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VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY IN CENTRAL ASIA: A RISK ASSESSMENT

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ACRONYMS

GBAO	Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous District
IJU	Islamic Jihad Union
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
USG	United States Government
UTO	United Tajik Opposition
VE/I	Violent Extremism and Insurgency

MAP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In contrast to the Middle East, North Africa and regions of South Asia, Violent Extremism and Insurgency (VE/I) in Central Asia is not an endemic problem. VE/I is not a challenge Central Asians must confront in their everyday life. At the same time, however, militancy and extremism are not entirely absent from Central Asian politics, and derive from compounding grievances that are ethno-nationalist, Islamist, economic, and/or secessionist in origin. Given this reality, it is important to catalog variations in the scope and nature of militancy and extremism that have occurred in Central Asia so as to be able to explore its causes and to assess the likelihood of future militancy and extremism.

In Kazakhstan, militancy has been limited and has manifested in ethno-nationalist, Islamist, and economic forms. In the pre-Soviet era, this had focused primarily on ethnic Russians. More recent ethnic violence has emerged between Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities including Chechens. In particular, the scrutiny of the Uyghurs by the Nazarbaev government bears watching; while it has not resulted in violence by or against the Uyghur population in Kazakhstan, the potential for such violence exists. Somewhat more pronounced and less expected than ethno-nationalist violence was the small-scale Islamist militancy that unfolded in 2011 when four separate attacks occurred over the months of May-December. The December attack, carried out by the Islamist group Jund al-Khilafah, was in retaliation for the Kazakh government's October passage of a new law on religion that markedly increased state control over religious organizations. Finally, economically-driven militancy emerged in December 2011 when violence erupted between oil workers and local police and central government troops after seven months of strikes for better pay and working conditions. Seventeen people died and 100 injured in the clashes; while other labor strikes have occurred since then they have not resulted in similar violence. Although the grievances driving militancy in Kazakhstan are diverse, the degree of militancy in Kazakhstan remains limited.

In contrast to the multiple explanations for militancy in Kazakhstan, the purported origins of militancy and extremism in Uzbekistan are consistently Islamist in origin. However, information available on the few known incidents of Islamist militancy in Uzbekistan is limited and is either filtered through the state-controlled Uzbek media or is incomplete, obtained by scholars and reporters under conditions where comprehensive data collection is impossible. For example, while the Karimov government has attributed the February 1999 bombings in Tashkent to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the IMU has denied any involvement. However, the IMU was involved in a series of cross-border incursions in 1999-2000; in this instance, the Karimov government's claims that the IMU was seeking a violent throw of the Karimov government are supported by reports from Japanese and American hostages who had taken by the militants. The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the successor to the IMU, claimed responsibility for a series of deadly bombings in 2004, and they were identified by the US Government as responsible for suicide bombings at the US and Israeli embassies. The Karimov government also claims that Islamists were behind the Andijan clashes of May 2005. For two decades the Uzbek government has maintained a ferocious repressive capacity. Critically, this repressive capacity, while it has engendered widespread distaste for the Karimov regime, has also deterred public support for militant causes.

The Tajik government, unlike the Uzbek state, has considerably less repressive capacity. This, combined with a public legitimacy deficit that further erodes the capacity of the Tajik government, has produced an environment conducive to militant politics. This militancy has assumed Islamist, secessionist, as well as ethno-nationalist forms. Indeed, Islamist, secessionist, and ethno-nationalist grievances have been articulated simultaneously in Tajikistan. The 1992-1997 Tajik civil war, for example, saw nationalists, democrats and Islamists unite in fighting against the autocratic regime of President Emomalii Rahmon. More recently, military action to capture escaped prisoners who took

shelter with a local warlord in Khorog 2010 resulted in small-scale conflict as well as public protests in Khorog against the government and the troops. Khorog, located within the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous district (GBAO), is predominantly ethnically Pamiri, and thus the mass protests can be seen as a manifestation of secessionist leanings among the population. However, their goal is primarily secession from government authority, not physical secession; nevertheless, when Dushanbe does intervene in the GBAO, Khorog's Pamiris are willing to support, at least rhetorically, those who stand in opposition to the Rahmon regime.

In Kyrgyzstan, similar secessionist pressures – pressures to secede from central government authority but not to territorially secede – have sparked episodes of militancy. In the Kyrgyz case, though, these pressures are episodic rather than constant. Regionalism in Kyrgyzstan is strong; in Kyrgyzstan's central government power has rotated between the country's northern and southern political elite. Elites from Kyrgyzstan's north and south have largely adhered to an unwritten understanding that, when in office, they would not interfere in the local governance of regional elites who did not occupy central government authority. However, the coalition of northern political elites who overthrew President Bakiev in April 2010, sought to weaken the patronage networks of the southern Kyrgyz political elite by seeking support of Uzbeks in the south. This led to growing tensions between southern Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks living in Jalal Abad and Osh, which manifested in inter-ethnic violence in 2010 and resulted in over 350 deaths and displaced over 100,000. Other, smaller-scale instances of politically-motivated violence include incursions by the IMU in 1999 and 2000, as well as several bombings in Bishkek.

The variations in autocratic capacity and diverging fault lines help to explain some of the variations in types and severity of VE/I in Central Asian states. VE/I is more pronounced in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where post-Soviet independence began with a fragmented political elite that is not conducive to the system of presidential patronage that has helped to support leaders in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Frequent elite defections in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have eroded autocratic capacity and created an environment more permissive of VE/I. As for the types of VE/I that have emerged in each of these states, many of them have their origins in Soviet rule and pre-existing societal fault lines that have re-emerged in the post-Soviet era. Unlike the Soviet state, which enjoyed a degree of legitimacy, the post-Soviet states are denuded of any legitimating ideology and can at best deter populations from resorting to violence as individual-level drivers of VE/I become increasingly salient.

The individual country studies conducted for the Central Asia risk assessment also identified five transnational and cross border-influences as potential drivers of VE/I: transnational militant Islamism; social media; migration patterns; transnational crime, and ethno-nationalist secession and ungoverned border areas. Each of these drivers has the potential to increase the likelihood of VE/I in Central Asia. Critically though, it is unlikely that any of these drivers alone would spark VE/I.

None of the four reports written for this USAID risk assessment see the USG-Afghanistan timeline as consequential for VE/I in Central Asia. What is consequential, however, is a different timeline – the growing inevitability of regime change in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as Presidents Nazarbaev and Karimov age out of office. The political elites in the region's two autocratic bulwarks could fracture, much as the political elites in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan fractured in the early 1990s. Alternatively, the Kazakh and Uzbek political elite might unite around a new successor, thus preserving these states' comparative autocratic capacity. Lastly, Kazakh and Uzbek political elites might opt for meaningful political reform, choosing the institutionalization of transparent succession mechanisms in an effort to avoid the chaos of Tajik and Kyrgyz politics and the opaque uncertainty of Turkmen politics.

As unlikely as meaningful political reform might be in Central Asia, it nevertheless is an objective worthy of continued USG development support. The USG would do well to deepen its support for political party development, backing of anti-corruption watchdog groups, and expansion of access to

information and information communication technologies, programming that in other post-Soviet contexts has encouraged processes of political liberalization.

Given that political liberalization may be slow to come to Central Asia, the USG would do well to prioritize several of the immediate development responses identified in the four Central Asian VE/I risk assessments. For the Kyrgyzstan, development responses that focus on mitigating ethno-nationalism should be emphasized. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, USG development responses might productively focus on civil society groups as well as political elites working to expand religious freedoms. Expanding religious freedoms, even in the context of continued corrupt patronage politics, will limit the attractiveness of militant Islamism. Finally, in Kazakhstan, USG development responses would do well to aid the promising but still inchoate institutionalization of state-society mechanisms for the resolution of labor disputes.

Critically, however, what might not disappear so quickly are the country-specific, individual-level drivers of VE/I. Individual-level drivers of VE/I may become, in the short run, more salient as competitive elections provide new platforms for the public expression of extremist ideologies. Given this challenging reality, the potentially exacerbating short run effects political liberalization can have on VE/I must remain at the fore of all USG development responses in Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Central Asia, though present, is less pronounced than the VE/I that exists in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Importantly however, the Central Asian political context is fluid. Political contexts that muted violent extremism and insurgency in the region over the past decade—the presence of stable autocratic regimes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as well as the international community’s containment of militant Islamist threats in Afghanistan—are changing. This changing political context does not invariably portend greater VE/I in Central Asia in the years to come. Central Asian governments, along with international partners, can initiate political reforms to decrease societal disaffection and thereby mitigate the pull of extremism and insurgency.

It is toward this objective, the mitigation of VE/I in the Central Asia Region, that this report is focused.¹ The report proceeds in four steps. Section I of this report presents an overview of variations in Central Asian VE/I. This variation is classified along two dimensions: the degree of VE/I—low or moderate—and the types of potential drivers of VE/I—including ethno-nationalism, Islamism, economic grievances and secessionism. VE/I in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has been low in the two decades since the Soviet collapse, though the frustrations actors articulated when episodes of militancy erupted in these two countries include several of the grievances just noted. VE/I in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has been moderate over the past two decades and actors’ grievances have predominantly reflected Islamist (Tajikistan), nationalist (Kyrgyzstan) and, to a limited extent, secessionist (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) agendas.

Section II of the report offers causal explanations for these variations in Central Asian VE/I. While many of the same drivers of VE/I are shared across Central Asian states, the national political context within which these drivers have operated differs markedly. Due to diverging modes of post Soviet transition – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan entered the post-Soviet period as stable autocracies whereas Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan began independence in political disarray – the capacity of these four states to deter and repress VE/I varies. Critically, though, Kazakhstan’s and Uzbekistan’s comparatively high capacities in deterring VE/I may be time bound. Both the Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, and the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, are in their seventies and both are thought to be struggling with chronic and potentially debilitating illnesses. As the health of these two presidents fades, so too may the autocratic stability of the Kazakh and Uzbek regimes erode.

Section III of the report investigates transnational and cross border influences on Central Asian VE/I. Specifically, this section explores how five transnational dynamics—transnational Islam, social media, migration, crime and ethno-nationalist secession—have influenced and may continue to influence patterns of VE/I in Central Asia.

Section IV of the report concludes with a risk assessment of VE/I in Central Asia and development responses the United States Government (USG) might pursue to mitigate the likelihood of future VE/I in the region. Development responses cannot, and thus should not attempt, to reverse Kazakhstan’s and Uzbekistan’s eroding capacity to repress VE/I. Development responses can, however, productively target the individual-, group-, and political-level VE/I drivers that all four Central Asian states share. In all four countries individuals’ religious freedoms are embattled, educational opportunities are limited, and political choices are constrained.

The root cause of these ills is the patron-client logic of Central Asian politics, a logic institutionalized during the Soviet period and a logic that endures, albeit in varying degrees of effectiveness, across all

¹ This report draws on and synthesizes country-level VE/I risk assessments on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan prepared by MSI for USAID.

Central Asian states today. This patron-client logic rewards Central Asian political elites, not Central Asian societies. The rewards of patronage politics, however, are mercurial, as the fortunes of Kyrgyzstan’s two deposed presidents illustrate, as do the fortunes of several recently dispatched, long-serving autocrats in North Africa and the Middle East. Here autocratic breakdowns, like the multiple government collapses in Kyrgyzstan and the anticipated political disruptions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, offer in addition to peril considerable potential.

The USG is well-positioned to capitalize on this potential. The USG’s programming, with both Central Asian state and society, has aided a constituency that understands the perils of patronage and that is ready, given a changing political landscape, to effect political reform. A new window for developmental responses has opened and the USG can productively ramp up programming that has proven effective in other environments of eroding autocratic rule: support for political party development, backing of anti-corruption watchdog groups, expansion of access to information and information communication technologies, and aid to civil society groups that promote interethnic and interfaith dialogue and understanding. Developmental responses will continue to face considerable obstacles. However, these obstacles are fewer now, most notably in critically important Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, than they have been in many years.

I. VARIATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIAN VE/I

In contrast to the Middle East, North Africa and regions of South Asia, VE/I in Central Asia is not an endemic problem. VE/I is not a challenge Central Asians must confront in their everyday lives. At the same time, however, VE/I is not entirely absent from Central Asian politics and society. Given this reality, it is important to catalog variations in the scope and nature of VE/I that has occurred in Central Asia so as to be able to explore causes of past extremism and to assess the likelihood of future extremism.

Figure 1 presents variations in Central Asian VE/I along two dimensions: the degree of VE/I—low or moderate—and the nature of VE/I grievances—ethno-nationalist, Islamist, economic, or secessionist.

Figure 1: Variations in Central Asian VE/I Since 1991

Nature of VE/I Grievances	Degree of VE/I	
	Low	Moderate
Ethno-Nationalist	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan
Islamist	Kazakhstan Uzbekistan Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
Economic	Kazakhstan	
Secessionist		Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan

VE/I in Kazakhstan²

Of all the countries reviewed in this study, Kazakhstan has seen the least violent extremism. The limited forms of militancy Kazakhstan has seen has taken one of three forms: ethno-nationalist, Islamist, and economic. Of these three forms, ethno-nationalist conflict appeared at the outset of post-Soviet independence to be the most likely form of violence the Kazakh polity might endure. Ethnic conflict occurred prior to the Soviet collapse when, in 1986, Kazakh nationalists in Almaty clashed with police during a protest against the appointment of an ethnic Russian, Gennadi Kolbin, to the post of Republic First Secretary. While anti-Russian sentiments have faded in Kazakhstan over the past two decades, tensions between Kazakhs and other minorities have sporadically led to fleeting street violence. In 2007 five ethnic Chechens died when attacked by a crowd of fifty Kazakhs in the southern village of Malovodnoye. More recently, the Uyghur population in southern Kazakhstan has come under increasing scrutiny from state authorities. Whereas in the past Uyghurs in Almaty had been able to openly publicize the repression of Uyghur minorities living in neighboring northwest China, in recent years the Nazarbaev government has limited the Kazakh Uyghur population's ability to openly criticize the Chinese government and has deported Uyghurs who had sought refugee status in Kazakhstan back to China. The Nazarbaev government's changed approach to Kazakhstan's minority Uyghur population coincides with improved relations between Astana and Beijing. While this new approach has not resulted in violence by or against the Uyghur population in Kazakhstan, the potential for such violence exists.

Despite this potential, it should be stressed that ethno-nationalist militancy and violence in Kazakhstan has been remarkably muted given the ethnic diversity of the Kazakh population. Somewhat more pronounced and, moreover, less expected than ethno-nationalist violence was the small-scale Islamist extremism that unfolded in 2011. In May 2011 a suicide bomber injured three people outside Aktobe's police headquarters. In July, one policeman and nine militants died in a gun battle in Kenkiyak, a village in northwest Kazakhstan. In November, a militant linked to the Islamist group, Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate), detonated two bombs in Atyrau. And in December 2011, two policemen and five Jund al-Khilafah militants died in a firefight in Boraldai, a suburb of Almaty. The December attack, Jund al-Khilafah explained, was in retaliation for the Kazakh government's October passage of a new law on religion that markedly increased state control over religious organizations.

Militancy took one further form in 2011—economically driven state-society conflict. In December 2011 seventeen people died and an additional 100 people were injured in clashes between oil strikers in the western Kazakh city of Zhanaozen and local police and central government troops. The violent clash was the culmination of seven months of contentious strikes in which the demands of thousands of employees from three different oil companies for better pay and safer work conditions yielded nothing save the intimidation and temporary incarceration of labor activists. Multiple labor disputes have emerged in the two years since the Zhanaozen violence. Notably, none of these protests have yielded a repeat of the December 2011 violence.

Although the grievances articulated during these eruptions of violence in Kazakhstan are diverse, the extent of violent extremism in Kazakhstan is limited. Attempts at militancy, be it ethno-nationalist, Islamist or economic-driven, have all quickly fizzled. Moreover, the casualties that have resulted from eruptions of militancy in Kazakhstan have been few. This last quality of militancy in Kazakhstan, the limited human toll it has inflicted, distinguishes Kazakhstan from Uzbekistan, another Central Asian state where violent extremism has been infrequent, but where the cost of it as denominated in human casualties has been immense.

² This synopsis of VE/I in Kazakhstan builds on the data presented in Eric McGlinchey, "Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Kazakhstan: A Risk Assessment," (produced for USAID by MSI, 2013).

VE/I in Uzbekistan³

In contrast to the multiple explanations for violent extremism offered by actors in Kazakhstan, the purported origins of extremism in Uzbekistan are consistently Islamist in origin. The hedge here is intentional; information available on the few known incidents of violent extremism in Uzbekistan is limited and the information we do have is either filtered through the state-controlled Uzbek media or is incomplete, obtained by scholars and reporters at considerable personal risk and under conditions where comprehensive data collection is impossible. We know, for example, that a series of bombs tore through the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, in February 1999, resulting in the deaths of sixteen people. The Karimov government has attributed these bombings to the militant group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU, however, has denied any involvement in the 1999 Tashkent bombings.

Less murky is the IMU's involvement in a series of Uzbekistan focused cross-border incursions in 1999 and 2000. In the summer of 1999 the IMU launched raids from its base in Tajikistan into neighboring Kyrgyzstan, raids that were met with Tashkent's aerial bombardment of IMU forces in Batken, Kyrgyzstan and Taviladara, Tajikistan. Reports from hostages—Japanese geologists and American mountain climbers taken by militants during the 1999 and 2000 incursions—support the Uzbek government's claim that the then Tajikistan-based IMU was seeking to the violent overthrow of the Karimov government.

Increased Uzbek government pressure on the Tajik state forced the IMU to move to Afghanistan following the 2000 incursions. IMU militants, weakened by clashes with the US military in Afghanistan in fall 2001, next relocated to South Waziristan. In 2004, however, Uzbek Islamists were once again targeting the Karimov government. In March and April 2004, a series of explosions and suicide bombings left forty-seven people dead in Tashkent. Militants struck once again in July 2004 in a series of suicide bombings that targeted the Uzbek Prosecutor-General office building as well as the US and Israeli embassies. A successor organization to the IMU, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), claimed responsibility for the spring 2004 bombings. The US government, moreover, identified the IJU as responsible for the summer 2004 suicide bombings targeting the Israeli and US embassies.

The Uzbek government claims Islamists were behind one additional case of political violence, the Andijan clashes of May 2005. The Uzbek state's narrative of these clashes asserts that militants loyal to a local Islamist group, Akromiya, led a mass jailbreak on May 12, 2005. These militants, along with their newly freed compatriots, forcibly occupied the Andijan regional government administrative building and then fired on Uzbek government forces attempting to free state employees whom the militants had taken hostage. The ensuing firefight resulted in 187 fatalities, the majority of which, the Uzbek government claims, were soldiers and militants.

Independent scholars and reporters, it should be stressed, dispute the Uzbek government's narrative of the Andijan events. Notably, independent research suggests that Arkomiya was not a militant group, but rather a group of prominent local Muslim businessmen that, through shared religious networks and economic acumen, developed a wide following in Andijan. The Karimov government, unnerved by the prominence of the Andijan businessmen, jailed these community leaders under false charges of Islamist extremism. At this point the Uzbek government and independent scholarship briefly converge. There indeed was a jailbreak on May 12 to free the Muslim businessmen and protesters did occupy the regional administrative building. The violence that followed, the independent scholarship concludes, was disproportionately inflicted by government forces and against unarmed civilians protesting in Andijan's central square. The number of fatalities, moreover, has been estimated to be closer to 750, the majority of whom were civilians.

³ This synopsis of VE/I in Uzbekistan builds on the data presented in Noah Tucker, "Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Uzbekistan: A Risk Assessment," (produced for USAID by MSI, 2013).

The frustrations and desperation that brought thousands of protestors into Andijan’s central square and that moved a handful of these protestors to mount an armed prison break to free the Akromiya Muslim businessmen are frustrations that are widely shared throughout Uzbekistan. However, to date Uzbekistan has experienced only one event like what occurred in Andijan. Not before and not since May 2005 have these frustrations moved ordinary Uzbeks to mount a protest similar in size and strategy to the one that was staged in Andijan. Andijan, notable for its horrific violence, is equally notable for its singularity. For two decades the Uzbek government has maintained a ferocious repressive capacity. Critically, this repressive capacity, while engendering widespread distaste for the Karimov regime, has also deterred public support for acts of defiance against the regime.

VE/I in Tajikistan⁴

The Tajik government, unlike the Uzbek state, has considerably less repressive capacity. This, combined with a public legitimacy deficit that further erodes the capacity of the Tajik government, has produced an environment conducive to VE/I. This VE/I has assumed Islamist, secessionist as well as ethno-nationalist forms. Indeed, Islamist, secessionist, and ethno-nationalist grievances have been articulated simultaneously in Tajikistan.

The 1992-1997 Tajik civil war, for example, saw nationalists, democrats and Islamists unite in fighting against the autocratic regime of President Emomali Rahmon. The United Nations-mediated resolution of the Tajik civil war resulted in a power sharing arrangement between the Rahmon regime and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the insurgency’s umbrella group that included the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan, democrats, and nationalists. Power sharing, however, quickly faded and, in the decade and a half since the 1997 accords, President Rahmon and his backers have reasserted their near complete control over the Tajik central government. Critically however, while President Rahmon has reestablished his influence over the central government, his authority continues to be contested in the regions outside the capital.

Two recent events, one in Tajikistan’s Rasht valley in 2010 and another in Khorog, the administrative center of the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous district (GBAO), illustrate the continued threat VE/I poses to Rahmon’s autocratic rule. In August 2010 two dozen prisoners—militant Islamists according to the Rahmon government—escaped from a prison in the country capital, Dushanbe. The prisoners sought refuge with Alovuddin Davlatov, a Rasht Valley warlord who had served as a commander for the UTO during the Tajik civil war. On September 19th, 2010, the Rahmon government dispatched troops to capture the escaped prisoners and to detain Davlatov. These troops were attacked upon entering the Rasht valley and 26 government soldiers died in the battle with Davlatov’s local army.

The Khorog events followed a pattern that, at least initially, paralleled the militancy seen in the Rasht valley conflict. In July 2012 the Rahmon government sent troops to Khorog in an effort to detain the alleged killers of General Abdullo Nazarov, the central government’s commander of border troops in Gorno-Badakhshan. As in the Rasht case, here too local militants loyal to a regional warlord, to Tolib Ayombekov, attacked government troops. 17 government soldiers and 30 militants died in the fighting.

Where the Khorog events differ from the Rasht valley case, though, is in the public opposition to the Rahmon government that occurred concurrently with the fighting. Hundreds of Khorog residents gathered in the city streets to demand the fighting end and government forces withdraw. Most residents of Khorog are Pamiri, not ethnically Tajik. Khorog’s Pamiris take the “autonomous” status of their region’s name, the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous district, seriously and one can view the

⁴ This synopsis of VE/I in Tajikistan builds on the data presented in Eric McGlinchey, “Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Tajikistan: A Risk Assessment,” (produced for USAID by MSI, 2013).

mass protests during the violence as manifestation of what, de facto, are strong secessionist leanings among the population. However, Khorog's Pamiris, living on the Afghan border, understand well there is nowhere to physically secede to; this is not their objective. Rather, their goal is secession from central government authority. They are willing to abide Dushanbe as long as Dushanbe does not interfere in GBAO's local governance. And, when Dushanbe does interfere in GBAO's local governance, Khorog's Pamiris are willing to support, at least rhetorically, local warlords who stand in opposition to the Rahmon regime.

VE/I in Kyrgyzstan⁵

In Kyrgyzstan, similar secessionist pressures – pressures to secede from central government authority but not to territorially secede – have sparked episodes of VE/I. In the Kyrgyz case, though, these pressures are episodic rather than constant. Regionalism in Kyrgyzstan is strong. In contrast to Tajikistan, where under Rahmon's long rule the one regional elite, the Kulyabi, has dominated the central government, in Kyrgyzstan central government power has rotated between Kyrgyzstan's northern and southern political elite. Moreover, further differentiating Kyrgyz politics from Tajik power relations, elites from Kyrgyzstan's north and south have largely adhered to an unwritten understanding that, when in office, they would not interfere in the local governance of regional elites who did not occupy central government authority. Thus Kyrgyzstan's first president, the northerner Askar Akaev, was careful to instruct his regional representatives to remain deferential to the patronage networks of the southern Kyrgyz political elite. And Kyrgyzstan's second president, the southerner Kurmanbek Bakiev, was similarly deferential to the patronage networks of Kyrgyzstan's northern political elite.

However, the coalition of northern political elites who overthrew President Bakiev in April 2010, broke from this tradition and sought, through the manipulation of southern political power structures, to weaken the patronage networks of the southern Kyrgyz political elite.⁶ To do this, the northern coalition government enlisted the support of ethnic Uzbeks living in southern Kyrgyzstan, most notably the support of Kadyrjan Batyrov, an influential Uzbek businessman in the southern Kyrgyz city of Jalal-Abad. This ill-conceived alliance and the perceived threat this alliance posed to southern power relations led to growing tension between southern Kyrgyz and the minority Uzbek population living in Jalal-Abad as well as in southern Kyrgyzstan's largest city, Osh. In June 2010 these tensions escalated into inter-ethnic violence. Kyrgyz security services in the south, services that were loyal to local politicians and out of favor with the northern coalition government, were slow to intervene. At least 350 people—the majority of whom were ethnic Uzbeks—died in the violence and a further 100,000 people were displaced.

The deadly 2010 ethnic riots, though the most devastating case of politically-driven violence in Kyrgyzstan when measured by the degree of human suffering, is only one of several instances of ethno-religious violence Kyrgyzstan has seen since the Soviet collapse. Kyrgyzstan, as noted in the discussion of VE/I in Uzbekistan above, was the target of multiple armed incursions the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) conducted in 1999 and 2000. The Kyrgyz government has also asserted that Islamist groups were behind an explosion outside the Sports Palace in the capital, Bishkek, as well as disrupted bombing plots targeting Bishkek's central mosque and central police station. Lastly, it should be noted that the story of post-Soviet Kyrgyz regime change itself is one of political violence. The 2005 and 2010 Kyrgyz “revolutions” were not achieved solely through

⁵ This synopsis of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan builds on the data presented in Sean Roberts, “Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Kyrgyzstan: A Risk Assessment,” (produced for USAID by MSI, 2013).

⁶ For a more extensive discussion of northern-southern power sharing arrangements and the 2010 attempted departure from these arrangements, see: Eric McGlinchey, “Exploring Regime Instability and Ethnic Violence in Kyrgyzstan,” *Asia Policy* (July 2011).

peaceful protest, but rather, were assured only when demonstrators forcibly overwhelmed security services guarding government buildings in the capital and in the regions.

II. CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS FOR VARIATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIAN VE/I

The preceding overview of variations of VE/I in Central Asia states points our attention toward two empirical puzzles: (1) why VE/I is more pronounced in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan than it is in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and (2) why certain forms of VE/I, most notably violent Islamist extremism occur across all Central Asian states whereas other forms of VE/I—ethno-nationalist, economic and secessionist—occur only in some states in the region. The answer to the first question may rest in variations in the inherited autocratic capacity of post Soviet Central Asian states. The explanation for the second question, in contrast, lies in the diverging fault lines that have become salient in Central Asian politics over the past two decades.

Variations in Autocratic Capacity

All Central Asian countries share a common logic of autocratic rule rooted in patronage politics. An executive's ability to provide economic rents, either in the form of direct payments or through the allocation of political and administrative positions that enable clients to exploit the broader population, is the glue that holds Central Asian autocratic hierarchies together.⁷ The strength of this glue, however, varies from one Central Asian regime to another. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the communist First Secretaries Nazarbaev and Karimov brought with them into post-Soviet independence large, pro-presidential political parties. Consequently, patronage politics is remarkably effective in these states. Political elites in these systems understand that they can be easily replaced and, as such, demand comparatively little compensation in return for their loyalty to the Nazarbaev and Karimov governments.

In contrast, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are both Central Asian states that began independence with a fragmented political elite. The payment that executives have had to pay to ensure elite loyalty is considerably greater. Here, due to political fragmentation, the presidential patronage network is one among many elites can select. Tajik and Kyrgyz presidents must compete with regional strongmen. Often this competition ends with elite defection from central presidential patronage to regional, warlord patronage. This patronage, in the Tajik case, has led to the de facto fragmentation of the Tajik state. In the Kyrgyz case defections to the regions produced the 2005 and 2010 convulsions in which power shifted from northern, to southern, and then back again to northern patronage networks. In both the Tajik and Kyrgyz cases, frequent elite defections from central presidential rule has eroded autocratic capacity and thereby created an environment more permissive of militant politics.

This causality explains why incidents of political violence are more frequent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan than such events are in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This causality, moreover, explains why militant secessionism—Pamiris' push for real autonomy in GBAO and southern Kyrgyz blatant disregard of presidential administrations from the north—emerge in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan but not in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. However, this structural logic does not explain the otherwise distinct, individual patterns of militancy in these four countries. Why economic-based militancy in Kazakhstan? Why the extreme ethno-nationalist militancy in Kyrgyzstan? And why does Islamist

⁷ For more on the workings of patronage politics broadly, see: Michael Bratton and Nicholas Van de Walle, "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa," *World Politics* 46, no. 4 (July 1994): 458.

militancy, though present at low levels across Central Asia, figure comparatively more prominently in the Tajik and Uzbek cases than in the Kazakh and Kyrgyz cases?

Diverging Fault Lines

Here the individual country studies in USAID’s four-country VE/I assessment of Central Asia provide helpful guidance. As each of these studies illustrate, Central Asian polities, despite their shared Soviet history, have seen remarkably different evolutions in their post-Soviet societies. To a certain extent, however, these seemingly new societal fault lines that now differentiate Central Asian polities may not be new at all.

Ethno-nationalist tensions, Sean Roberts illustrates in his study of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan, existed during the Soviet period, but the “Soviet government proved adept at establishing at least a temporarily sustained peace.”⁸ So too do we learn in Noah Tucker’s study of VE/I in Uzbekistan and the study of VE/I in Tajikistan that Islamist leanings emerged in both of these republics during the late Soviet period. Once again, however, the Soviets were able to defuse a potential threat. Thus, Tucker explains, “Soviet authorities, including the Muftiate, found a shared agenda with the (Islamist) reformers in their fight against local mystical practices regarded as ‘backwards’ superstitions; this tacit approval gave them considerably more room than their traditionalist peers to teach, argue, and even publish openly in Communist government newspapers.”⁹

Even the economics-driven militancy of Kazakhstan had precursors in Soviet rule. The post-Soviet hydrocarbon bonanza was not the first economic boom to see Kazakh workers clash with central state management. Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands effort to transform Kazakhstan into the breadbasket of the Soviet Union similarly resulted in labor’s clash with management.¹⁰ As with the ethno-nationalist threat in Kyrgyzstan and the Islamist threats in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, so too here did Soviet authorities prove adept at limiting the potential damage of Kazakhstan’s economic fault line. Brezhnev, Khrushchev’s successor, backed off the Virgin Lands effort rather than risk further alienating Kazakh workers.

In short, the diverging forms of Central Asian VE/I summarized in Section I of this study should not come as a surprise. Diverging individual level drivers for these diverging forms of VE/I – “concrete and specific political, economic, and social grievances,” “broader ideological (especially religious) objectives,” and “the search for economic gain” – have long existed in these four states. The difference between the Soviet period and the post-Soviet period, however, is that the Soviet state, a state that was widely perceived as legitimate, was able to defuse individual-level drivers of VE/I. The post-Soviet Central Asian states, states denuded of any legitimating ideology and left only with corrupt patronage politics, can, at best, deter populations from resorting to violence as individual level drivers of VE/I become increasingly salient.

III. TRANSNATIONAL AND CROSS BORDER INFLUENCES ON CENTRAL ASIAN VE/I

Sections I and II of this report review country level cases and causes of VE/I in Central Asia. This section complements the preceding analysis and investigates the extent to which transnational and cross-border influences have shaped and may continue to influence VE/I in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan,

⁸ Roberts, p. 4.

⁹ Tucker, p. 2.

¹⁰ Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia*, 1st ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 49.

Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The individual country studies conducted for the Central Asia risk assessment identify five transnational and cross border-influences as potential drivers of VE/I:

1. Transnational Militant Islamism
2. Social Media
3. Migration Patterns
4. Transnational Crime
5. Ethno-Nationalist Secession and Ungoverned Border Areas

Each of these drivers has the potential to increase the likelihood of VE/I in Central Asia. Critically though, it is unlikely that any of these drivers alone would spark VE/I. As Section II demonstrates, political violence in Central Asia most frequently occurs during periods of government instability and eroded state capacity. As such, it is the interaction of transnational and cross-border influences with weakened states of governance, rather than transnational and cross-border influences acting alone, that provides the formula for VE/I.

Transnational Militant Islamism

The coincidence of transnational militant Islamism and VE/I can be found in all four cases reviewed for this risk assessment. Tohir Yoldosh and Juma Namangani, the leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant Islamist organization responsible for acts of violence in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, became militants in Uzbekistan, but rather, abroad. After fleeing Uzbekistan in 1992, Yoldosh resettled in Peshawar, Pakistan, where he reportedly became enamored with Transnational Salafi Jihad.¹¹ Namangani, who also fled Uzbekistan in 1992, was a field commander in the Tajik civil war. It was these formative experiences abroad, presumably, that encouraged Yoldosh and Namangani to join forces to form the IMU in 1998, to launch cross border incursions from bases in Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, and to carry out the Tashkent bombings in 2000. While the IMU has largely disbanded, a successor group, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), is based in South Waziristan and is believed to have been responsible for a series of bombings in Uzbekistan in the spring and summer of 2004.

Kazakhstan, though untouched by the IMU and the IJU, has also been the target of militant Islamist actors inspired from abroad. Jund al-Khilafah, a militant Islamist group that has claimed responsibility for a series of deadly attacks in November and December 2011 in Atyrau and Almaty, was reportedly founded by three Kazakhs who, frustrated by Kazakh government restrictions on Islamic study, travelled to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to further their religious development. Here the three became radicalized and, in turn, are believed to have convinced a handful of followers in Kazakhstan to carry out the 2011 attacks in protest against the Kazakh state's new and restrictive law on religion.

Jund al-Khilafah, along with the IMU and IJU, illustrate that transnational militant Islamism has encouraged acts of violence in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While the human loss resulting from these incidents should not be overlooked, it nevertheless is striking how fleeting these incidents of Islamist militancy are. These incidents are so rare perhaps, as Tucker suggests in the Uzbek case, because the Karimov regime enjoys sufficient repressive capacity to deter militant Islamism. In Kazakhstan Islamist militancy may be rare because the Nazarbaev government has delivered both economic growth and a national image that trumpets interfaith and interethnic harmony. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, acts of Islamist militancy may be rare because, paradoxically, the Tajik and Kyrgyz states, in contrast to the Uzbek state, are so weak that religious freedoms, despite seemingly restrictive national laws, are largely untrammelled at the local level. Were any of these state-society dynamics to suddenly change, were the Uzbek state to lose its repressive capacity,

¹¹ Tucker, p. 4.

the Kazakh state its economic and ideological legitimacy, or were the Tajik and Kyrgyz governments to ramp up their efforts to control the practice of Islam, then the pull of transnational Islamist influences might begin to exert a greater causal effect on VE/I in the region. If, however, state-society relations in these four countries evolve in much the same way these relations have evolved over the past two decades, the pull of transnational militant Islam in Central Asia will remain limited.

Social Media

Social media, academic and policy studies claim, can advance the objectives of Islamists and others who seek to foment political and social upheaval. To a limited degree these studies are correct. New forms of social media provide platforms through which all manner of grievances, causes and ideologies can be shared across borders. Thus, Evan Kohlman notes: “Beyond written propaganda and training manuals, influential al Qaeda commanders have also used the Internet in other ways designed to incite sympathetic individuals to form homegrown terrorist networks—most notably with sophisticated, Hollywood-worthy digital video recordings.”¹²

Many analysts, however, question how effective and widely received militant messages are in the evolving new media world. Daniel Kimmage, for example, notes that “even Al Qaeda’s biggest YouTube hits attract at most a small fraction of the millions of views that clips of Arab pop stars rack up routinely.”¹³ Militant extremism, no matter how slickly packaged on YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook, cannot compete with the latest music or fashion sensations. Moreover, Kimmage suggests, the increasingly discursive and less anonymous nature of new social media – Web 2.0 in contrast to Web 1.0 – disempowers rather than empowers militants and extremists in the online world. Static web pages where information was presented with little or no opportunity for discussion, perhaps were a help for militants in years past. Today, however, social media platforms are dynamic, an attribute that “can unite a fragmented silent majority and help it to find its voice in the face of thuggish opponents, whether they are repressive rulers or extremist Islamic movements.”¹⁴

Recent events in Kyrgyzstan, however, suggest an important caveat to Kimmage’s otherwise sound reasoning. In normal daily interactions, social media likely does have the moderating effect Kimmage posits. In extraordinary conditions, for example, during the interethnic riots in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, social media can act as an accelerant of violence. Ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz interviewed in Osh and Jalal-Abad in the weeks immediately following the riots frequently produced videos of atrocities committed during the June 10 – June 14 violence. Some of these videos did not emerge on websites until after the riots had stopped. Many videos, however, were posted on websites or circulated from smartphone to smartphone by email and Facebook as the riots were happening. This concurrent circulation of video with the riots, many respondents believed, likely heightened and protracted the violence.¹⁵

Migration Patterns

Central Asian migration patterns have had, for the most part, a mitigating effect on VE/I. Young men disproportionately are the perpetrators of political violence. The immediate reasons why young men may be sympathetic to militant causes are many—joblessness, perceptions of injustice, ideological radicalization. The transition from being sympathetic to militancy to actually engaging in militancy often requires one further variable – the absence of an exit option. Most Central Asian men

¹² Evan F. Kohlmann, “‘Homegrown’ Terrorists: Theory and Cases in the War on Terror’s Newest Front,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (July 1, 2008): 101.

¹³ Daniel Kimmage, “Fight Terror With YouTube,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2008, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/26/opinion/26kimmage.html>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Author interviews in Osh and Jalal Abad, Kyrgyzstan, June and July 2010.

do, however, have an exit option: Russia. The International Organization for Migration estimates that 1.5 million Tajiks out of a total Tajik population of 7.7 million are migrant workers in Russia. The ratio of migrant workers to the total population is lower in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but still sizeable. The net effect of this labor migration is to mitigate economic push factors for VE/I.

Not all Central Asian migration, though, is to Russia. Moreover, labor migration to Russia need not always have a moderating effect on VE/I. Central Asians, as the IMU and Jund al-Khilafah cases illustrate, can migrate to Peshawar just as they can migrate to Saint Petersburg. And even if a Central Asian labor migrant chooses Saint Petersburg over Peshawar, he may be as likely to be exposed to extremist ideologies in Russia as he is in Pakistan. Ultimately, what is most important in assessing the net causal effect of migration on VE/I is identifying the reason for migration. If the reason for migration is economic, as it appears to be for most Central Asian migrants, then the resolution of economic grievances that migration allows works to mitigate a critical push factor of VE/I. If, on the other hand, the reason for migration is religion related, if migration is motivated by perceived restrictions on religious freedom such as the restrictions the founders of the IMU and Jund al-Khilafah felt, then migration may be conducive to VE/I. For the vast majority of Central Asians, economics is the driver of migration. As such, as long as Russia continues to absorb Central Asian workers, the net effect of transnational migration will be to mitigate the likelihood of VE/I in the future.

Transnational Crime

Heroin and other opiates, as Roberts notes in his risk assessment of VE/I in Kyrgyzstan, are transported through Central Asia en route to markets in Russia and Europe. Knowledge of the degree and extent of Central Asian involvement in this narcotics trade, as Roberts also notes, is limited. As a result, it is difficult to conclude what, if any effect drug trafficking may have on VE/I in Central Asia. What we can determine with some confidence is what the contours of drug trafficking related- or, for that matter, any transnational crime-related VE/I would be. Social scientist who have researched economic-related VE/I have found that such VE/I may be violent but almost always is fleeting. Drug lords can buy the temporary allegiance of young men. But if these men do not believe in the cause for which they are being paid to fight, they quickly lose interest in sustained violence.¹⁶

This pattern of violence does coincide with cases of Central Asian VE/I where transnational narcotics trafficking allegedly has played a role: in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 and in Tajikistan in July 2012. Section I of this report advanced the hypothesis that the interethnic riots that took place in Osh and Jalal Abad in June 2010 were sparked by a new and weak interim government's attempt to dismantle deeply institutionalized patronage networks linked to the ousted president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Other scholars agree with this analysis but suggest that, were it not for the intervention of well-heeled drug syndicates, that the southern politicians would not have been able to instigate the June 2010 violence. Thus, the International Crisis Group reports:

Southern politicians saw the overthrow of President Bakiyev, a southerner, on 7 April that year as another move by northerners to weaken their position. Organised crime groups, including those involved in the exceedingly lucrative drug trade, saw a chance to consolidate their power and support the emergence of well-inclined politicians. These factors played into the hands of southern political leaders, who were angered at the removal of one of their own from the presidency and keen to obtain their share of economic and political power under the new dispensation.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South," March 29, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/222-kyrgyzstan-widening-ethnic-divisions-in-the-south.aspx>.

The illegal trafficking of commodities has also been advanced as a cause of the July 2012 Khorog violence in Tajikistan. As summarized in section one of this report, the Khorog violence began when central government troops were sent to GBAO to capture the killers of President Rahmon's military commander in the region, General Nazarov. Knowledge of the incident that sparked General Nazarov's death is murky. A story that one frequently hears in Khorog, though, is that Nazarov was a casualty of Dushanbe's attempt to reassert its control over lucrative illicit commodity flows – including narcotics trafficking – coming across the Tajik-Afghan border. The economic rents from this trafficking at the time were thought to be accruing to a local strongman, Tolib Ayombekov. Nazarov was tasked with regaining these rents for the central government. Ayombekov's supporters, the story that circulates in Khorog goes, killed Nazarov for this overstep and then again responded with force when Dushanbe escalated its response through the dispatching of central government soldiers.¹⁸

Notably, in both the southern Kyrgyz and the Khorog cases, the violence that followed contestation of criminal commodity flows was fleeting. This, again, is what we would expect from economically-motivated VE/I. True believers are capable of sustained violence. Mercenaries, in contrast, would rather avoid the personal risks that sustained violence entails. Importantly, while the patterns of violence we see in the June 2010 southern Kyrgyz conflict and the July 2012 Khorog conflict are what we would anticipate they would be if these conflicts were crime motivated, does not mean that these conflicts were, in fact, the product of struggles over transnational crime networks. In short, this pattern is consistent with the transnational crime hypothesis but does not conclusively prove its veracity.

Ethno-nationalist Secession and “Ungoverned” Border Areas

The need for this caveat becomes apparent when one considers competing causal explanations for the June 2010 southern Kyrgyz violence and July 2012 Khorog violence: the perceived threat of ethno-nationalist secession. Southern Kyrgyzstan and Khorog are home to sizeable minority populations whom titular populations perceive as harboring secessionist leanings. This titular fear of secessionism is all the more pressing because the Pamiri population in Khorog (and GBAO generally) and the ethnic Uzbek population in southern Kyrgyzstan have consistently pressed the central Tajik and Kyrgyz governments for greater autonomy. Moreover, many Tajiks and Kyrgyz believe these minority populations have viable secessionist strategies: GBAO's Pamirs could unite with Pamiris living on the other side of the Panj river in Afghanistan and ethnic Uzbeks living in southern Kyrgyzstan could lobby for the militarily much more powerful government in Tashkent to reassert its claim to the historically Uzbek cities of Osh and Jalal Abad.

Most Pamiris living in GBAO as well as most Uzbeks living in southern Kyrgyzstan would dispute assertions that they harbor secessionist leanings. The hardships Pamiris face in northern Afghanistan and the challenges Uzbeks must confront on a daily bases in Uzbekistan limit the attractiveness of secessionism for Tajikistan's Pamiris and Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbeks. At the same time, however, Pamiris in GBAO and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan do not hide their desire for greater autonomy. And this desire for greater autonomy lays bare a central challenge that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan both face: the central government's inability to govern border regions. This inability is, in itself, capable of generating VE/I. When this inability to govern intersects with titular populations' perceptions of minority ethnic secessionist claims as well as transnational criminal networks, fleeting bouts of VE/I become all the more probable.

¹⁸ Author interviews in Khorog, Tajikistan, May 2013.

IV. CENTRAL ASIA VE/I RISK ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT RESPONSES

Considerable concern exists, both in the academic and policy communities, that the USG drawdown in Afghanistan might lead to an uptick in VE/I in Central Asia. None of the four VE/I risk assessments written for USAID see the USG-Afghanistan timeline as consequential for VE/I in Central Asia. What is consequential, however, is a different timeline – the growing inevitability of regime change in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as Presidents Nazarbaev and Karimov age out of office.

This timeline holds the potential to take Central Asia in one of three directions. The political elites in the region's two autocratic bulwarks could fracture, much as the political elites in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan fractured in the early 1990s. Were this to happen, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan would likely experience the same capacity-eroding regional and secessionist pressures that have plagued the Tajik and Kyrgyz autocracies for the past two decades.

Alternatively, the Kazakh and Uzbek political elite might unite around a new successor, thus preserving these states' comparative autocratic capacity. This scenario is not without precedent in post-Soviet Central Asia. In Turkmenistan, the one Central Asian country not included in this USAID risk assessment, political elites quickly fell in line behind President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov following the death of Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006.

Lastly, Kazakh and Uzbek political elites might opt for meaningful political reform, choosing the institutionalization of transparent succession mechanisms in an effort to avoid the chaos of Tajik and Kyrgyz politics and the opaque uncertainty of Turkmen politics. This, admittedly, is the least likely of the three scenarios outlined here. It would be the scenario, however, in which already low levels of VE/I in these two countries could be reduced even further.

As unlikely as meaningful political reform might be in Central Asia, it nevertheless is an objective worthy of continued USG development support. Political scientists fiercely debate the processes that are thought to lead to democratic change. Some argue that democratization occurs only with economic growth, and that it is unrealistic to expect meaningful liberalization in economically poor Central Asia.¹⁹ Others argue that democracy can emerge in the absence of wealth as long as key elites work tirelessly to promote political reform.²⁰ Few political scientists would dispute, however, that efforts to promote domestic constituencies inclined toward democracy increases the potential for political liberalization in the long term. As such, the USG would do well to deepen its support for political party development, backing of anti-corruption watchdog groups, and expansion of access to information and information communication technologies, programming that in other post-Soviet contexts has encouraged processes of political liberalization.

Importantly though, given that political liberalization may be slow to come to Central Asia, the USG would do well to prioritize several of the immediate development responses prioritized in the four Central Asian VE/I risk assessments. These development responses are tailored to the differing natures of VE/I in Central Asian countries. Thus, as Roberts concludes for the Kyrgyz case, development responses that focus on mitigating ethno-nationalism should be emphasized: “given that ethnic nationalism is the one ideology that has proven capable of mobilizing citizens both

¹⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 69–105, doi:10.2307/1951731; Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 54 (2002): 212–244.

politically and violently in Kyrgyzstan to date, serious thought needs to go into how a development response can counteract its rapid growth in the country today.” In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, USG development responses might productively focus on civil society groups as well as political elites working to expand religious freedoms. Expanding religious freedoms, even in the context of continued corrupt patronage politics, will limit the attractiveness of militant Islamism. Finally, as noted in the study of VE/I in Kazakhstan, USG development responses would do well to aid the promising but still inchoate institutionalization of state-society mechanisms for the resolution of labor disputes.

Maintaining focus on these admittedly more modest development responses does not mean the USG need abandon support for more ambitious political reform in Central Asia. The potential for meaningful political reform, particularly for meaningful political reform in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, is greater today than it has ever been in the post-Soviet period. Were political reform to occur, many of the state-level drivers of VE/I—denial of political rights and civil liberties, violations of human rights, government corruption—would fade in significance.

Critically, however, what might not disappear so quickly are the country-specific, individual-level drivers of VE/I, the gravitation among some groups in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan toward Islamism, the ethnic tensions of *longue durée* in Kyrgyzstan, and the economic and labor disputes that have periodically erupted in Kazakhstan. Indeed, as Kyrgyzstan’s current tentative steps toward democracy illustrate, individual-level drivers of VE/I may become, in the short run, more salient as competitive elections provide new platforms for the public expression of extremist ideologies. Given this challenging reality, the potentially exacerbating short run effects political liberalization can have on VE/I must remain at the fore of all USG development responses in Central Asia.

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