



KYRGYZSTAN

Quick Facts

Population: 5,964,897 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 199,951 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Kyrgyz 73.5%, Uzbek 14.7%, Russian 5.5%, Dungan 1.1%, other 5.2% (includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, German) (2019 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$7.565 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades on from its independence from the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan's Islamic revivalism continues to shape the political, economic, and social landscape of the country. After decades of Soviet atheism and repression, people seem keen to connect with their spiritual past. This re-emergence of Islam is strengthened by the support provided by Islamic missionaries, which include Tablighi missions in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, apart from missionaries in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Turkey.¹ Islamism was institutionalized by these groups through the establishment of mosques and the translation of the Koran into Kyrgyzstan's local languages. In turn, the proliferation of mosques and other religious organizations in Kyrgyzstan in recent years reflects the success of these efforts.²

Kyrgyzstan has a checkered history in dealing with orthodox Salafism, blurring the lines between faith and extremism. The popularity of radical movements like the Hizb-ut Tahrir (HuT) and Kateebat Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) has redefined the way in which Islam is viewed in the secular Kyrgyz Republic. The presence, as of 2019, of more than 800 Kyrgyz citizens in the Islamic State (IS) reflects a growing trend of intolerant religious indoctrination.³

Governmental control over religious organizations and practices stands in contrast to Kyrgyzstan's traditionally vibrant religious tradition, and has on occasion proven counterproductive and resulted in increasing hostility toward the state. However, the country remains vulnerable to the spread of radical and extremist ideology on account of several factors, include its geographical proximity to extremist hotspots such as Afghanistan, Xinjiang, and the Fergana valley, the appeal of the Islamic State to young Kyrgyz, the weakness of the state itself, and an internal environment conducive to criminality that supports terror.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Radical Islam boasts a long presence in Kyrgyzstan. Repression of Islamic practices while the country was part of official control during the Soviet era, given the USSR's state policy of official atheism, which gradually gave rise to a cohort of radicalized believers. Notably, however, the majority of the Muslim population, even during the early part of the Soviet period, was cut off from the wider Islamic world. It was only during the 1970s, when Soviet policy toward Islam was relaxed, that Islamic groups and tendencies truly reemerged. By the time of the dissolution of Soviet Union, however, Islamist activists and leaders had succeeded in building their own networks through which to shape the incipient political and religious narrative of the country.⁴

Notably, with the fall of the Soviet Union, a number of former communist leaders gravitated toward Muslim theology and Islamic discourse. This pivot was largely tactical, an embrace of Islamic revivalism as a means of staying in power. Thereafter, local leaders progressively opened their doors to Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi Islam after Riyadh expanded its financial and political footprints into the so-called "post-Soviet space." This trend continues to this day; Eco Islamic Bank, which is supported by Saudi Arabia, is currently estimated to have more than 120 branches across Kyrgyzstan, while the Saudi government is known to pay monthly stipends to local religious leaders through this financial institution.⁵

The scope of this outreach is profound. Shamshibek Shakirovich Zakirov, a veteran Kyrgyz expert on religious affairs, estimated that, after 1990, ten new mosques were constructed with Saudi help in the Kyrgyz city of Osh alone.⁶ In the 1990s, one official in the Kyrgyz government assessed:

Numbers of illegal private religious schools increased ... and their contacts with foreign (Saudi) Muslim organizations expanded. As a result of such contacts, not only the functioning character of these centers, but also their ideology, changed. Those schools of traditional Islamic education turned into independent radical religious centers, the programs of which, except for training, included the propagation of their own social and political views.⁷

Since then, radical Islamic recruiters have become still more active, including through the encouragement of young Kyrgyz to study at Islamic educational institutions throughout the broader Muslim world.⁸

Over the years, the Islamic revival that has taken place in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has had a deep effect on civil society. Religious traditions have gained traction in the country, including the Hanafi, Salafi, Nurjular and Wahhabi schools of thought, while the group Tablighi Jama'at has risen in prominence.⁹ Given existing social and economic fault lines, including insufficient economic growth and festering resentment toward authorities, religious leaders have been able to cultivate a receptive audience. These same deficiencies have likewise led to the rise of extremist groups which have often posed a challenge to the stability of the Kyrgyz state.

As experts note, in the case of Wahhabism, the question was not one of "a trivial reshuffling of power, but rather a truly radical revolution" in which the ideology confronted – and posed a challenge to – secular elites.¹⁰ In response, these elites tried to undermine religious activity that appeared threatening by promoting the Hanafi school of thought, viewed as a moderate form of Islam, while clamping down on other groups that were not in line with state-led initiatives. Kyrgyz security services are known to have targeted religious minorities, and the state has also sought to restrict the influence of foreign missionaries.¹¹ This set the stage for a period of intense regional Islamic radicalization, wherein religious extremists from neighboring states began to cultivate growing unrest in Kyrgyzstan.

While no major terrorist attacks have targeted Kyrgyzstan since 2012, there have been a growing number of terror-related arrests within the country.¹² The only organized terrorist attack to take place in Kyrgyzstan in recent years – the August 2016 suicide bombing of the Chinese embassy – was carried out by Uighur extremists and not directed against Kyrgyzstan. However, Kyrgyz citizens have been involved in high-profile attacks abroad, including the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and the 2017 attack on the

metro in Saint Petersburg, Russia.¹³

Terrorism-related arrests continue to be made by the country's security services, particularly of fighters returning home from conflict zones in the Middle East. To date, more than 300 Kyrgyz fighters and their family members have returned to Kyrgyzstan, of which 44 have been imprisoned. In October 2019, Kyrgyzstan reportedly arrested 16 people on terror related charges. Of these, 11 were held on terrorism charges while the rest were accused of indulging in religious extremism. An IS sleeper cell was discovered in the country in November 2019. The vanguard of this cell had been recruiting Kyrgyz nationals to carry out terror related attacks in Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, the Prosecutor General's Office and State Committee for National Security (GKNB), the national agency responsible for intelligence on counter terrorism and organized crime in Kyrgyzstan, reported the seizure of more than 399 pieces of extremist materials in 2019.¹⁴

Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)

HuT, a Sunni transnational political organization, is one of the most popular Islamist groups in Kyrgyzstan. Tracing its roots to Jalalabad and Osh in 1997–1998, the movement has evolved into political opposition, projecting itself as the Islamic alternative to corrupt regimes. Officially, the organization prefers peaceful methods to obtain its objectives. However, it also has expressed the view that violence will be unavoidable in light of the repressive nature of local government measures.¹⁵

It is estimated that HuT's membership in Kyrgyzstan lies in excess of 20,000.¹⁶ It is particularly popular in the socially disadvantaged southern regions of Kara-Suu, Bazar-Korgon, Suzak, Aravan, and Uzgen, and the cities of Osh and Jalalabad.¹⁷ Notably, these areas bore the brunt of 2010 riots that exposed inter-ethnic fault lines between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Those riots stemmed from the marginalization of the minority ethnic Uzbeks over access to economic and political power, and the reluctance of the majority ethnic Kyrgyz population to grant concessions to disenfranchised minorities.¹⁸ HuT's methods include the distribution of food and aid to families whose members have been imprisoned by Kyrgyz authorities. The group has also proselytized in prisons, and distributed literature among receptive followers.¹⁹

Tablighi Jamaat (TJ)

Founded by cleric Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhalawi in 1927 in Mewat, India, Tablighi Jama'at has roots in the Deobandi version of the Hanafi School of jurisprudence. Today, it ranks as one of the largest groups of Islamic proselytizers, and is seen as playing a vital role in the spread of Islam across the world.

An apolitical religious proselytization (*dawa*) movement, Tablighi Jama'at intrinsically opposes Wahhabi and Salafi movements.²⁰ The majority of its members are young,²¹ and the organization espouses the principle of non-interference in politics. Aside from Kyrgyzstan, all of the other Central Asian Republics have formally banned the group. However, according to high-ranking Kyrgyz officials, the group is under the control of the country's special services and therefore does not pose a threat.²² Its *modus operandi* involves holding religious seminars in order to proselytize.

Islamic State (IS)

IS appears to have gained substantial support in Kyrgyzstan in recent years; as of 2019, more than 800 Kyrgyz nationals are estimated to have joined the militant organization, making Kyrgyz nationals the highest per capita cohort of foreign recruits from Central Asia.²³ The IS message appears to have resonated significantly in Kyrgyzstan, largely among the country's marginalized and its youth. Here, ethnicity and the country's latent ethnic divisions play a large role; it is estimated that more than 70 percent of Kyrgyz nationals in IS are ethnic Uzbeks from the volatile region of Osh and Jalalabad.²⁴

IS released its first propaganda and recruitment video addressing Kyrgyzstan Muslims back in July 2015.²⁵ Since then, existing social, political, and cultural conditions have allowed IS to embed itself there, and more broadly in Central Asia. It has done so pursuant to a larger strategic plan formulated by the

militant organization. An IS map from 2014, for instance, highlighted the group's plans to expand into regions that were under the historical Arab caliphates from the seventh to thirteenth centuries – a swath of territory that includes Central Asia.²⁶ Kyrgyzstan now faces a different threat from the group: that of radicalized fighters returning home to wage *jihad* against the ruling regime. So far, around 300 such fighters and their families have returned home, although no IS-related attacks have resulted.²⁷ This is at least partly attributable to Kyrgyz government vigilance; authorities have dismantled several IS terrorist cells planning to commit terrorist attacks in the country over the past few years, and more than 140 people have been arrested and convicted for taking part in ISIS activities in Syria.²⁸

Kateebat Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ, or “Monotheism and Jihad Battalion”)

KTJ was formed in 2013 in Syria. Its members swore allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2015 and renewed this pledge in January 2019.²⁹ Until April 2019, KTJ was led by the charismatic Abu Saloh, an ethnic Uzbek from Osh. Saloh was replaced by Abdul Aziz, an Uzbek and a native of the Fergana Valley.³⁰ KTJ has roughly 500 active fighters and is largely comprised of individuals from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.³¹ Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Russia have labelled KTJ as a terrorist organization.³²

Today, Saloh continues to be associated with KTJ as one of its key propagandists. Having worked in Kyrgyzstan as an assistant to an *imam* in Osh in 2010, he allegedly has a robust network of in-country followers.³³ The goal of achieving *shahada* (martyrdom) and the creation of a *caliphate* are among Saloh's key preachings.³⁴ He has used social media extensively to criticize Central Asian regimes for repressing Muslims and opposing the pillars of Islam.

The Central Asian *jamaats* have widely used the internet and social media to spread their propaganda. This includes the encrypted Telegram handle of Jihad Shomali (Wind of *jihad*). KTJ has also ventured into producing media content. Its media outlet is called *Jannat Oshiqdari* (lovers of paradise). The videos are professionally made and target regional social fault lines. They project the allure of fighting for a “just” cause and the virtues of an Islamic state where genuine equality is putatively practiced.

Three terror attacks are known to have been executed by Saloh's followers: the 2015 attacks in Al-Fu'ah in Syria, a suicide attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan in August 2016, and the St. Petersburg metro attacks in April 2017. It is alleged that Abu Saloh continues to recruit new volunteers for Al-Qaeda, although the scope of this effort (or its successes) is not very clear. He has called for *jihad* against Central Asian regimes, Jews, and Christians. Saloh has also criticized the Islamic preachers of Central Asia for colluding with the region's regimes in order to stay relevant.³⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Kyrgyzstan faces growing radicalization, particularly in the ethnically sensitive and socially disadvantaged southern regions of Kara-Suu, Bazar-Korgon, Suzak, Aravan, and Uzgen districts, and the cities of Osh and Jalalabad.

The prevailing inter-ethnic discord in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in its southern regions, enabled radicals to recruit those marginalized by society. In Kyrgyzstan, where ethnic Uzbeks comprise more than 14 percent of the population, there have been two major ethnic riots in 1990 and 2010. In the aftermath of these riots, Uzbeks were subjected to arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture. Out of the nearly 2,000 homes that were destroyed during the violence, the majority belonged to ethnic Uzbeks.³⁶

Indoctrination and recruitment take place at both the domestic and international levels. Domestically, indoctrination is initiated clandestinely by extremist Islamic groups in mosques and prayer meetings.³⁷ The Internet and social media have also made it easier to radicalize individuals, especially because the Kyrgyz state lacks the capability to comprehensively track online content.³⁸ Further, radical groups have

devised methods to avoid detection, including transferring radical propaganda via memory sticks and the SIM cards in cell phones.³⁹ The Kyrgyz government also remains handicapped in prosecuting and properly rehabilitating returning foreign fighters due to inadequate resources and expertise.⁴⁰ The borders, especially in the southern part of the country, remain porous, facilitating unmonitored and clandestine travel.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Kyrgyz migrants are known to often be indoctrinated in countries like Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, where many go for work and to study Islam.⁴² This is more acute in the case of Russia, where a sizeable number of Kyrgyz migrant laborers are employed. This cohort is mostly under the age of 35, its members often do not have legal work permits, and they are engaged in the least appreciated and most exploited jobs, where they average from \$226 to \$454 per month.⁴³ Islamic groups have tapped into their prevailing discontent to promise a better alternative. Specifically, there are reports of these migrants being offered \$5,000 to join the IS.⁴⁴

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Kyrgyzstan has prioritized regulating and suppressing unsanctioned religious activity, anchored in the country's 2014 "state policy concept in the religious sphere." Ostensibly, that policy concept is set to expire at the end of 2020⁴⁵ – but, as of this writing, there is no indication that the country will meaningfully change course thereafter. The prevailing approach seeks to steer Islam in the country toward the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence on the grounds that it is more liberal, tolerant and accommodating. In practice, the policy seeks to mitigate or prevent outright the influence of external Islamic schools of thought on Islam in the country. The concept justifies this on the grounds that it is the most appropriate approach to safeguard Kyrgyzstan's ethnic and religious diversity.⁴⁶ This has resulted in a number of controversial (and often counterproductive) restrictions, including the enhanced monitoring of clergy and their religious preaching. This and other measures has opened authorities up to charges that they seek to ban ideas, intent, and rhetoric, rather than simply physical violence that may result.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the resultant crackdowns have prompted a public policy debate regarding whether Kyrgyzstan has "securitized" Islamic radicalization in order to retain power. In the past, regional governments have frequently implied that Islamic radicalism represents an existential threat as a means of justifying state control, and Kyrgyzstan is no different. The Kyrgyz government, for instance, has taken measures such as modifying the country's laws on Countering Terrorism and its Code of Civil Procedure,⁴⁸ which could have the cumulative effect of undermining freedom of media and expression. Under the new laws, reporters are prohibited from interviewing "terrorists" without the approval of the government. In May 2020, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Désir, who has been critical of the new laws, noted his concern over "the scope and the potential impact of the new amendments to the law on countering terrorism and their impact on media freedom."⁴⁹

While controversial, the Kyrgyz government's approach has proven effective, both in diverting attention from the myriad social and economic problems that prevail in the region, and in garnering foreign support and assistance to tackle militant extremism. This includes training and capacity building assistance from the Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)⁵⁰ and the OSCE,⁵¹ as well as military and economic assistance from Russia, China, EU,⁵² and the U.S.⁵³ Additionally, the UN appointed a counterterrorism adviser to Central Asia in 2017 who serves as the coordinator between the multilateral agency and the Central Asian Republics on matters relating to Islamic radicalism. At the same time, by virtue of being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Kyrgyzstan receives weapons and training from Russia, which supplement the already-robust intelligence sharing infrastructure that exists between Moscow and Bishkek.⁵⁴ The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),

of which Kyrgyzstan is a member, frequently conducts anti-terror exercises as well. Its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is a vital body for sharing intelligence and tackling terrorism across the region.

During the May 2019 meeting between Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Bishkek, China reiterated its commitment to enhance Kyrgyzstan's anti-terror capabilities.⁵⁵ This ostensibly includes training and exercises.⁵⁶ The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which seeks to "promote law enforcement reforms through community policing training and supporting efforts to counter narcotics and violent extremism, improving the criminal justice sector response to human trafficking, implementing the new criminal codes, and spurring anti-corruption efforts,"⁵⁷ has resulted in the provision of more than \$515 million in security aid to Kyrgyzstan between 2001 and 2017.⁵⁸ Subsequently, in 2019, the U.S. provided an additional \$400,000 to implement a joint project with UNODC on "capacity building for effective identifying and recovering the proceeds of crime in Kyrgyzstan."⁵⁹ Similarly, the EU has stepped up its security engagement with Kyrgyzstan, particularly on counterterrorism and border control. For the period 2014-2020, it allocated €184 million (roughly \$219 million) for projects involving combating torture and corruption.⁶⁰

Apart from banning its citizens from joining IS, Kyrgyzstan has mobilized the support of non-governmental organizations and domestic clergy to counsel people on the ideals of Islam. In November 2018, Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov gave a major address in which he elaborated on the role of Islam in the secular Kyrgyz state. He argued for governmental involvement in religion in order to ensure peace, order, and development in society. He also emphasized the importance of promoting "traditional Islamic values" inherited from Kyrgyz ancestors as an alternative to radical religious movements.⁶¹ President Jeenbekov further outlined plans to develop an Islamic Academy, the activities of which will be under state control, as a means of establishing a Kyrgyz religious identity and removing the need for Kyrgyz Muslims to travel abroad for Islamic education.⁶²

Jeenbekov's statements highlight the government's deep suspicions of non-Hanafi sects of Islam, and help to explain the state's approach to the Islamic faith, wherein only Hanafi Sunni Muslims are allowed to be clergy members, religious judges, or *muftis*. This policy extends to the requirement that religious leaders submit to screening and accreditation tests which are heavily biased in favor of Hanafi beliefs.⁶³ Additionally, the country's Ministry of Education launched a new curriculum on "moderate Islam" for high school students in 2019.⁶⁴ Through these initiatives, the Kyrgyz government has sought to tackle the ideological aspect of Islamic radicalization.

Nevertheless, Islamic radicalization in the country has unquestionably been fueled by poor governance and lackluster economic conditions, including declining economic growth, rising poverty, and rising unemployment in recent years. As laid out in a 2018 report from the Asian Development Bank, 22.4 percent of people in Kyrgyzstan live below the poverty line. At the same time, the unemployment rate among the young people between the ages of 15-24 was estimated at 15.9 percent in 2018.⁶⁵ Kyrgyzstan also has the lowest average wage rates among the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).⁶⁶ Meanwhile, corruption remains endemic. In 2019, Kyrgyzstan ranked 128 out of 180 countries on the "Corruption Perception Index."⁶⁷ Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that Kyrgyzstan loses \$700 million per year to corruption – a figure which translates into 11 percent of total GDP.⁶⁸ Concurrently, one million people and 1,125 villages remain without access to clean drinking water.⁶⁹

Kyrgyzstan's "national program and action plan on countering terrorism," launched in 2018, remains a work in progress. It has drawn criticism as an instrument by which the state has sought to undermine the country's political opposition and marginalize ethnic minorities.⁷⁰ Kyrgyzstan has sought to employ state media to discredit groups such as the Islamic State, while simultaneously elevating the Hanafi school of religious thought by broadcasting the speeches and sermons of state-approved *muftis*.⁷¹ The government

also frequently monitors the internet and blocks radical websites; in 2019, 64 websites and 233 social media accounts were registered as having been blocked on these grounds.⁷² The previous year, the government had blocked 184 websites – including Sound Cloud, a music-sharing platform with more than 175 million listeners worldwide.⁷³

In recent years, the strengthening of domestic laws to better combat radicalism has been a major governmental focus. In January 2019, Kyrgyzstan updated its criminal laws, making it illegal to possess extremist materials - even absent the intent to disseminate such literature.⁷⁴ Human rights groups were critical of the updates, stating that the loose definition of extremism adopted by the Kyrgyz state was being misused to justify the arrests of people for non-violent activities.⁷⁵

The new regime ushered into office in June 2020 with the appointment of Prime Minister Kubatbek Ayilchiyevich Boronov, while more liberal, has maintained a focus on combating radicalization – albeit with some modifications. Possession of extremist materials is no longer a criminal offense, a change which has led to a sharp decline in the number of related arrests.⁷⁶ However, dissemination of such materials or the intent to do so continues to qualify as illegal. Meanwhile, the loose definition of extremism under existing has, according to critics, left the door open subjective interpretation and misuse.⁷⁷

To date, Kyrgyzstan has banned a total of 20 terrorist and extremist organizations.⁷⁸ It has also sought to expand its global partnerships in tackling terrorism and extremism with international organizations and entities. Notably, for instance, UNODC now supports Kyrgyzstan in a comparatively new effort: to deradicalize prisoners and assist government authorities in devising a blueprint for accommodating and assimilating foreign fighters back into Kyrgyz society.⁷⁹

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