisoned.[82]

[76] Shakhrukh Saipov, Daniil Kislov, "Rashod Kamalov: A respected imam or "chief Islamist" in Kyrgyzstan?" *Ferghana News,* Feb. 13, 2015. http://enews.fergananews.com/articles/2909

[77] *RFE/RL Tajik Service*, "Tajikistan's Ruling Party Wins Election Decried As 'Farce,'" March 2, 2015. http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik-elections-rahmon-party-victory/26877105.html

[78] "Akademia Nauk: PIVT Opasna dlya Obshesvto kak Taliban i IGIL" *Asia-Plus*, Feb. 12, 2015. http://news.tj/ru/node/199300

[79] Nargis Hamrabaeva, "Tajik Protest Plan Squashed Before it Starts," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting,* Oct. 9, 2014. https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajik-protest-plan-squashed-it-starts

[80] *RFE/RL Tajik Service,* "SMS Services Down In Tajikistan After Protest Calls," Oct. 10, 2014. http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-sms-internet-group-24-quvatov-phone-message-blockage-dushanbe/26630390.html.

[81] Nadejda Atayeva, "Arrests of the Tajik activists. In Moscow: Maksud Ibragimov is missing," *L'Association Droits de l'Homme en Asie Centrale*, Jan. 27, 2015. http://nadejda-atayeva-en.blogspot.com/2015/01/arrests-of-tajik-activists-in-moscow.html

[82] *BBC News, "*Tajik opposition leader Kuvatov shot dead in Turkey," March 6, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31760810

Anyone returning disillusioned from Syria — particularly after learning that much of the conflict is fratricidal among opposition and Islamist groups rather than a united effort to defend the people of Syria, as portrayed by recruiters — and often those returning from time away as migrant laborers are treated by the state as criminals. Independent lawyers in Uzbekistan have documented cases in which security officials in small villages arrest returning labor migrants from Russia on charges of Islamic extremism even in cases in which the returnees are not practicing Muslims.[83] New legislation has been introduced in Tajikistan that criminalizes any participation in the conflict, regardless of what faction an individual enlisted in or in what capacity, with a number of people prosecuted and convicted in absentia on suspicion of fighting in Syria.[84] These policies create an environment in which migrants become further trapped in an already difficult situation — facing the possibility that they could be prosecuted for returning home from Turkey or Russia puts them in a situation in which they have few options.

Blaming the West and the United States for Economic and Social Problems, Including the Rise of ISIS

Russian-funded propaganda operations saturate the Russian-language information environment with messages that blame the West and the United States for the economic and social problems of the former Soviet Union; these operations have significantly gained traction in the Central Asian states. Uzbekistan's state-approved media has long accused the United States of using democratization measures to undermine the country. Beginning in 2014 — especially following the Maidan movement and the emergence of civil conflict in Ukraine — even Kyrgyzstan, known for its openness to Western organizations, has introduced legislation copying the Russian federal measures to classify NGOs that receive external funding as "foreign agents"[85] and has begun to prosecute local NGOs with ties to the United States on charges of attempting to "destabilize" the country or assist with recruiting to ISIS.[86]

Much of the Central Asian public reaction to the rise of ISIS, in fact, has been spurred by conspiracies alleged in the press and by Central Asian politicians that promote the belief that ISIS is an American "puppet" created to hinder the development of Muslim-majority countries. Choosing to fuel — rather than correct — these conspiracies, and pushing the narrative that the economic and social problems that cause migration in the first place are the fault of the United States, unwittingly plays directly into the recruitment narratives promoted by ISIS supporters. Refusing to acknowledge the local roots of fundamental problems that spur migration — or in the case of Uzbekistan, where President Karimov famously denigrated all migrant workers as "lazy," refusing to acknowledge that an economic problem exists at all[87] — is likely to only deepen the economic and political marginalization experienced by migrant workers that makes them vulnerable to violent mobilization along religious or ethnic lines.

VI.   PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS FOR USG/USAID

The preceding analysis identifies three core regional dynamics contributing to Central Asian support for ISIS and Al-Qaida: 1) the lack of employment opportunities for the burgeoning youth population in Central Asia; 2) labor migration in response to these economic conditions that creates grievances and severs community bonds, both of which make young migrants vulnerable to targeting by recruiters; 3) Jihadist and anti-Western

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[83] Surat Ikramov, direct correspondence, Aug. 14, 2014.
[84] Tilav Rasulzoda, Lola Olimova, "Countering Extremism in Tajikistan." March 10, 2015. https://iwpr.net/global-voices/countering-extremism-tajikistan
[85] *RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service*, "Kyrgyz Parliament Debates 'Foreign Agent' Law," Nov. 24, 2014. http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz-parliament-debates-foreign-agent-law/26707392.html
[86] Chris Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan Arrests American Journalist, Raids NGO Office," March 27, 2015. http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72756.
[87] *BBC Uzbek*, "Karimov mehnat muhojirlarini 'dangasa' deb atab, ulardan 'jirkanish'ini bildirdi" June 21, 2013. http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/lotin/2013/06/130621_latin_uzbek_karimov_migrants

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messaging and misinformation campaigns. Identifying potential programmatic responses to these drivers of support for violent extremism is relatively straightforward: Economic development and job creation efforts, training and re-education for unemployed or returning migrants, community-building for migrants living abroad, and counter-messaging programs are all potential programmatic responses to the drivers described above.

But implementing these or other programs in the region and especially in Russia is a far more complex undertaking. Any USG CVE efforts intended to address these issues would face serious challenges of at least three kinds. First, if this analysis is correct, an important driver of Central Asian support for VE is labor migration, which in turn is a reflection of the structural political and economic problems common to most of Central Asia. Tajikistan, for example, as the world's most remittance-dependent economy, is unlikely to embrace efforts to reduce labor migration without first creating new opportunities for domestic employment. Second, there is the need for both scale and targeting. The phenomena of unemployment and labor migration are so broad-based in Central Asia that programmatic responses would need to be large enough to have general impact. But they also would need to be well targeted to reach those deemed most likely to support VE. To design and implement successful programs would require a major investment of USG and other donor resources.

Finally, there is the challenge of a lack of Central Asian government receptivity to USG interventions. The USG faces increasing resistance to engagement in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, even at the development level. While some regional states like Uzbekistan may be more than happy to accept US military hardware or training to enhance kinetic CT capabilities, they are much less interested in accepting the United States as a partner for programs targeted at social, economic or political reforms that would directly affect their population -- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular face heavy Russian pressure to cease cooperation with Western NGOs.

These caveats need to inform consideration of potential USG responses, but they are not intended to support the conclusion that nothing can or should be done. In the event that USG resources (human as well as financial) are made available to address the problem of VE among Central Asian migrants, USAID and the USG more broadly should explore programming in the following four areas.

Improving the Economy and Standards of Living

In spite of all the attention focused by the government and regional press on the threat of ISIS, ICSR estimates of recruitment from Uzbekistan indicate that citizens born there are joining militant groups in the Syrian conflict at a rate of approximately 17 per 1,000,000.[88] The infant mortality rate for 2013 is 37,000 per 1,000,000. This means that a child born in Uzbekistan is 2,176 times more likely to die at birth — mostly from preventable causes — than to join a foreign extremist group. Economic development alone will not stem the tide of recruitment: Belgian residents join the conflict at more than twice the rate of citizens of Uzbekistan, suggesting that broader economic prosperity does not provide a catch-all solution.

Programs that focus on economic development and improving the standard of living in Central Asia, however, can help mitigate specific drivers identified for this sociopolitical context, including both the economic problems that drive labor migration and the perception that development programs sponsored by the United States are mostly designed to engineer social or political changes. While suspicious of civil society building, Central Asians (and their governments) remain open to programs that help with economic development, assist them in improving their public services and offer education opportunities. Language education in particular can additionally help address the problem of disinformation, giving Internet users the ability to access perspectives other than those available in the Russian-language media.

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[88]http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/lotin/2015/03/150319_latin_foreign_fighters?ocid=socialflow_facebook

The governments of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have each identified the need to decrease their reliance on labor migration to Russian and made political promises to initiate programs to create new jobs to employ returning migrant workers and increase overall domestic employment so that fewer citizens need to seek work elsewhere. Each Central Asian country is likely to respond positively to proposals for programs to create new jobs and or offer training and education that could help develop domestic industry.

Economic development programs in these states have a long history, however, and have been significantly hobbled by lack of political will to cooperate with USAID and USG, predatory corruption at all levels, and lack of will and available capital for joint-ventures or co-investment. New Russian legal regulations that make migration more difficult likely mean the USG enjoys a window of opportunity in terms of political will for job creation and worker education programs that could lead to better engagement and also help relieve the economic stresses that push the outflow of migrant labor.

Mitigating the conditions that cause labor migration in a meaningful way, however, will require deep economic reforms to improve the business and investment climate of each country. Programs for job creation and re-employment of returning migrants should certainly be pursued, but with a strategy that acknowledges these are long-term issues that arise from the region's most fundamental economic and political challenges.

In areas where it has become more difficult for USAID and USG to work directly, programs may encounter less political resistance when they can be publicly led by the World Bank, OSCE, the Asian Development Bank or local organization partners.

Helping Migrants Build Community Support Structures

While any new development programs are unlikely to be welcomed in Russia, where the largest portion of the Central Asian migrant community is located, programs exist to help migrants build community support structures for one another to help them navigate migration systems, acquire new jobs skills and build supportive social communities that can help replace family and community structures left at home. These could play a key role in mitigating the marginalization and resentment that serve as key drivers for VEO recruiting. Turkey, which is the central conduit for recruits from Russia and has its own large population of economically marginalized ethnic Uzbek immigrants vulnerable to recruiting, could be a good site for pilot programs of this nature that could work in partnership with pre-existing organizations like *O'zbeklar Birligi* (Uzbek Solidarity) led by Adam Chelik.

Within Russian, where the vast majority of Central Asian migrants take up temporary residence sometimes in multi-generational families, there is potential to work with the IOM or United Nations projects that remove a direct link between the USG and the public. Some limited local organizations also exist that have cautious approval from the Russian government, which recognizes phenomenon of Syrian recruiting within its borders and the need to allow migrants to form self-supporting communities but also has elected to deliver favors to Central Asian governments by arresting migrant organization leaders who develop political voices.[89]

The Central Asian governments, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are wary of independent political movements formed outside their borders to address migrant grievances in no small part because many of the grievances the migrants cite are directed toward their home governments. Some of these organizations, however, such as Karomat Sharipov's Tajik Migrant Workers Movement, have adopted a less confrontational approach and focus on building communities and addressing migrant worker needs inside Russia and could potentially be important local partners inside Russia.

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[89] See, for example: "Leader of opposition movement Young People of Tajikistan arrested in Dushanbe," *Interfax,* February 2, 2015 http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=568872

Capacity Building for Religious Counter-Messaging to VEO Recruiting and Community Support

In a positive policy development, this approach appears to be one recognized recently by Uzbekistan, where the popular religious broadcaster, journalist and poet Hayrullo Hamidov — himself prosecuted in 2010 on terrorism charges widely seen as a typical effort to counter his popular influence — was released from prison on amnesty in February 2015.[90] Less than a month after his release, Hamidov became the new face of Uzbekistan's anti-ISIS public messaging campaign. Both the fear of external influences like ISIS and the recognition of their inability to produce and control the narrative on social media will likely continue to force Central Asian governments to allow popular and safely loyal independent actors like Hamidov to occupy a greater role in the public spotlight. In the big picture, though, the decision to release Hamidov (presumably in exchange for his help against ISIS and other political Islamist movements) is even more significant, marking the first time since the "war on extremism" began in the late 1990s that the government has rehabilitated a popular religious figure falsely accused of ties to terrorism because they recognize that they need help to shore up social borders against the influence of real terrorists.

This may represent a window in which Central Asian states are again willing to engage in programs like imam exchanges and accept support for anti-VEO messaging programs conducted by local religious authorities. Public cooperation with respected Islamic figures could also mitigate the popular perception that the United States is "at war with Islam."

Counter-messaging programs that could amplify credible voices of returnees and victims from the Syrian conflict could be a powerful deterrent and help raise *awareness* of the realities of life inside the Islamic State, for example, and especially of the conflict between Muslims in Syria and Iraq -- of which the vast majority of Central Asian potential recruits appear to remain unaware. To date, however, each regional state has made it very difficult for former fighters or even many migrant laborers who are devout Muslims to return without fear of prosecution. Each government should be encouraged to pursue policies that help returning fighters who want to lay down arms to re-integrate into civilian society and see them as potential allies rather than criminals to be imprisoned.

Broadening US Engagement

Finally, both state and public responses to the Syrian conflict in Central Asia have troubling implications for the image and influence of the United States in Central Asia. Central Asian government policies that both fuel and reflect anti-American attitudes are growing in the region and among its large population of migrants living abroad, especially in Russia. The United States faces the difficult task of confronting both the misinformation and the underlying conditions that lead a small minority of the public that supports ISIS to mobilize to "fight back against America." Equally problematic though is the fact that the vast majority of the public that rejects or fears ISIS believes that the Islamic State is another arm of the all-powerful American spider, another instrument in the drumbeat of destabilization constantly hammered by Russian and Central Asian state-approved media.

Central Asian responses to the Syrian conflict illustrate the need for the United States to work to actively rebuild trust with the people of Central Asia. The United States faces a highly coordinated and well-funded information assault in the region. And as funding and public outreach and education resources directed toward the region shrink, particularly in light of the withdrawal of combat troops and their supporting operations from Afghanistan, the USG is at a growing disadvantage.

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[90] *BBC Uzbek,* "Xayrullo Hamidov ozodlikka chiqarilgan," Feb. 11, 2015.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/uzbek/lotin/2015/02/150211_latin_hayrullo_hamidov_freed

This situation presents a major public diplomacy challenge for the USG, recommendations for which are beyond the purview of this analysis. However, one possible form of engagement that could help to address the problem of migration-driven VE in Central Asia would be for the USG to support a multi-country conference or series of conferences on labor migration issues that would involve Central Asian governments, academic experts and, if possible, non-governmental actors. (Perhaps these could best be designed as "Track 2" or "Track 1½" meetings to allow for more informal and broad-based interaction.) These meetings would allow for US engagement with Central Asians on an issue that presents a major challenge for Central Asia as well as for the US. The meeting or meetings also would help to identify and disseminate more effective policy responses for Central Asian governments, including how to deal with migrant radicalization.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF DRIVERS OF VE/I AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The primary implication of research on mobilization for the Syrian conflict for our understanding of the drivers of VE/I is that the data suggests the experience of immigration is perhaps the most influential factor for recruitment of Central Asians to the conflict. This implies that in Central Asia, familial, community and religious support mechanisms in home communities may be even more important than assumed. While a greater number of foreign fighter recruits continue to come from the Middle East, and thus may not experience the same kind of social marginalization or alienation as Muslims who move to non-Muslim majority societies, past experience with other conflicts indicates that internal migration will likely be shown to have played an important role in the process of intra-regional mobilization as well.

Second, the experience of Central Asian recruits suggests that disinformation — particularly in the age of social media — may play such an important role in mobilization that it could be added as an individual or political-level driver.

Although information gaps remain at all levels of the research question, one of the most important gaps to fill for understanding mobilization to Syria and to other future conflicts — given the importance of social and digital media for VEO messaging efforts — is to determine how important personal (or "in-real-life," in the parlance of social media) connections remain to the mobilization process. A data set of recruits that could determine what percentage of them "self-recruited" online — without personal contact on the ground with a recruiting network — could offer key information on direct impact of social media on the recruiting process and its ability to amplify the reach of violent extremist groups. Preliminary research by both Exeter scholar Edward Lemon and the Digital Islam Project suggest that personal ("in-real-life") connections continue to play a key role in the mobilization process, but that social media is essential to facilitating communication between, for example, former classmates or residents of the same village — networks that pull more members into the conflict once one or two have joined.