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Central Asia and Counterterrorism: The Contrasting Cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

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INTRODUCTION

The implosion of the Soviet Union a quarter century ago resulted in the creation of 15 new independent states, each, in turn, setting out on their own progress, or lack thereof, in democracy, economics, and other social and political trajectories. Despite many cultural and historical similarities among the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, where now five states\(^1\) coexist, there also have been major differences in way of level of socioeconomic well-being (largely differentiated between the petrol-rich states of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan versus the other three states), culture (broadly speaking, dividing the region between the Turkic-speaking majority ethnic groups and Persian-speaking Tajiks), and religious belief (chiefly Sunni Islam and its differing modes and temporal exposures in the region).

A Resurgence of Islam

Given an eight-decade-long Soviet suppression of much of religious practices and values in Central Asia, resulting in an “Islamic ideological vacuum,” the collapse of the Soviet Union brought to much of the region a rekindling of “interest in their spiritual and religious heritage.”

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Along with this renewal, however, there also appeared, for a minority of the region’s citizenry, an attraction for radical Islam, initially inspired by outside events, such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran and the defeat and 1989 withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan. The emergence of political Islam (Islamism) and religious radicalism in Central Asia, however, has also been a reaction to the “deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and the increasingly repressive politics of the governing regimes” (Rashid 2003, p. 193). That said, religious extremism has not necessarily resulted in widespread incidents of terror in the region. In fact, the rate of terrorist incidents in Central Asia has been relatively low as compared to many other parts of the world. During the two decades of 1992–2011, for example, all together only 238 “terrorist attacks” were registered in Central Asia, as compared to 383 in East Asia, 4,628 in Southeast Asia, 15,683 in South Asia, and 15,567 in the Middle East (Omelicheva 2013). At the same time, within Central Asia, the two countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are known to “have taken the brunt of terrorism and Islamic incursions” (Omelicheva 2007a).

Despite near-identical CT policies and legislations, all reiterating “principles of the rule of law and respect for human rights,” nearly all Central Asian states have also regularly gone “astray from [their] proclaimed standards” (Omelicheva 2007a). Aside from domestic legislation, largely emulated from the Russian Federation, there exist international CT instruments for the region, such as the 2006 UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy with its Joint Plan of Action of Central Asian States, and the 2013 Istanbul Process, which focuses on resolving the crisis in Afghanistan through cooperation and trade. These mechanisms, however, have proven to be largely formalistic and the pace of their implementation being slow to be nonexistent (Kirbassov 2014). All said, in spite of lack of coherence between policy and action, there exist clear-cut distinctions among Central Asian states in their individual CT programs including adherence to internationally endorsed human rights norms.

**Contrasting Counterterrorism Programs**

Of the five states in the region, the worst-case practices of attempted CT is attributed to Uzbekistan where official organs engage in routine “[u]nfair trials, systematic torture and ill-treatment” and where “disappearances, death sentences and executions have been a big concern” for human rights organizations (Omelicheva 2007a). The number of political prisoners in Uzbekistan has been estimated at between 7,000 and 12,000 (Lillis 2014). Much of the oppression on part of the Uzbek security state intensified after six bombings targeting government structures took place in the capital city, Tashkent, on February 16, 1999, resulting in 16 mortalities, an incident which the authorities attributed to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU, a group formed in 1998 in Afghanistan by self-exiled Uzbek nationals as a supposed
reaction to Tashkent’s repressive rule, with origins dating back to the early 1990s in Namangan, Uzbekistan) (Polat and Butkevich 2000). On the other hand, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’s CT practices are far milder than the brutalities implemented by the Uzbek authorities.

For Central Asia as a whole, nearly all states have used CT in one degree to another as a tool to suppress dissenting voices and garner Western material assistance. In October 2015 in Tajikistan, for example, the only legal Islamist political party in the post-communist world was banned and the majority of its leadership detained on largely trumped-up accusations of terrorism, while in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, a number of “high-profile” religious leaders “critical of the government” have been detained (Kaplan 2016). A case in point is that of Rashodkhan Kamalov, a Muslim imam from the southern Kara Suu region of Kyrgyzstan, respected by the locals “for criticizing brutal and corrupt officials.” Kamalov was sentenced to ten years in prison for supposed membership in the Islamist extremist, yet nonviolent, group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (Freedom Party), and for enticing his followers to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Observers claim that Kamalov’s imprisonment is a means “to silence a prominent critic” of the Kyrgyz government (EurasiaNet 2015).

Despite this and some other cases, Kyrgyzstan’s modus operandi vis-à-vis CT is still known to be among the least repressive in Central Asia and more professionally conducted in way of treatment of terrorism cases and adhering to human rights at least as compared to neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This difference in states’ responses to terrorism in Central Asia is “puzzling” (Omelicheva 2007a). Why would adjoining states—taking the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—with similar Soviet histories and economic conditions behave differently when dealing with the issue of CT?

One answer to the above lies in the political culture of the dominant ethnic groups of the two countries and their history and mode of exposure to Islam. Islam initially came to Central Asia in the late seventh century A.D. with a series of raids, commencing in 673 A.D. by order of the Muawiya and Umayyad caliphates who managed to incorporate Bukhara (now in Uzbekistan) under Islamic rule by 709 A.D. (Khalid 2007). This first introduction and eventual conversion to Islam of the mostly ethnic Tajik and Uzbek inhabitants thus involved the entry of Arab Islamic armies to the region, which overwhelmed the forces of the then Soghdian dynasty female ruler of Bukhara (Bosworth 2014). As opposed to their northern Kyrgyz and Kazakh neighbors, therefore, the ethnic Tajik and Uzbek of Central Asia were exposed to Islam up to a millennium earlier. The ethnic Kazakh and Kyrgyz, on the other hand, were among the last converted masses to Islam in Central Asia. Some Kyrgyz living in the southern part of today’s Kyrgyzstan, in the Ferghana Valley, took up Islam as late as the end of seventeenth century through the missionary activities of Yasawi and the Naqshbandi Sunni Muslims, while others in the northern parts of today’s Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan accepted Islam even later, in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, largely through the endeavors of Tatar missionaries from Russia (Gardaz 1999).

For the historically nomadic ethnic groups of Central Asia, the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh who make up the majority and/or the ruling ethnicity of their respective nominal states in post-communist Central Asia, therefore, Islam has been a relatively new idea and belief system, while for the historically “sedentary people” of Tajik and Uzbek ethnicities who make the majority populations in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively, Islam has had a far more ancient history—as much as a millennium older. Likewise, both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have seen “greater Islamicisation than Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where traditionally less strict adherence to orthopraxis ... of Islam prevented it from taking deep roots.” The history of Islam in the region has in turn affected current government “views on the extent of threat posed by radical Islam” and respective CT policies of individual governments (Omelicheva 2007a).

Differences in CT practices in the region have also been affected by contemporary geopolitics. Tajikistan, for example, shares the longest border among the Central Asian states with Afghanistan, a country which in the 1980s served as the focal point of the Cold War encounter between the USSR and US- and Saudi Arabia-backed anti-Soviet Islamic warriors, the Afghan Mujahidin. There is credible evidence that Tajikistan’s geographic proximity to Afghanistan and the sharing of ethnic and linguistic ties with that country, coupled with exposure to the Soviet-Afghan war, influenced Tajikistan’s own post-Soviet violent trajectory, wherein it was engulfed in a brutal five-year civil war (1992–1997), resulting in approximately 50,000 deaths, the fleeing of much of its educated elite, massive economic loses, and critical setbacks in adopting democratic and liberal norms.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan, which also experienced its own albeit temporary exposures to post-Soviet authoritarianism (2005–2010) and violence in way of interethnic clashes of June 2010, whereby an estimated 400 people lost their lives in the southern part of the country, has nonetheless had a far smoother and less violent history of post-communist transition as compared to Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan has been described by many as largely an outlier in the region, given its politics of “reasonably competitive elections,” while Tajikistan is widely categorized under “authoritarian rule” (Lewis 2012, p. 116). The remainder of this chapter will look at the individual cases of CT practices of these two Central Asian states.

**Kyrgyzstan and Counterterrorism**

Summer 1999 was a turning point in Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy. In August, the government was taken by surprise by news that IMU militants had taken a number of high value hostages in a small village in Kyrgyzstan’s southern Osh province (Rashid 2003). In the same month, IMU militants captured parts of the Batken region (further south of Osh and bordering Tajikistan), in the process taking more hostages, including a Kyrgyz general and ten workers of Uzbekistan’s State Meteorological Committee working near the Abramov Glacier in
Kyrgyzstan (Rashid 2003). Having been caught by surprise and unable to counteract without risking the lives of the hostages, the Kyrgyz authorities agreed to the militants’ demands and paid a hefty ransom, while additionally providing a helicopter to them to fly to Afghanistan. Similar incursions into the Batken region followed the next year, in 2000, where both local and foreign citizens, including four American mountain climbers and four Japanese geologists and their Kyrgyz interpreter, were taken hostage. This time around, however, the Kyrgyz army illustrated far more resilience and fought back against the militants, taking in 46 casualties from among its own armed forces and killing 25 suspected militants in the process (Rashid 2003). These brazen acts by the IMU had exposed Kyrgyzstan’s lack of a coherent CT policy and the associated vulnerability that such unpreparedness brought to the country.

Prior to the above-mentioned events, the Kyrgyz authorities had ignored the transnational nature of Islamic militancy and turned a blind eye on the continuous unrest the IMU had caused in neighboring Uzbekistan. They had also ignored the influence of militant Islamists on Tajikistan’s five-year civil war (Khalid 2007). After the IMU’s 1999 and 2000 incursions into the country, the government of Kyrgyzstan finally embarked on drafting a formal CT policy. This initial policy, adopted by Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akayev, at the turn of the century, was however still milder in theory and practice and more tolerant in comparison to the brutal repression and CT practices adopted by Uzbekistan, China, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Known as a beacon of democracy in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan under Akayev, a physicist by training, had instead laid a foundation for CT policy with respect for human rights.

Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy has been influenced not only by internal factors, but also regional geopolitics. On the one hand, the balance between the fight against alleged terrorists and acting to some extent in accordance with internationally recognized human rights norms has been means of distinguishing the country as an “Island of democracy,” a term used by former President Askar Akayev. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan has been under pressure from the neighboring authoritarian regimes (chiefly Uzbekistan and Russia) and regional organizations (namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO; and the Common Security Treaty Organization, CSTO) to adopt repressive CT policies at the expense of human rights (Omelicheva 2009). Until he was ousted from power as a result of the March 2005 “Tulip Revolution” and having fled to Russia where he now teaches mathematics to university students, Akayev managed to incorporate and generally be respectful of human rights in Kyrgyzstan, in general, what was also reflected in the country’s CT policy. Upon Akayev’s departure, however, all this began to change.


In the years following independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan under Akayev waved away the threats of religious radicals turning into terrorists, claiming that the
IMU’s campaign against Uzbekistan’s president, Islam Karimov, and the Tajik civil war were foreign problems incapable of causing harm to Kyrgyzstan. When asked about Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism by a Russian newspaper, Akayev had said: “If I do not have a real problem of religious extremism, why would I create an artificial one?” (Omelicheva 2009, p. 7). In another instance, responding to the country’s Prosecutor General who was seeking harsh penalties for extremists, Akayev responded that “only ideas should be used to defeat ideas, not repression” (Omelicheva 2007a). Such statements sum up Kyrgyzstan’s initial post-Soviet CT policy. Akayev did not believe religious radicalism posed a genuine threat to national security and acted accordingly.

As opposed to the rest of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan under Akayev was under pressure, albeit mild, from the West to initiate democratic reforms in way of political and economic liberalization, to secure badly needed loans and grants vital for the country’s survival. The government, in turn, had several reasons not to fear religious extremism. Akayev was right to have been wary of the exaggerated nature of religious radicalism’s threat to Kyrgyzstan (Khalid 2007). Being descendants of pastoral nomads and relatively recent converts to Islam, the majority of the ethnic Kyrgyz have adhered to their religious faith leniently and have also proved to be less susceptible to Islamist indoctrination and extremism (Karagiannis 2010). That said, the ethnic Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan’s south have had a long tradition of mobilizing around Islam, with some among them being susceptible to influence by radical Islamism. However, given his pluralistic attitudes, Akayev also remained popular among ethnic minorities, including Kyrgyzstan’s largest minority, the ethnic Uzbeks. Akayev had become president on the back of the violent inter-ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in 1990 in the southern Osh province of the then Soviet Socialist Republic of Kyrgyzstan. He recognized the need to reintegrate the country’s ethnic minorities and designed domestic policies accordingly, among other things, casting Kyrgyzstan as a “common house,” a policy which helped to restore a sense of order and reassured ethnic Uzbeks of the country that they were welcome in their own country of Kyrgyzstan (Khamidov 2004). Still, the dire economic and political situation served as fertile ground for religious radicalism, a factor which Akayev had failed to fully take into consideration.

The period from independence up until 1999 was marked by the absence of a concrete CT policy for Kyrgyzstan. The armed clashes associated with the Batken events of 1999 and 2000 put the country momentarily in the limelight of world news and, more importantly, prompted the government to design a more holistic CT policy. Akayev had found his government at a near-impossible crossroad of CT and human rights. A multivector foreign policy and dependence on regional neighbors and overseas donors meant that Kyrgyzstan had on the one hand to devise a more aggressive CT policy, potentially similar to the heavy-handed methods practiced by Russia and Uzbekistan, while on the other hand staying true to the democratic ideals it had sworn to uphold in front of the West (Omelicheva 2009). The task was
urgent. The 1999 and 2000 IMU assaults had left the government in disgrace with tens of dead soldiers and a number of Kyrgyzstani and foreign hostages taken by militants (Rashid 2003).

On the nights of July 24 and 25, 2001, the Kyrgyz authorities yet again reported attacks in southern Kyrgyzstan, specifically on two army posts on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, what the then Afghanistan-based IMU leader, Tohir Yuldashev, later asserted to have been carried out by the movement’s members in Kyrgyzstan. The government’s neglect of religious radicalism appeared to have finally born bitter fruit and the southern Batken region had now turned into a recruiting ground for the IMU. The first alarm had rung in 1999 when nine young ethnic Kyrgyz from Karakash village in Batken had left to join the IMU (Rashid 2003). Simultaneously, Hizb ut-Tahrir, an international extremist and bigoted, yet nonviolent, organization seeking to establish an Islamist caliphate, opened its first cells in Kara Suu, a district in Osh province, and began gaining support primarily among Kyrgyzstan’s ethnic Uzbek minority (Karagiannis 2010). In addition to fighting foreign terrorists, therefore, Akayev now faced the problem of the rise of religious extremism at home, what he had thought as being artificial not too long ago.

Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy acquired a new dimension in the face of the policy of control over Islam and religious practices in the period begun in late 1999 and lasting until March 2005. Despite being surrounded and influenced by the more authoritarian regimes that left out human rights from their CT policies, Kyrgyzstan under Akayev had still opted for a more balanced approach to combating terrorism, focusing on liberal principles outlined by the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (Omelicheva 2009). The government continued to take the view that the 1999 raids by Islamic militants originated from outside had little, if any, support from within Kyrgyzstan (Omelicheva 2007a). Lacking sufficient knowledge, experience, and expertise for addressing security problems, the government attempted to learn from the practices of geographically proximate Central Asian states perceived as successful in limiting the spread of terrorism and Islamic radicalism (Omelicheva 2009), and turned to Uzbekistan where its president, Islam Karimov, had the reputation of having succeeded at saving his country from succumbing into chaos and anarchy, which the IMU allegedly sought to induce. But although Kyrgyzstan adopted parts of Uzbekistan’s CT policy, it largely left out the state practices of kidnappings, harassment, killings, and long-term jail sentences for which Uzbekistan was notorious for in its fight against Islamic militancy.

The CT policy pursued by Akayev’s administration consisted of several elements. First, the leadership believed that religious extremism was an imported phenomenon. Therefore, in April 2004, Akayev signed a decree and plan of action ordering his National Security Agency to take measures to “restrict and prevent the activities of missionaries who propagate religious fundamentalism and extremism as well as reactionary and [Islamic] Shia ideas” (Karagiannis 2010, p. 32). The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, the Muftiyat, picked up the government’s efforts and declared that
individuals wanting to engage in Muslim missionary work would first have to obtain written permission from the agency.

The authorities’ cooperation with the Muftiyat is the second element of the CT policy in this phase. An independent body only de jure, the Muftiyat has since acted as the government’s de facto tool to control Islamic activities in Kyrgyzstan. Article 8 of Kyrgyzstan’s constitution outlaws the establishment of political parties on religious grounds, and the Muftiyat has reiterated this and interpreted its official position toward the Hizb ut-Tahrir claiming: “[N]either sharia nor our country’s constitution allow a political party to be set up on a religious basis …” (Karagiannis 2010, p. 34). The Muftiyat comes in handy in the government’s endeavor to define and impose a moderate and politically harmless form of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, and it has been continuously calling on Muslims to practice an apolitical form of Islam in the form of the Kyrgyz version of the Hanafi tradition.

Thirdly, Akayev’s government sought to counter terrorism with laws and institutions. In November 2003, Kyrgyzstan’s Supreme Court sustained the previous verdict by a District Court, which banned Hizb ut-Tahrir on grounds of extremism and ties to international terrorism (Karagiannis 2010). The government also passed the Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations to tighten control over religious groups. According to this law, all religious organizations, including mosques, must register at the Committee of Religious Affairs (Khalid 2007). Last, but not least, the authorities carefully monitored the mosques in the country. The government under Akayev believed that religious extremism and terrorism grew out from preaching political views and thus attempted to ensure that mosques are kept under check. This led to closure of some mosques. For example, in May 2003, the head of the Karadarya district in the Jalalabad province closed down seven mosques under the pretext that they were on state-owned land and that their imams were preaching radical politics.

The CT policy pursued by the Akayev administration was not exemplary in terms of respect to human rights. However, during his presidency, Kyrgyzstan still enjoyed the bragging rights in Central Asia in the area of balance between CT and human rights. It was true that Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy was not hampering human rights as much as neighboring states. The government pursued a mild authoritarian approach in dealing with religious extremism. More importantly, they responded to threats through the existing legal (and not extralegal) framework and illustrated more respect to safeguarding human rights than neighboring states. In contrast to the government of Uzbekistan, which did not shy away from fabricating evidence and handing long-term prison sentences to alleged religious extremists (Khalid 2007), for example, Kyrgyzstan sought to discourage radicals by less repressive means. As a result of Kyrgyzstan’s adoption of a rather liberal approach toward Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, a first offence usually warranted a police warning and fine, and a subsequent offence a prison sentence from two to five years (Karagiannis 2010).
Indeed, despite being an outlawed group, in the southern part of Tajikistan, some Hizb ut-Tahrir members often did not conceal their membership in the organization (Karagiannis 2010). Personal experience of one of the authors of this paper in 2014 while conducting research in Kara Suu, known as the capital of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan, revealed the same. Previously, in August 2001, Hizb ut-Tahrir members had gone so far as to circulate an open letter to the president, the Parliament and the judiciary, inviting them to an open discussion about religious and political issues. And in 2004, the group circulated a petition for the state sponsorship of Muslim schools and restrictions on the sale of pornography (Ibid). Here, it appears, Hizb ut-Tahrir members made use of the state's less vigorous CT policy and the space left for human rights and freedom of expression. Additionally, the organization benefited from the disagreement between the authorities over its legal status. In February 2002, Omurzak Mamayusupov, then chairman of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, declared that he saw no obstacle to register the party, but in March of the same year, he stated that “the party’s aim contradicts the constitution of Kyrgyzstan” and cannot be registered (Karagiannis 2010, p. 45). Kyrgyzstan’s Human Rights Ombudsman of the time, Tursunbai Bakir Uulu, in turn, called upon the government not to prosecute the group’s members and even urged for the legalization of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Karagiannis 2010). Despite Akayev’s ambivalent response to religious extremism, his beliefs in the power of persuasion and moderation meant that the state’s CT policy did not necessarily come to conflict with human rights.


A major overhaul of Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy came after one of the key historical events in the country. On March 24, 2005, Akayev was ousted from power via the peaceful Tulip Revolution and former prime minister and opposition leader, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, became the new president. Bakiyev’s presidency heralded a new era in the state’s CT policy, under which Kyrgyzstan expressed less tolerance toward perceived religious extremism and pursued more repressive methods of CT. Bakiyev’s inclination to cooperate with Kyrgyzstan’s authoritarian Central Asian neighbors in the security sphere, both bilaterally and in the framework of regional political and military organizations, led Kyrgyzstan toward extralegal means in combating terrorism. Among other things, during this period, Bakiyev’s regime “intensified prosecution of Islamists and became implicated in the increasing number of human rights abuses in the name of the fight against terrorism” (Omelicheva 2007b, p. 194).

Bakiyev began his rule with the intensification of cooperation in the security sphere with Uzbekistan (Omelicheva 2009). One incidence of such cooperation resulted in the death of Rafiq Qori Kamalov, a popular imam from Kyrgyzstan’s Kara Suu region. Kamalov was known as a sound critic of the policies adopted against Hizb ut-Tahrir in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Having been accused of aiding the IMU, Kamalov was shot and killed in...
August 2006, by what is suspected as a joint operation conducted by the Kyrgyz and Uzbek Special Forces (Saidazimova 2006). Kamalov’s possible extralegal execution can be seen as an indication of Bakiyev’s disregard for human rights and went against sound CT practices. With this and other acts, CT practices under Bakiyev shattered the positive image of respect for human rights created by Akayev.

In addition to the influence from Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz authorities harmonized their antiterrorism legislation with that of the CSTO and the SCO member states. Several antiterrorism laws came in retrospect of the CSTO’s CT activities and the SCO’s “Three Evils” doctrine of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which SCO members claim “seriously threaten territorial integrity and security of the Parties as well as their political, economic and social stability” (HRIC 2012, p. 42). Kyrgyzstan’s reliance on the Three Evils doctrine has been problematic in light of China’s record of characterizing the legitimate exercise of religious, ethnic, cultural and other rights as separatism and extremism, with the persecution of China’s Uighur ethnic minority being an example of this dilemma. Membership in the SCO and the CSTO, therefore, stirred Kyrgyzstan towards more of an autocratic rule, including the violations of human rights when implementing its CT policy (Omelicheva 2009).

Besides the murder of Rafiq Qori Kamalov, the Kyrgyz government’s crack-down of a protest against the ban on public celebration of an Islamic holiday in the southern Osh province reflected the way human rights and CT policy came into conflict under Bakiyev’s rule. On October 1, 2008, several hundred residents of the small town of Nookat clashed with the police, after the authorities had banned the public celebration of Eid al-Fitr, a holiday marking the end of Ramadan, the Islamic month of fast. Following a campaign of indiscriminate arrests, the authorities prosecuted and convicted—based on tenuous evidence—32 Nookat residents to lengthy prison sentences, causing an outcry from both local and international human rights groups (Khamidov 2013). Eventually, the somewhat violent April 2010 revolution put an end to Bakiyev’s rule and the erosive CT policy the government had pursued during his presidency (Hiro 2010). Much has changed with the Kyrgyz government’s conduct vis-a-vis human rights and CT since the 2010 regime change, which also led to Bakiyev’s fleeing Kyrgyzstan to Belarus.

**Atambayev Era and Return to Balanced Counterterrorism (2011–Present)**

In the post-Bakiyev era, Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy has once again been transforming into a more balanced system of addressing religious extremism and terrorism. It has remained important for the authorities to differentiate themselves from the Bakiyev regime so as to legitimize their own power. The government has thus been on the course of rekindling a CT policy somewhat similar to that of the Akayev administration. Still, a changing
global political climate means that the Kyrgyz authorities face different challenges in designing and conducting their CT policy. In addition to the reality of hundreds of Kyrgyz citizens’ participation in the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq, primarily through joining the ranks of ISIS, the authorities have had to deal with a number of radical religious groups in the country.

Instead of killing independent imams, banning Islamic holidays, and imprisoning citizens who protest against such measures, the government of President Almazbek Atambayev has put more trust in a new multifaceted policy in the sphere of religion as means of countering religious extremism and preventing terrorism. Soon after being elected, Atambayev admitted that Kyrgyzstan lacked a serious and clear state policy in the sphere of religion (Esenamanova 2015). In November 2014, he signed a decree approving the new Concept of State Policy in the Sphere of Religion intended for the period of 2014–2020, which addresses many issues related to religion and its extremist manifestations (Bekmurzaev 2015). For example, it introduces a unified study curriculum and secular subjects into religious schools, seeks to raise the population’s level of religious knowledge, promises to promote the Central Asian version of the Hanafi school of Islam, and even includes a list of foreign institutions, which students from Kyrgyzstan can and cannot study at (Esenamanova 2015).

Though the government appears to have recognized the complex nature of religious radicalism, there also exist intermittent harassment and forms of human rights violations, including torture, by the law-enforcement agencies. In a 2014 report, for example, the UN expressed its concerns on “widespread torture and ill-treatment of children” in closed institutions, while a Kyrgyz antitorture coalition reported that the law-enforcement bodies “declined to open criminal investigations into 100 out of 109 registered complaints of torture in the first half of 2014” alone (HRW 2015). Despite remaining serious problems with human rights, we argue that Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy’s future is the most promising in the region. Atambayev’s government has left behind murder of clerics and arbitrary imprisonment of its majority Muslim citizens and has once again attempted to place human rights as a central components of Kyrgyzstan’s CT policy.

**Tajikistan and Counterterrorism**

*Independence, Ideology, and Civil War*

Tajikistan’s case as a post-Communist Central Asian state is both tragic and unique as the country set out on a five-year civil war soon after independence, a conflict whose warring sides were divided by ideological and regional cleavages. On the one side stood the government, largely composed of “Neo-Soviets” (Atkin 2013, p. 373), that is, former Soviet apparatchiks now leading an independent state, and their associated brutal militias; and on the other, a loose coalition of democrats, nationalists, and Islamists (supporters of the Islamic
Revival Party, IRP), together forming the armed United Tajik Opposition (UTO), with the largest contingent of its membership and fighters being form the IRP. The causes of the 1992–1997 civil war included a political vacuum and economic devastation induced by the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of regional divides, which among other things, fought over the country’s resources. The deadly conflict, however, was also over ideology in way of a “dispute over the role of Islam in state-building” (Omelicheva 2007a), an ideological conflict between political Islam and postcommunist secularism.

The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan was the sole surviving branch of USSR’s all-union IRP, which was formally registered during Gorbachev’s perestroika era in the 1980s. In the post-independence era, despite the fact that the IRP was officially recognized in Tajikistan, the government ensured that its candidate did not have the chance to win the 1991 presidential vote. Soon after the start of the civil war, the IRP was officially banned in 1993, but in 1999, as part of fulfilling one of the key promises of the 1997 Peace Accord, the IRP was unbanned. However, although the authorities had promised to incorporate 30% of all government posts with UTO candidates, given the level of ingrained mistrust and animus of the Islamists by Tajikistan’s neo-Soviet rulers, that promise was gradually rescinded.

The current IRP leader, Muhiddin Kabiri (now in self-exile in Europe), had stated at one point that “it is impossible to set up an Islamic state ... in Tajikistan in the foreseeable future [and that the IRP’s] ultimate goal is to create a free, democratic, and secular state.” Pro-government critics, however, had termed this position as “duplicitous” and “a tactical ploy to gain power” (Akbarzadeh 2012, p. 124). In the post-civil war era, the victorious government side invoked the broad label of “terrorist” when referring to any remaining antigovernment armed groups who had not agreed with the 1997 Peace Accord (Omelicheva 2007a). And upon once again banning the IRP in September 2015, Tajikistan through its Supreme Court labeled the party as a “terrorist organization,” accusing it as having engineered an armed uprising with the intention of toppling the state, charges which have been viewed as trumped up by independent observers.

Internal Factors

Although political Islam’s footholds in the region “have been linked to external influences,” much of the emergence of any extremism has also been “stimulated by events within the region” itself, chiefly due to “autocratic policies of Central Asian governments.” The terrorist events of 9/11 in the U.S. with links to Afghanistan provided an excuse for regional powers for “intensified security and [suppression of] a wide range of religious and political freedoms under the pretense of fighting terrorism,” a modus operandi, which has been argued can breed “resentment among the Muslims and... [contribute] to the emergence of social forces that embrace violence and terrorism”
(Omlicheva 2013, p. 1). In this process, however, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan lie on diverging poles.

Among other things, there have been a number of mysterious assassinations and detentions of opposition figures and alleged extremists within and outside of Tajikistan, which many observers point the finger of responsibility toward the government (HRW 2016). In 2011, for example, an alleged rebel leader, Alovuddin “Bedaki” Davlatov and seven of his followers, are said to have been “detained, tortured, and extrajudicially executed” by Tajikistan’s State National Security Committee (GKNB) agents, though the government claimed they had died in a gunbattle. In addition, during a 2012 peaceful anti-government protest, a regional representative of IRP, Sabzali Mamadrizoev, is also thought to have been “abducted, tortured, and killed” by government troops (Freedom House 2015, p. 655). Another example is that of November 2014 when the leader of the Tajik Youth for Revival of Tajikistan, Maqsud Ibrohimov, was stabbed in Moscow and, soon after partial recovery in a Russian hospital, extralegally renditioned to Tajikistan with suspected help of Russia’s security organs. Ibrohimov was subsequently detained and likely tortured in Tajikistan, then tried and sentenced to 13 years of prison (Asia Plus 2015). And in March 2015, Umarali Quvvatov, the leader of Group 24, a loose nonviolent opposition group in exile, was shot to death in Istanbul in what is highly suspected as having been a government plot.

Unlike Kyrgyzstan where, despite remaining flaws, two regime changes since 2005 have contributed to a certain degree of democratization and pluralism in the country, Tajikistan’s political system has continued to narrow among President Emomali Rahmon’s ethnoregional Kulobi clan characterized by patron-client rentierism and repression. Among the tools of dealing with opposing voices and forces have been routine “harassment and police brutality” with the dual purpose of ensuring a halt to popular protests (which in the immediate post-independence era had gradually transformed into a bloody civil war), and “to make it easier to extort money from civilians (it is better to pay than be beaten at the police station).” In addition, the government’s financial impoverishment and moral ineptitude has allowed for corruption to “lie in the heart of the security sector” (Matveeva 2004, p. 135). In 2015, Transparency International ranked Tajikistan at 136th place out of 165 countries measured on the Corruption Perception Index, while Kyrgyzstan was placed at the somewhat less corrupt rank of 123rd (Transparency International 2015).

External Factors of Potential Terror

Aside from religious extremism, Tajikistan’s problem with potential terrorism has been linked with its drug trade as both the IMU and the Taliban are known to be traffickers of Afghan heroin, a significant portion of which passes through Tajik territory on its onward northern journey. And aside from the drug trade, despite no direct attacks so far by the IMU, Taliban, or ISIS, the government “feels threatened by the potential of a resurgence
of violent radical Islamic groups” (Gorenberg 2014, p. 21). Despite the state’s hyping of such threats for utilitarian purposes, the core argument of an extremism threat, including an Afghan spillover, for Tajikistan and the region is nonetheless real. This fact was driven home in summer 2015, when the Taliban temporarily took over the capital of Afghanistan’s Kunduz, a district bordering Tajikistan. One report also states that if a “significant portion” of an estimated 2,000 “radicalized” Central Asians currently fighting alongside ISIS—many having been recruited while working as economic migrants in Russia—were to return to their countries of origin in Central Asia, “they risk challenging security and stability” throughout the region (ICG 2015, p. 1). To counter such threats, though currently not patrolling Tajikistan’s borders, Russia does have its largest military contingent outside of its territory, the 201st Motor Rifle Division, based in Tajikistan, with up to 9,000 soldiers ready for activation and repelling of agitators, including countering incursions of potential terrorists from Afghanistan. Toward this end, Russia’s Federal Security Service (Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, FSB) provides advice and technical assistance to the Tajik government and its border guards (Pannier 2015).

Geopolitics and Counterterrorism Assistance

Immediately after 9/11, “Central Asia became a strategic access point” for the US-led ‘global war on terror’ (Foust 2012, p. 48). Since then, Tajikistan’s proximity and long border with Afghanistan has induced substantial foreign aid for repelling both drugs and potential terrorists from its southern borders. Among the chief donors to Tajikistan has been the US, which in recent years has been increasing its CT assistance to the region. For 2016–2017, the majority of the US$50 million of CT funds allocated by the US for Central Asia were earmarked for Tajikistan with the declared intention of “securing [the border] with Afghanistan to interdict illicit movement of people, narcotics, and weapons” (Kucera 2016). The increase in CT assistance has come at a time when the Tajik government has intensified its persecution of nearly all existing organized and generally peaceful opposition groups, with the anvil largely coming down on the now banned IRP, and its falsely accused and imprisoned leadership.

Despite presumed goodwill in promoting CT activities by such international entities as the OSCE, which in 2011 established a Counter Terrorism and Police Issues Adviser Unit in Tajikistan with the broad objective of helping “all law enforcement agencies to better combat the complex phenomenon of organized crime, drug trafficking and terrorism,” the reality of Tajikistan’s state structures has been one of “a complex interaction between the state and criminality,” what directly undermines and resists “international efforts to improve the law enforcement” (Lewis 2011, p. 113). On criticizing the US training of hundreds of security (GKNB) and counter-narcotics personnel, entities known for their brutality and corruption, one source writes: “In no other country of the world, except perhaps
contemporary Afghanistan, can such a superimposition between drug traffickers and government officials be found” (Kucera 2013). Indeed, Tajikistan’s authoritarian government has not shown a political will to reform its security structures, characterized with corruption, repression, torture, and lack of standard access to detainees by lawyers, human rights activists, or even the International Committee of the Red Cross. Under such conditions, security including CT assistance may work to merely “legitimize an authoritarian political system” with little to no positive impact on security structures (Lewis 2011, p. 114).

CONCLUSIONS

By comparing the two cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on their individual state CT behavior, this chapter took the “most-similar-systems design” approach, whereby two highly alike cases were selected with their common characteristics taken as constants or control variables that can be eliminated “as explanations for the variation” observed. The control variables for both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in this comparison are: being post-communist and post-Soviet, located in Central Asia, nearly the same size territory, relatively poor as compared to rest of the post-communist world with near-similar per capita GDPs, highly reliant on remittances from labor migrants as source of sustenance, and with populations which are heavily pro-Russia. The key variables, in turn, which can explain the contrasting CT behavior of the two cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, we argue, are political culture, temporal exposure to (or history of) Islam, and geopolitics (in way of proximity to Afghanistan). If there are both “normative” and “utilitarian” factors which affect the scope and levels of brutality (or lack thereof) of states in their choice of CT methods (Omelicheva 2007b, p. 189), we concur that “normative” or tendency toward alignment with international human rights norms has been the choice of Kyrgyzstan, while “utilitarian” or tendency toward material and political benefits has been the preference of Tajikistan.

But what are the practical implications for Central Asia of this difference in CT behavior? As argued by Mariya Omelicheva, rational choice theory can be used to demonstrate that though “state repression may have an immediate deterrent effect” against dissent, including forms of political Islam, “in the long run, it will generate a lagged stimulus,” inducing potentially violent behavior on part of those targeted. Such a process, in turn, may eventually radicalize those initially nonviolent religious groups in Central Asia, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and even moderate Muslims, such as Tajikistan’s banned IRP, who may be encouraged to practice their faith and politics outside of the confines set by the region’s governments (Omelicheva 2007a). This argument is all the more critical given the dangerous and relatively new emergence of ISIS-sympathized Islamists in the region and the highly unstable scenario in neighboring Afghanistan. The challenge for Central Asian governments, local activists, and the international community is thus to determine the best means to entice
the adoption and uptake of human rights and security norms capable of concurrently mitigating terrorist threats and upholding individual and group rights of Central Asians.

NOTES

1. The five post-Soviet states of Central Asia are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

2. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Tajikistan has a population of 7.5 million (end-2009) and land mass of 143,100 km² (approximately the size of Nepal or Bangladesh or the US state of Iowa); Kyrgyzstan has a population of 5.5 million (end-2010) with land mass of 198,500 km² (nearly the size of Senegal or the US state of South Dakota).

3. Over a million Tajikistanis and around 800,000 Kyrgyzstanis, about 15% of their respective populations, live and work in Russia and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan (Foroughi 2012; Tursunov 2013). The share of female migrant workers for each country is 15% for Tajikistan (EurasiaNet 2012) and between 40% and 50% of the total for Kyrgyzstan—the highest among Central Asian republics (Botoeva 2012). According to the Central Bank of Russia, during 2011, Kyrgyz migrants sent remittances worth US$894 million back to their families in Kyrgyzstan (Sultanov and Karimov 2012). And according to the World Bank, Tajikistan’s remittances inflow surpassed US$3 billion in 2011 (Foroughi 2012). Tajikistan ranks number one in the world in inflow of remittances as percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). In 2010, remittance inflows to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were equivalent to 31% and 21% of their respective GDPs (Mohapatra et al. 2011).

4. In a cross-national survey when members of the public were asked: “Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of Russia?” the top answers of those choosing “approve” were: Tajikistan (94%), Kyrgyzstan and Mali (84%), Uzbekistan (81%), and Armenia (75%) (Gallup 2013). And in a June 2014 phone survey of over 1,000 individuals surveyed per country, 90% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan and 85% in Tajikistan expressed “great deal” or “fair amount” of confidence in the Russian president, Vladimir Putin (Trilling 2014).

REFERENCES


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