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VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY IN KAZAKHSTAN: A RISK ASSESSMENT

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CONTENTS

Acronyms	i
Map	ii
I. Background: Homegrown or Imported Violent Extremism?	1
II. Patterns of Violent Extremism and Insurgency	2
Ethno-Nationalist Violence.....	2
Economic Violence	6
Violent Islamist Extremism.....	8
III. Current and Prospective Drivers of VE/I in Kazakhstan	10
Individual-Level Drivers of VE/I.....	10
Group-Level Drivers of VE/I.....	11
Political and Societal Level Drivers of VE/I.....	11
Scenarios for Future VE/I in Kazakhstan.....	12
IV. Potential USG Responses	14
Promoting Police Reforms to Mitigate the Potential for Ethno-Nationalist Violence	14
Institutionalizing Mechanisms for the Resolution of Labor Disputes.....	15
Encouraging the Reform and Reorientation of State-Sanctioned Religious Institutions.....	15
Encouraging Transparent Succession Mechanisms	16
Annex A: Works Cited.....	17

ACRONYMS

OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
VE/I	Violent Extremism and Insurgency

MAP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws on and synthesizes published sources to assess the current and prospective risk of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Uzbekistan. It does not attempt to offer an in-depth analysis of VE/I in Uzbekistan, but rather seeks to provide an overview of key drivers, mitigants and trends in order to inform future USG policies and programs. The framework used for this assessment is based on the Guide to Drivers of Violent Extremism, produced for USAID by Management Systems International (MSI).

Context: State-society violence is present in Kazakhstan and has assumed one of three forms: ethno-nationalist violence, economic violence, and violent Islamist extremism.

Ethno-nationalist violence between Kazakhs and Russians intermittently strained the Kazakh polity from the late Soviet period through the mid-2000s but has shifted in recent years from ethnic Russians to ethnic Chechens and Uyghurs. Succession struggles are conducive to ethno-nationalist violence and potentially generative of more sustained violent extremism and insurgency. If Kazakhstan's transition to a post-Nazarbaev government is well-managed, the threat of ethno-nationalist violence will remain low. If, on the other hand, Kazakhstan's approaching succession is bungled, the resulting atmosphere of political instability has the potential to transform incipient ethno-nationalist tensions into deadly ethno-nationalist violence. Importantly, however, this violence most likely would be fleeting in nature.

Economic violence, foreshadowed by protests in the 1990s, manifested during the Zhanozen clash between oil workers and state security forces in December 2011. Income inequality has also increased markedly since the Soviet collapse. Kazakh citizens living in the country's two political and economic capitals—Astana and Almaty—have fared well. Kazakhs living in the regions, however, have seen their living standards steadily erode. Perhaps not surprisingly then, it is here in the regions, where perceptions of income inequality have generated almost all of Kazakhstan's economic unrest in the form of large scale strikes, primarily in the extractive industries. Although intransigence on the part of the state to resolve these strikes could result in a recurrence of economic violence, the government seems to have learned its lesson and recent strikes have been peacefully resolved in favor of labor. Labor unrest in the extractive industries still holds the potential to generate violence. Kazakhstan's battle-hardened unionized workers may be prove valuable assets for power-hungry political elites in the coming struggle to succeed Nazarbaev.

Violent Islamist extremism is a new development in Kazakh state-society relations. The perception of Islamist militancy as being other countries' problem suddenly disappeared in 2011 when a series of attacks occurred in Kazakhstan. Whereas in the past Islamist extremism in Kazakhstan was characterized by a handful of militants using Kazakhstan as a staging ground for attacks against other governments, the 2011 incidents of Islamist extremism appear to be the work of Kazakh Islamists working from safe havens abroad. As is the case with Kazakhstan's economic-based violence, so too is it possible to imagine a case where Islamist extremism is marshaled as a political tool in Kazakhstan's looming succession struggle.

Current Risk: Although drivers of violence and extremism have been present, albeit to varying degrees, in Kazakhstan for several decades, only on a few occasions has violence actually occurred. This infrequency of violence suggests that the drivers that are present in Kazakhstan may be necessary but not sufficient causes of VE/I. When violence has occurred in Kazakhstan, it typically is the product of an interaction of causes – of constant drivers interacting with contingent triggers—a barroom brawl, police overreach by a police force that is almost exclusively ethnic Kazakh in composition, political decisions that are tone-deaf to public sentiment. Nevertheless, it is easy to see

how a poorly managed transition from the Nazarbaev government could result in escalation of these tensions into widespread violence.

Future Risk: The collapse of one party rule elsewhere in Central Asia has enabled devastating violence and extremism. The longer the Nazarbaev government clings to power without articulating a clear and transparent succession policy, the greater the likelihood for violence and extremism will become. Nazarbaev has long banked on his and his affiliated parties' dominance in politics. Would-be challengers, understanding that a large political machine backed Nazarbaev, were reluctant to challenge the president. This institutional reality, a legacy Nazarbaev inherited from the late Soviet period, ensured high degrees of elite loyalty. Critically though, elite loyalty to a long-serving ruler wanes as the ruler's vitality fades.

This aging autocrat dynamic is conducive to increased violence and extremism in three ways. First, imperiled autocrats like Nazarbaev begin to view groups – political and economic elites, labor activists, religious leaders – as potential threats and respond these perceived threats through increasingly repressive policies and legislation. Second, the aging autocratic dynamic erodes the cohesive glue of single party systems. Third, with the cohesive glue of the single party eroding, autocratic leaders begin to lose control over political and economic elites, elites who owe their comparative good fortune to Nazarbaev but who now see Nazarbaev as being on the equivalent of political life-support. These elites, freed from the President and the single party, begin to build their own networks in central government ministries, in regional administrations, in the economy and in the media, networks that can be readily mobilized when Nazarbaev's life-support begins to fail.

However, even if Kazakhstan were to see a managed succession, endemic corruption and widely held feelings of economic inequality will continue to incline some disaffected Kazakhstanis toward VE/I for the indefinite future.

Implications for the USG: Fortunately, VE/I in Kazakhstan has been rare and, in most cases where violence has occurred, drivers are readily identifiable. As such, it is possible to identify a variety of ways that the US Government could further mitigate the risk of VE/I in Tajikistan. These are outlined below:

- *Promoting police reform to mitigate the potential for ethno-nationalist violence:* The Kazakh police force has become increasingly mono-ethnic in the years since Soviet independence. The Kazakh government has partnered with the OSCE in a reform initiative. This initiative is one that can benefit from the U.S. Government's considerable experience with police reform in ethnically heterogeneous communities in the United States as well as the USG's experience partnering with foreign governments to further police reform in similarly ethnically heterogeneous societies abroad.
- *Institutionalizing mechanisms for labor disputes:* The USG, along with U.S. non-governmental organizations such as the Solidarity Center, have extensive experience working both in the U.S. and internationally to improve the tripartite relationship among labor, business, and governments. Such efforts can productively be expanded in Kazakhstan.
- *Encouraging the reform and reorientation of State-sanctioned religious institutions:* The USG and U.S. NGOs, together with the Kazakh government can work with the Spiritual Association of Muslims and the State Committee on Religious Affairs, to reorient these bureaucracies' missions away from monitoring and control and toward what ultimately is a more stabilizing goal: the promotion of interfaith understanding.
- *Encouraging transparent succession mechanisms:* Finally, at the diplomatic level, the USG can and should explore ways of engaging the Nazarbaev government on the issue of how to institutionalize transparent and meaningful succession mechanisms. USG efforts to get the Nazarbaev government to resolve this uncertainty would help mitigate potential political instability that can give rise to VE/I.

Summary Assessment of VE/I Risks in Kazakhstan

Key factors	Assessment	Explanatory note
1. Current level of VE/I activity	<p>Acts of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Kazakhstan are rare but not entirely absent. Intermittent and poorly organized acts of VE/I have increased in recent years.</p>	<p>Islamist VE/I, despite many scholars' predictions to the opposite, was entirely absent during Kazakhstan's first two decades of independence. The past two years, however, have seen an uptick in Islamist extremism.</p>
2. Overall capacity of state and society to respond to VE/I	<p>-The government uses sophisticated media campaigns to discourage dissent and extremism. In select cases the government has also used force and prosecution to repress dissent. The government also closely manages the practice of Islam.</p> <p>-The persuasive capacity of media campaigns as well as the government's repressive capacity, may weaken if the Nazarbaev government fails to address the growing challenge of leadership succession.</p>	<p>The "Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan" monitors the practice of Islam and enforces conformity that dovetails closely with "moderate" and "traditional" Islam the Nazarbaev government welcomes. A religious law passed in 2011 puts in place stringent mandatory registration requirements on missionaries and religious groups and gives the government broad grounds to deny religious groups legal status.</p>
3. Likely trajectory of VE/I over next 3 to 5 years	<p>The likelihood of a significant and sustained VE/I is low. But intermittent, ad hoc VE/I is likely to continue until Kazakhstan's political succession is resolved.</p>	<p>-Some observers point to a growth in Islamic militancy among young men.</p> <p>- The limited nature of Uyghur and Chechen violent extremism to date suggests that those within these diaspora communities who do become radicalized are more the exception than the rule.</p>
4. Nature of the threat posed by VE/I	<p>- In the absence of a legitimate succession process, aspiring political elites may mobilize violent extremism to undermine the Nazarbaev government and further their political ambitions.</p> <p>-The presence in Kazakhstan of Uyghur and Chechen extremists could damage Kazakhstan's foreign relations.</p>	<p>The absence of a transparent regime transition mechanism erodes political elite loyalty and thereby raises the likelihood of political infighting and instability. Violent extremists may seek to capitalize on this instability and weakened government capacity to advance militant Islamist as well as other extremist agendas.</p>
5. Implications for USG policies and programs	<p>The actual and prospective threat posed by VE/I does not warrant a major reorientation of USAID's strategy or programs. However, to further mitigate the risk of VE/I the USG could consider supporting police reform, improving labor dispute mechanisms, promoting reform of state-sanctioned religious institutions, and encouraging transparent and meaningful succession mechanisms.</p>	

I. BACKGROUND: HOMEGROWN OR IMPORTED VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

Acts of violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) in Kazakhstan are rare but not entirely absent. The probability of serious and sustained VE/I is low. Critically however, acts of Islamist extremism have occurred in recent years. Moreover, ethno-nationalist and economic tensions have periodically led to violent conflict. While these incidents of violent conflict fall short of extremism and insurgency, the grievances that produce ethno-nationalist and economic violence can also generate violent extremism. The potential for intermittent outbreaks of Islamist extremism and ethno-nationalist and economic violence, this report finds, will continue until the uncertainty surrounding Kazakhstan's imminent regime transition is resolved—either through the death of the increasingly frail President, Nursultan Nazarbaev, or through the institutionalization of a transition mechanism that clarifies how Nazarbaev's successor will be chosen. Moreover, even if Kazakhstan were to see a managed succession, endemic corruption and widely held feelings of economic inequality will continue to incline some disaffected Kazakhstanis toward VE/I for the indefinite future.

State-society violence in Kazakhstan has assumed three forms: 1) ethno-nationalist violence, 2) economic violence, and 3) violent Islamist extremism. Ethno-nationalist violence intermittently strained the Kazakh polity from the late Soviet period through the mid-2000s. Acts of ethno-nationalist violence, curiously though, have faded in recent years. Economic violence, foreshadowed by protests in the 1990s, became deadly manifest during the Zhanozen clash between oil workers and state security forces in December 2011. Violent Islamist extremism, despite many scholars' predictions to the opposite, was entirely absent during Kazakhstan's first two decades of independence.¹

The majority of ethnic Kazakhs, as is the case with the most ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen, are Sunni Muslims who follow the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence. Sovietologists like Michael Rywkin and Alexandre Bennigsen argued that this Sunni identity, with the easing of Moscow's restrictions on religion beginning in the late 1970s, was becoming more developed and potentially more antagonistic to Communist rule. The reality, however, is that even into the mid-1990s, the majority of ethnic Kazakhs did not self-identify as being a member of any specific religion.² In a survey the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) conducted in 1996, for example, only thirty-three percent of ethnic Kazakhs reported that they were members of a religion. Interest in Islam, importantly, has increased over the past two decades. In a 2008 NSF-supported survey conducted with colleagues at the University of Washington, ninety-one percent of ethnic Kazakhs reported they were Muslim.³ Care, though, should be taken when interpreting Kazakhs' increased self-identification as Muslim. For example, results from Pew's 2012 survey on religious beliefs show that "in only two of the 38 countries where the question was asked – Albania (45%) and Kazakhstan (41%) do fewer than half of Muslims link morality to faith."⁴ In this same

¹ Many scholars saw Central Asian Islam as inimical to Soviet-style autocratic rule and anticipated an Islamist uprising would destabilize the USSR. Central See, for example: Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia*, Rev. ed (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1990); Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). Central Asians, paradoxically, proved among the least reluctant to abandon the USSR. This reluctance to challenge autocratic rule has continued for most of the post-Soviet period, with the exception of the lone wolf Islamist acts I discuss here.

² The IFES 1996 Kazakh survey included 1,500 respondents, of which 631 were ethnic Kazakhs.

³ Our NSF 2008 survey included 1,000 respondents, 444 of which were ethnic Kazakhs.

⁴ *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (Pew Research Center, April 30, 2013), 24, http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf.

survey, only ten percent of Kazakh Muslim respondents said they were in “favor of making sharia the official law in their country,” this compared to thirty-five percent of Kyrgyz and twenty-seven percent of Tajik respondents.⁵ In sum, although there has been a marked increase in Kazakhs self-identifying as Muslim, the overwhelming majority of this increase in Islamic identity appears to be moderate in orientation. That said, as this report documents, the past two years, have seen a noticeable uptick in Islamist extremism.

These diverging patterns—decreasing ethno-nationalist violence, increasing economic violence, and increasing Islamist extremism—are examined in Section II of this study. Section III investigates the drivers of VE/I in Kazakhstan and, more specifically, asks if the violence we see in Kazakhstan is “homegrown” and therefore amenable to developmental intervention, or if rather this violence represents a “spillover” from regions abroad, for example, from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Xinjiang and Chechnya. To foreshadow this report’s conclusion, available data suggests that, while perpetrators of violence, particularly alleged Islamist militants, may draw inspiration from groups abroad, the drivers of VE/I are firmly rooted in the Kazakh polity. Building on this finding, Section IV concludes with a discussion of potential development responses to VE/I in Kazakhstan.

II. PATTERNS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND INSURGENCY

President Nazarbaev frequently emphasizes the peacefully inclusive nature of the Kazakh polity. Indeed, it is this inclusiveness that Nazarbaev credits for Kazakhstan’s comparatively smooth post-Soviet transition: “Kazakhstan has overcome hardships of the transitional period and has taken the path towards development thanks to the unity of our multiethnic nation, genuine friendship between nationalities and stability.”⁶ Nazarbaev’s belief in the unity and stability of the Kazakh polity is understandable; protest is infrequent and violent extremism and insurgency (VE/I) is lower in Kazakhstan than anywhere else in Central Asia. Incidents of violence, nevertheless, have occurred in the past and are occurring today with slightly greater frequency than they have in the past. It is too early to determine if this uptick in violence represents a new trend line. Critically however, understanding past patterns in VE/I can help Kazakhstan and its international partners devise potential development responses should recent patterns continue into the future.

Ethno-Nationalist Violence

Paradoxically, despite Nazarbaev’s emphasis on “genuine friendship between nationalities,” the Kazakh president used ethno-nationalism to engineer his own political ascent. In the summer of 1986, Nazarbaev, then chairman of the Kazakh SSR Council of Ministers, berated his superior, Kazakh first secretary Dinmukhamed Kunaev, for the soviet republic’s “stagnation” and for “violations in the selection, placement and upbringing of cadres.”⁷ Nazarbaev’s denouncement was effective; in December 1986 Kunaev, who had been Kazakh first secretary since 1971, was dismissed. To Nazarbaev’s likely dismay, however, Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian, was named as Kunaev’s replacement.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ “Ethnic Accord Is Driving Force Behind Kazakhstan’s Progress, Nazarbaev,” *Kazakhstan General Newswire*, July 8, 2008.

⁷ “Speech by Comrade N. A. Nazarbayev, Chairman of the Kazakh Republic Council of Ministers,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 38, no. 15 (May 14, 1986).

On December 17, 1986, 10,000 protestors gathered in Brezhnev square in Alma-Ata, the Kazakh republic capital, to demand Kolbin's replacement with an ethnic Kazakh. Reflecting on the first secretary succession in his 1991 memoir, Nazarbaev acknowledged his central role in the 1986 protests:

When the protestors on the square began to surge toward the city, I realized I had to make one of two choices: either I would have to take action or I would have to [leave the square and] return to the Central Committee building. The second alternative seemed to me to be an unforgivable treason to my people—they were right! I set off with them at the head of the column.⁸

Not highlighted in Nazarbaev's memoir was the violence that accompanied the protests. Accounts diverge as to which side – the 10,000 predominantly Kazakh protestors or the 50,000 army troops and special forces Gorbachev mobilized to suppress the uprising – initiated the violence. Also not addressed is the widely shared belief among many Kazakhs that Nazarbaev did not lead the protests, but rather, was complicit in the repression of the December 1986 ethno-nationalist uprising. What is clear is that the conflict was deadly. The Soviet media reported one Kazakh and two Russians died in the violence.⁹ Other reports place the death toll at 168, of which 155 were protestors.¹⁰

Given this historical context of ethno-nationalist violence, it is understandable that Kazakh – Russian tensions remained high in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Russian separatist movements, real and imagined, receive frequent coverage in the Kazakh press. In September 1990, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published an essay in the Soviet paper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, demanding that northern Kazakhstan, at the time populated predominantly by ethnic Russians, be incorporated into a new Slavic state.¹¹ Solzhenitsyn's words have continued to reverberate in the Kazakh collective consciousness. In 1996 several prominent Kazakh writers, citing the 1990 Solzhenitsyn essay, insisted *Komsomolskaya Pravda* cease printing in Kazakhstan. The writers' demands resonated with Kazakhstan's prosecutor-general, who agreed that *Komsomolskaya Pravda*'s running of the Solzhenitsyn article was "gross intervention in the internal affairs of an independent state."¹²

Three years later, Kazakh fears of Russian separatism allegedly almost came to fruition. On November 23, 2000, 22 ethnic Russians were arrested in Ust-Kamenogorsk, a Kazakh city 50 miles from the Russian border.¹³ The Russians were charged with planning to take over the city's administrative buildings with the goal of inciting an ethnic Russian uprising and, ultimately, the establishment of an independent state, "Rusland."¹⁴ This objective might appear far-fetched today. At the time, however, Russia maintained a sizeable military presence throughout Central Asia and the idea of a greater Rusland resonated not only with the Ust-Kamenogorsk ethnic Russians, but with the Russian military personnel stationed abroad. In the parliamentary elections of 1999, Vladimir Zhirinovsky's bloc, pledging to return Russia to greatness and restore lands lost to Kazakhstan following the 1991 collapse of the USSR, polled very well and was often the second most popular party (Yeltsin's Unity party understandably polled highest) among soldiers serving in Central Asia.¹⁵ Zhirinovsky's comments about Kazakhstan—he once reflected on the country in an interview

⁸ Nursultan Nazarbaev, *Nursultan Nazarbaev: Bez Pravykh i Levikh* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1991), 180.

⁹ Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: A Look Back at the Zheltoksan Protest a Quarter-Century Ago," *EurasiaNet*, December 16, 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64721>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Francis X. Clines, "Russia Gets Call By Solzhenitsyn For Slavic State," *New York Times*.

¹² Claire Bigg, "Solzhenitsyn Leaves Troubled Legacy Across Former Soviet Union," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 6, 2008.

¹³ "Kazakh Prosecutor Says Law Will Be Observed in Alleged 'Uprising' Case," *Khabar TV*, November 24, 1999.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Vladimir Mukhin, "Russian Servicemen Got Their Orders to Vote for Unity - So They Did. Those Who Didn't Voted for Zhirinovsky," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 27, 1999.

with *Ekho Moskvy*, “there is nothing at all there in that south Siberian steppe. It [Kazakhstan] was just something Stalin thought up.”—have so irked the Nazarbaev government that the Kazakh Foreign Ministry declared the Russian politician *persona non grata*.¹⁶

The Russian separatist threat emerged once more in the Kazakh press, in May 2001, when the colorful leader of the (Russia based) National Bolshevik Party, Eduard Limonov, was jailed in Barnaul, a Russian city 160 miles north of the Kazakh border. Although Kazakh authorities were quick to claim their own security forces had no involvement in Limonov’s detention, Limonov’s alleged objective—the instigation of “an armed uprising in Kazakhstan”—was front-page news in the Kazakh press.¹⁷

Discussion of ethno-nationalist Russian separatism, let alone alleged events of Russian ethno-nationalist violence, has all but disappeared from the Kazakh media over the past decade. This easing of fears surrounding potentially violent Russian ethno-nationalist conflict may in part be the result of changing demographics in Kazakhstan. In the 1989 Soviet census, ethnic Russians constituted thirty-six percent of the Kazakh Republic’s population. In the 2009 census, the Russian proportion of the Kazakh population dropped to twenty-four percent. Much of this drop can be attributed to emigration. Dissatisfied ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, in short, have an easy out; they can move to Russia. And many Russians who remain in Kazakhstan are thriving. A review of the Forbes “50 Most Wealthy People in Kazakhstan” reveals that Russian ethnic identity is by no means an insurmountable barrier to amassing phenomenal wealth in Kazakhstan.¹⁸

Although Kazakh – Russian ethno-nationalist tensions have steadily declined, periodic violent conflict perpetrated either by or against other ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan remains a possibility. Minority groups that do not have easy exit options – ethnic Chechens and Uyghurs most notably – have come into violent conflict with the ethnic Kazakh majority. Although it is only recently, in the wake of the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings committed by the Tsarnaev brothers, that the international media began investigating links between violent extremism and the Chechen diaspora in Kazakhstan, many ethnic Kazakhs have long viewed Chechens with heightened and, perhaps, unwarranted suspicion. This suspicion is likely what led to the deadly escalation of a March 2007 barroom brawl in which an ethnic Chechen shot and wounded a Kazakh in Malovodnoye, a village in southern Kazakhstan. In retribution for the shooting, a crowd of 50 Kazakhs attacked Chechens living in the neighboring settlement of Kazatkom. Five Chechens were killed and four more were hospitalized as a result of the violence.¹⁹

Kazakhstan’s ethnic Uyghurs are similarly viewed with considerable suspicion. Importantly, state suspicion of Uyghurs appears to be a relatively recent development. One is hard-pressed to find press accounts on violent Uyghur nationalism prior to the 2000s. In September 2000 two Kazakh policemen were killed and the Kazakh state media attributed these deaths to militants from the “Uyghur Liberation Organization,” a group seeking full political autonomy for Uyghurs living across the Kazakh border in Xinjiang, China.²⁰ Later in the decade Uyghur-Kazakh relations were further strained when Uyghur activists in Almaty organized several public events to commemorate the 129 people who died in violent clashes with ethnic Han Chinese in the July 2009 Urumqi, China ethnic riots. While Kazakh authorities allowed a 5,000-strong July 20 memorial service, two weeks after the Urumqi conflict, the Kazakh government prevented leaders of the Uyghur diaspora from holding an

¹⁶ “Kazakhstan Declares Russian Nationalist Lawmaker Persona Non Grata,” Associated Press, February 10, 2005.

¹⁷ “Kazakh Security Service Denies Involvement in Arrest of Russian Writer,” *Ekspress-K*, April 29, 2001.

¹⁸ “50 Самых Богатых Людей Казахстана,” www.forbes.kz, accessed July 17, 2013, http://forbes.kz/leader/50_samyih_bogatyih_lyudey_kazahstana.

¹⁹ “Kazakhstan: Deadly Melee Leaves Unanswered Questions,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, April 2, 2007.

²⁰ “Kazakh Police Want Tougher Visa Regime with Kyrgyzstan over Uyghur Murder Case” (Kazakh Commercial Television, September 26, 2000), <http://www.lexisnexis.com.mutex.gmu.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

August photo exhibit documenting the deadly July violence.²¹ And if the Uyghur diaspora had any doubts as to where the Kazakh state's loyalty ultimately lied, these were dispelled in May, 2011, when Kazakhstan deported Ershidin Israil, a Uyghur refugee who had witnessed the 2009 Urumqi violence, to China. Israil had been granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This status was ultimately revoked, however, when the Kazakh government agreed to China's Interpol request to detain Israil on terrorism charges.²² Kazakhstan's changing approach to Uyghur nationalism, perhaps not coincidentally, parallels Astana's improving relationship with Beijing. By the late 1990s Kazakhstan and China resolved what were occasionally tense negotiations over the border demarcation between the two countries and had embarked on a new era of mutually beneficial oil and gas development projects.

Ethno-nationalist tensions persist in Kazakhstan. Many Kazakhs were surprised, for example, to learn that leaflets in support of the Tsarnaev brothers were posted in the oil boomtown, Atyrau. Some have even speculated about the potential for transcontinental Chechen violent extremism with roots in Kazakhstan.²³ What the consequences of these persisting tensions will be, however, is difficult to predict. Disaffected Uyghurs and Chechens, in contrast to Kazakhstan's ethnic Russians, do not have attractive emigration options. Just the opposite, for some members of these diaspora communities, enduring conflicts in distant homelands provide impetus for radicalization and dim hopes for refuge. The limited nature of Uyghur and Chechen violence to date, however, suggests that those within these diaspora communities who do become radicalized are more the exception than the rule. We might expect this trend to continue were it not for one looming development in Kazakh politics – the change in Kazakh leadership that will be inevitable in the next few years. As the 1986 Kazakh protests and, more recently, the deadly ethnic riots that accompanied the chaotic 2010 transfer of power in Kyrgyzstan suggest, succession struggles are conducive to ethno-nationalist violence and potentially generative of more sustained violent extremism and insurgency. If Kazakhstan's transition to a post-Nazarbaev government is well-managed, the threat of ethno-nationalist violence will remain low.

If, on the other hand, Kazakhstan's approaching succession is bungled, the resulting atmosphere of political instability has the potential to transform incipient ethno-nationalist tensions into deadly ethno-nationalist violence. Importantly, however, this violence most likely would be fleeting in nature. Here the Kyrgyz case is instructive. During the initial political instability that followed the ousting of President Bakiev in April 2010, eleven ethnic Uyghurs and Dungans were hospitalized as a result of short lived and small scale ethnic violence in the northern Kyrgyz city, Tokmok.²⁴ Like Kyrgyzstan's Uyghurs and Dungans, Kazakhstan's Uyghurs and Chechens represent such a small percentage (1.5 percent and 0.1 percent respectively) of the total Kazakh population that sustained, mass scale ethnic violence is unlikely.²⁵ Perhaps more likely would be conflict between largely Russian speaking ethnic Kazakhs living in urban areas and the Kazakh-speaking population who, historically, have lived in rural areas but who, in recent years, have migrated in increasing numbers to the cities. The Kazakh scholar, Nurbulat Masanov, for example, has gone as far as to question "what urbanized Russophone ethnic Kazakhs actually have in common with their rural Kazakh speaking counterparts."²⁶ The convulsions of political instability in Kyrgyzstan have occurred between

²¹ "Uyghurs in Kazakhstan Rally Against China Crackdown," AKpress, July 20, 2009; "Kazakh Officials Ban Uyghur Photo Exhibit On China Clashes," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, August 21, 2009.

²² "Kazakhstan Deports Uighur Back to China," Agence France Presse, June 7, 2011.

²³ "Leaflets Supporting Boston Suspects Appear in Kazakhstan," RIA Novosti, May 15, 2013.

²⁴ "Dungans, Uyghurs Attacked In Northern Kyrgyz Town," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, April 9, 2010.

²⁵ *Results of the 2009 National Population Census of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (Astana: The Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011), 24.

²⁶ Nurbulat Masanov, "Perceptions of Ethnic and All-national Identity in Kazakhstan," (2000), cited in: Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, *State-building, Identity and Nationalism in Kazakhstan: Some Preliminary Thoughts*, Working

urbanized and Russo-fied northern Kyrgyz political elites and southern political elites representing rural, Kyrgyz-speaking populations. It is reasonable to anticipate that, if Kazakhstan's succession challenge is not resolved in the near future, here too the Kazakh polity might follow the Kyrgyz example.

Economic Violence

In December 2011 striking oil workers in Zhanaozen, a city in western Kazakhstan, clashed with Kazakh police. Seventeen people died and another 100 suffered injuries as a result of the violence.²⁷ The Kazakh government has acknowledged that police overreacted when dispersing the Zhanaozen protesters. Five police officers received prison sentences of five to seven years for the use of excessive force.²⁸

Notably though, while the government has acknowledged the excessive use of force, Kazakh authorities maintain that the Zhanaozen police were baited by the disorderly and destructive oil strikers. The day of the clash, December 16, coincided with Kazakh Independence Day. Zhanaozen's central square had been filled with celebratory yurts and a central stage in advance of the holiday. In video taken just prior to the deadly violence, several dozen protesters can be seen charging and then dismantling central stage, tossing metal barriers, loudspeakers and, at one point, a guard, from the structure.

The Kazakh prosecutor's office claims that the violence was far more extensive than that which is visible on the video. Protestors, the prosecutor general's December 16, 2011 report notes, "set fire to, damaged or looted over 125 buildings ... including government and police offices, apartment buildings and stores, cars and ATMs."²⁹ The reliability of the prosecutor general's report, as well as whether or not the violence alleged in this report was premeditated or spontaneous, is unclear. What is clear is that the grievances that led up to the December 16 violence were deep, widespread and enduring.

Thousands of oil workers from three different Kazakh oil companies had been on strike in the seven months preceding the December violence. The strike began as a wage dispute; workers at the three oil companies—Ersai Caspian LLC, KarazhanbasMunai JSC and OzenMunaiGas—sought higher salaries as compensation for dangerous working conditions. Notably, economic tensions at the oil companies coincided with sub ethnic identity divides between workers and management. The workers at these three oil companies are almost all members of the local Adai "clan" whereas there "were virtually no Adai in the managements" of the oil companies.³⁰ The shared common identity among the workers facilitated collective action. This, combined with the regional government's intolerance of the striking workers, escalated the scope and nature of the strike beyond the original wage dispute. Rather than following International Labour Organisation Conventions, conventions that Kazakhstan has signed on to, the regional government ran roughshod over oil workers' freedoms of association, rights to organize, and collective bargaining rights.³¹ Union activists and

Papers in International Studies (Centre for International Studies, Dublin City University, 2011),
<http://doras.dcu.ie/16243/1/1101.pdf>.

²⁷ Bureau of Public Affairs Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, *2012 Human Rights Reports: Kazakhstan*, Report (Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs., April 19, 2013), kazakhstan], <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2012/sca/204402.htm>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Заявление Генерального Прокурора Республики Казахстан По Событиям, Имевшим Место в Г. Жанаозен 16.12.2011 Года," <http://prokuror.gov.kz/eng/node/3657>.

³⁰ Elena Kostyuchenko, "Zhanaozen," *Novaya Gazeta*, December 20, 2011.

³¹ International Labour Organization, "Newsletter: ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team and Country Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia," September 2012.

protesters, moreover, were jailed, fined for holding “illegal strikes,” and, in several cases, attacked by unknown assailants.³²

While the Zhanaozen strike has received considerable international attention, understandably, due to the December 16, 2011 deadly violence, it is important to note that Zhanaozen is not the only case where economic grievances have had the potential to devolve into violence. Income inequality has markedly increased since the Soviet collapse. Kazakh citizens living in the country’s two political and economic capitals—Astana and Almaty—have fared well. Kazakhs living in the regions, however, have seen their living standards steadily erode relative to their Astana and Almaty counterparts.³³ Perhaps not surprisingly then, it is here in the regions, where perceptions of income inequality have generated almost all of Kazakhstan’s economic unrest. In December 1994 over 3,000 coal miners went on strike in Karaganda, the coal mining capital of Kazakhstan. In February 1997 state employees, including 1,500 teachers in Semipalatinsk, went on strike to protest in an effort to secure the \$810 million in wage and pension arrears that the Kazakh government owed.³⁴ And in June 2006, 3,000 workers at the Mittal Steel plant in Temirtau went on strike in the hopes of bumping their salary from \$415 to \$448 dollars a month.³⁵

These strikes share important commonalities: with the exception of the teachers’ protest, all strikes have been centered in the extractive industries; these strikes involve economies that constitute large portions of the Kazakh gross domestic product; and these strikes involve populations that have long been unionized and, as a result, can readily be mobilized. In short, the populations who participate in these strikes enjoy institutionalized and effective mechanisms of mobilization as well as a heightened perception of efficacy. As Kazakh Radio reported in January 1995 the striking coal miners understood their “decision was likely to have ‘negative consequences’ for the Kazakh economy because many industrial plants and power stations were running out of coal.”³⁶ Similarly, the Zhanaozen protesters also understood the debilitating effects of their strike. The work stoppage at KrazhanbasMunai JSC, for example, is estimated to have resulted in a loss in oil production of four thousand tons per day.³⁷

Prior to Zhanaozen, strikes in Kazakhstan’s extractive industries had either resulted in real gains for workers or, at the very least measured and largely amicable discourse between workers, employers and the Kazakh state. The state’s intransigence in the Zhanaozen case – and the Kazakh state notably is heavily invested in two of the three companies targeted in the 2011 oil strike – represents a departure from earlier labor negotiations practices. This departure, this new intransigence, likely contributed to the violence that erupted in Zhanaozen in December 2011. Were the state to remain similarly intransigent in future labor disputes in Kazakhstan’s extractive industries, one might expect economic-based violence to emerge once again. Importantly though, the Nazarbaev government appears to have learned the lesson of Zhanaozen. There have been dozens of strikes since the Zhanaozen unrest, notably strikes by copper miners in Zhezkazgan, steel workers in Temirtau, and coal miners in Karaganda. All of these strikes have been resolved in favor of labor. Critically though, labor unrest in the extractive industries still holds the potential to generate violence. The same organizing principles that make labor so effective in mobilizing strikes can prove effective in competing elites’ efforts to mobilize support in the event of a succession struggle. As Scott Radnitz has demonstrated in the case of the 2005 Kyrgyz “revolution,” competing political elites mobilize

³² For an extensive overview of the challenges and intimidation the oil workers faced, see: *Striking Oil, Striking Workers: Violations of Labor Rights in Kazakhstan’s Oil Sector* (Human Rights Watch, September 2012).

³³ Azamat K. Junisbai, “Understanding Economic Justice Attitudes in Two Countries: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 4 (June 1, 2010): 1697.

³⁴ “Hundreds Join Strike Action in Kazakhstan,” *Agence France Presse*, February 11, 1997.

³⁵ “Mittal Steel Workers Protest Wages in Kazakhstan,” *Agence France Presse*, June 4, 2006.

³⁶ “Kazakh Radio Says Some Striking Miners Returning to Work,” *Kazakh Radio First Program*, January 31, 1995.

³⁷ “More Kazakh Output Lost to Strikes,” *Nefte Compass*, June 23, 2011.

communities united by common economic interests during periods of unrest so as to win state power.³⁸ Oftentimes these communities, as witnessed by the sudden escalation of anti-foreigner sentiments among ethnic Kazakhs working for the Turkish owned Senimdi Kurylys oil contracting company in Atyrau in the summer of 2007, also share ethno-nationalist identities that coincide with powerful economic interests.³⁹ Savvy political elites could readily harness Kazakhstan's battle-hardened unionized workers and the nationalist leanings of many of these workers in the coming struggle to succeed Nazarbaev.

Violent Islamist Extremism

As with the Zhanaozen economic violence, Islamist violent extremism is a new development in Kazakh state-society relations. In contrast to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, where violent Islamist extremism—both real and imagined—often defined the political environment, in Kazakhstan Islamism was thought to be a distant problem, if a problem at all. When discussion of Islamist VE/I did occasionally appear, it was typically in the context of non-titular militants harboring animosities not against the Nazarbaev government, but against the governments in neighboring countries. Thus, in August 2004, the Kazakh National Security Committee acknowledged that it was “investigating several people” whom the Uzbek government believed were involved in a series of deadly bombings in Tashkent earlier in the spring.⁴⁰ And in February 2008, Almaty’s Chief of Police reported that his force had “blocked nine trafficking channels that destabilized security in the Northern Caucasus.”⁴¹

This perception of Islamist militancy as being other countries’ problem suddenly disappeared in 2011. In May a suicide bomber injured three people outside Aktobe’s police headquarters.⁴² In July, one policeman and nine militants died in a gun battle in Kenkiyak, a village in northwest Kazakhstan.⁴³ In November, a militant linked to the Islamist group, Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate), detonated two bombs in Atyrau.⁴⁴ And in December 2011, two policemen and five militants died in a firefight in Boral dai, a suburb of Almaty.⁴⁵ Jund al-Khilafah again claimed responsibility for the attack, explaining that it was retribution for the government’s October adoption of a new religious law that strictly controls the registration and activities of religious organizations in Kazakhstan.⁴⁶ This claim is consistent with what little information there is on this the militant organization. Jund al-Khilafah, according to a recent report in *The Times of Central Asia*, is thought to have been created by a Kazakh from Atyrau who became radicalized when “denied permission by Kazakh authorities to study Islam in Saudi Arabia.”⁴⁷ The Kazakh, along with “two companions from Atyrau then fled to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, where they established Jund al-

³⁸ Scott Radnitz, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*, First (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

³⁹ “Foreign Workers of TCO’s Contractor Bear no Grudge Against Their Kazakh Colleagues,” *Kazakhstan Oil & Gas Weekly*, August 27, 2007.

⁴⁰ “Kazakh Security Service Says It’s Investigating Several People in Connection with Violence in Uzbekistan,” *Associated Press Worldstream*, August 21, 2004.

⁴¹ Natalia Leshchenko, “Kazakh Police Arrest Islamist Terrorist Suspects,” *Global Insight*, February 28, 2008.

⁴² “Rare Suicide Bombing Shocks Kazakhstan,” *Agence France Presse*, May 17, 2011.

⁴³ “Kazakh Police Kill 9 Gunmen,” *Associated Press*, July 11, 2011.

⁴⁴ “Kazakh Bomber ‘Identified,’ As Islamist Group Claims Responsibility,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, November 1, 2011.

⁴⁵ “Five Militants, Two Police Killed in Kazakhstan Clash,” *Agence France Presse*, December 4, 2011.

⁴⁶ “Islamist Group Claims Deadly Kazakhstan Violence,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, December 9, 2011.

⁴⁷ “Terror and Extremism: Kazakh Government Calls on Public for Rejection,” *Times of Central Asia*, April 3, 2013.

Khilafah while maintaining networks with Salafists in Kazakhstan who could carry out attacks on the home front.”⁴⁸

Whereas in the past Islamist extremism in Kazakhstan was characterized by a handful of militants using Kazakhstan as a staging ground for attacks against other governments, the 2011 incidents of Islamist extremism appear to be the work of Kazakh Islamists working from safe havens abroad. Jund al-Khilafah is thought to be based on the Afghan-Pakistan border and is also thought to have close ties with Islamist militants in the North Caucasus.⁴⁹ And the North Caucasus more broadly, some Kazakh analysts believe, is attracting a new generation of Kazakh youth increasingly drawn to militant Islamism.⁵⁰ Problematically for Kazakhstan, these militants do not seem content to remain abroad. In April 2012, 42 people were found guilty on terrorism charges related to the October 2011 Atyrau bombings.⁵¹ And in December 2012, the deputy chairman of the National Security Committee, Kabdulkarim Abdikazymov, stated in a press conference that Jund al-Khilafah had won a considerable following inside of Kazakhstan and, as such, “poses a threat to the country’s security.”⁵² It should be stressed again, however, that comparatively little is known about Jund al-Khilafah and, other than Abdikazymov’s 2012 statement, there are too few definitive data points to confirm that this group indeed has established firm roots in Kazakhstan.

As is the case with Kazakhstan’s economic-based violence, so too it is possible to imagine a case where Islamist extremism is marshaled as a political tool in Kazakhstan’s looming succession struggle. Indeed, some Kazakh news outlets have already aired this possibility in relation to the 2011 bombings. In a March 2012 letter to the opposition newspaper, *Respublika*, an informant, presumably a high-placed government official, revealed that the interior ministry had recorded “a conversation between Aslan Musin’s son, Aslbek, with the people suspected of organizing and carrying out terror attacks in 2011.”⁵³ Aslbek Musin is the son of the then head of the Presidential Administration, Aslan Musin. Musin was transferred from this position in October 2012 to the considerably less influential post of Accounts Committee head. Given that the *Respublika* letter was written under a pseudonym, it is impossible to verify if the suggested allegation that Musin was using Islamists in his bid to amass power is true. That political elites might find common cause with homegrown Islamists is, however, a scenario worth anticipating given the highly fluid atmosphere that would accompany any succession struggle.

Of the three types of violence discussed above, ethno-nationalist violence, economic violence, and Islamist extremism, it is the recent emergence of indigenous Islamist extremism that appears most troubling. The threat of ethno-nationalist violence in Kazakhstan is far less today than it was at the time of Kazakh independence in 1991. Economic-based violence, as the Zhanaozen events illustrate, is a possibility, but one that can and has over the past two years been avoided through the thoughtful mediation of labor disputes in Kazakhstan’s extractive industries. In short, the drivers of and, as a result, policy responses to ethno-nationalist and economic violence can be readily identified. Importantly however, should Kazakhstan’s approaching leadership succession prove to be protracted and contested, it is plausible, as the preceding paragraphs detail, that competing elites could mobilize both Islamist, ethno-nationalist, and economic-based identity groups. This mobilization need not

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Soldiers of the Caliphate Not Based in Afghanistan, Linked with N. Caucasus -,” *Central Asia General Newswire*, September 28, 2012; “47 Charged With Terrorism In West Kazakhstan,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, March 2, 2012.

⁵⁰ “Paper Warns of Growing Number of Kazakhs Joining Jihad in Russia’s Caucasus,” *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, April 28, 2011.

⁵¹ “Forty-Two Sentenced To Prison In Kazakh Terrorism Trial,” *The Times of Central Asia*, April 26, 2012.

⁵² “Kazakh Security Committee Admits Terrorist Group Is Threat,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, December 4, 2012.

⁵³ Аманом Шабдарбаев, “Касымов «прикрыл» сына Мусина?,” *Республика*, March 19, 2012.

assume violent forms. As past events demonstrate, though, violence and even extremism and insurgency are possibilities.

III. CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE DRIVERS OF VE/I IN KAZAKHSTAN

Violent extremism is rare in Kazakhstan. Nonetheless, the preceding discussion demonstrates that not only have violence and extremism occurred, but they have occurred in three distinct spheres. This section explores how potential drivers of ethno-national, economic, and Islamist violence operate at individual, group, and society-wide levels.

A caveat here is in order: these drivers have been present, albeit to varying degrees, in Kazakhstan for several decades yet only on a few occasions has violence actually occurred. This infrequency of violence suggests that the drivers discussed below may be necessary but not sufficient causes of VE/I. When violence has occurred in Kazakhstan, it typically is the product of an interaction of causes – of constant drivers interacting with contingent triggers—a barroom brawl, police overreach by a police force that is almost exclusively ethnic Kazakh in composition, political decisions that are tone-deaf to public sentiment.⁵⁴ That an element of contingency exists in Kazakh violence, importantly though, does not lessen the need for causal analysis and policy remediation. It is just the opposite: because contingency cannot be controlled, analysts and policy makers do well to focus on those drivers that can be remediated. Addressing the drivers of violence can prevent a spark from turning into a conflagration.

Individual-Level Drivers of VE/I

USAID's *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* encourages the analyst to consider the absence or presence of the following five categories when assessing the potential individuals may engage in violent extremism or insurgency:

1. “Concrete and specific political, economic, and social grievances”;
2. “Broader ideological (especially religious) objectives”;
3. “The search for economic gain, or the pull exercised by prior involvement in illicit economic activities”;
4. “Personal factors … (such as) the desire to avenge a loved one, or follow a friend… on the path of jihad”; and
5. “Intimidation or coercion by peers or the community.”⁵⁵

The instances of violence and extremism reviewed in section one of this report suggest that concrete grievances, broader ideological objectives as well as personal desires to avenge insults committed against family and friends have contributed to violence in Kazakhstan. Ethno-nationalist violence, particularly ethno-nationalist violence that had been directed at Kazakhstan's sizeable Russian population, was very much rooted in concrete political grievances. Gorbachev, in appointing the Russian Gennadi Kolbin as Kazakh first secretary in 1986, violated the unwritten but widely

⁵⁴ For the growing and now nearly exclusive dominance of the Kazakh police force by ethnic Kazakhs, see: Olga Oliker et al., *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army* (Rand Corporation, 2003), 167.

⁵⁵ Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, “USAID: Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism” (Management Systems International, February 2009), 63, http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/publications/docs/guide_to_drivers_of_ve.pdf.

understood rule that leading posts in the Kazakh republic were to be occupied by ethnic Kazakhs. Nobel Laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in calling for northern Kazakhstan to be ceded to Russia in his 1990 *Komsomolskaya Pravda* essay, was a direct challenge to Kazakhs' growing sense of political sovereignty. Now however, more than two decades into independence and with the Russian proportion of the Kazakh population much diminished, political grievances directed toward Russians have diminished and the potential for a sustained campaign of anti-Russian ethno-nationalist violence has all but disappeared.

What has not disappeared, however, are the more personal drivers of ethno-nationalist violence. The March 2007 retribution killings in which several dozen ethnic Kazakhs murdered five Chechens in Kazatkom illustrates how the desire to avenge a perceived—and non-fatal—slight can spiral into a devastating convulsion of violence. Presumably these personal factors were also at play in the 2011 alleged Islamist bombings in Atyrau. If one accepts the conclusions of the Kazakh government's investigation of these bombings, then it would appear that, in recent years, an increasing number of Kazakh citizens have chosen to follow what they perceive as the path of jihad.

Group-Level Drivers of VE/I

It would be naïve to think, though, that individuals spontaneously turn to Islamist or any other form of violence in a vacuum. David Kilcullen's observation, quoted in the Tajikistan VE/I study, bears repeating here: "people don't get pushed into rebellion by their ideology. They get pulled in by their social networks."⁵⁶ Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine several of the incidents of violence discussed here occurring if it were not for the social networks within which individuals are embedded.

The December 2011 Zhanaozen violence—the protesters' destruction of property in the city and their clash with police—likely would not have occurred had the protesters not shared the common sub-ethnic and economic identities that produced a deepened sense of efficacy and ultimately led to seven months of sustained, union-led strikes. The fifty Kazakh men who attacked and ultimately killed five Chechens in Kazatkom in 2007 were all residents of the same village—Malovodnoye—neighboring Kazatkom. The close networks that emerge in village daily life, and the perceived affront to these networks when an ethnic Chechen from outside the village attacked an ethnic Kazakh from Malovodnoye, worked both to justify and facilitate the killings on the Chechen "outsiders." And the Islamists who are alleged to have carried out the 2011 bombings were members, or at least perceived themselves to be members, of the newly-formed Kazakh Islamist group, Jund al-Khilafah.

Individual-level drivers—the hope for economic gain in the Zhanaozen riots, the desire to avenge an attack on a friend in the Kazatkom murders, the call to jihad in the 2011 bombings—may have inclined actors toward violence, but it is the facilitating nature of group membership that effected the realization of violence.

Political and Societal Level Drivers of VE/I

In addition to individual- and group-level drivers of violence and extremism, USAID's *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* also highlights seven "political drivers" that have the potential to shape and reshape society broadly. These drivers include:

1. Denial of political rights and civil liberties;
2. Violations of human rights;
3. Widespread government corruption;
4. The presence of ungoverned territories;

⁵⁶ Ibid., 74.

5. A history of prior militant conflict;
6. External state support for domestic violent extremist groups; and
7. Illegitimate yet unchallenged national governments.⁵⁷

Of these seven political- and societal-level drivers, the first two, the denial of political rights and civil liberties and violations of human rights—appear to be driving the acts of violence we have seen in Kazakhstan thus far.

The Kazakh government has committed, both in its signing of International Labor Organisation (ILO) conventions and in its domestic law, to safeguarding freedom of association. In the assessment of foreign governments and international organizations, however, Kazakhstan has fallen short on these commitments. The U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, for example, has faulted Kazakhstan for placing “restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, religion, and association.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Human Rights Watch concludes: “Kazakhstan’s labor laws fall short of international standards in many important respects, thus failing to protect workers’ rights in a manner in which these rights can fully be enjoyed in practice. Indeed, some provisions of Kazakhstan’s labor code directly violate international human rights standards.”⁵⁹

These assessments hold true in the case of the Zhanaozen oil workers. Kazakh courts declared the Zhanaozen strikes illegal. Union members were denied entry to their union offices. Zhanaozen strikers were arrested and jailed. And one prominent lawyer working with the Zhanaozen strikers, Natalia Sokolova, was sentenced to six years in prison “for ‘inciting social discord’ and ‘actively participating’ in illegal gatherings.”⁶⁰ In light of the accumulation of these multiple insults, it is reasonable to believe that the Kazakh government’s cavalier attitude toward freedom of association and assembly contributed to the December 16, 2011 Zhanaozen oil strikers’ rampage.

Similarly, the Kazakh government’s considerable restrictions on religious freedoms likely have contributed to the growing Islamist VE/I in recent years. The Kazakh government, like all Central Asian governments, has continued the Soviet era policy of closely managing Islam. The “Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan”—the successor to the Soviet “Central Asian Muslim Spiritual Directorate”—monitors the practice of Islam throughout the country. Though officially independent of the civilian state, the Directorate enforces conformity in the practice of Islam that dovetails closely with “moderate” and “traditional” Islam the Nazarbaev government welcomes. Moreover, should the Directorate fail to provide sufficient conformity, the government passed a new religious law in October 2011 that sets in place “stringent mandatory registration requirements on missionaries and religious groups” and “gives the government broad grounds to deny religious groups legal status.”⁶¹ The militant Islamist group Jund al-Khilafah cited the passage of this religious law when taking credit for the November 1, 2011 bombing in Atyrau.⁶²

Scenarios for Future VE/I in Kazakhstan

Recent events of violence and extremism in Kazakhstan can be attributed, at least in part, to uncharacteristically poor government policy. The Nazarbaev government ran roughshod over the unionized Zhanaozen strikers’ freedoms of assembly and association rather than, as it has in the past, working cooperatively with companies and unions to mediate labor disputes. Similarly, the Nazarbaev regime’s 2011 Law on Religion’s ratcheting up of the monitoring and control of religion,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁸ Department Of State. The Office of Website Management, 2012 Human Rights Reports: Kazakhstan.

⁵⁹ *Striking Oil, Striking Workers: Violations of Labor Rights in Kazakhstan’s Oil Sector*, 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁶¹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012: Kazakhstan*.

⁶² “Islamist Brigade Claim Kazakh Blasts,” Agence France Presse, November 1, 2011.

made the state's already excessive oversight of Islam even more invasive. It is tempting to view these uncharacteristically poor decisions as one-off events, as mistakes the Nazarbaev government is unlikely to repeat. The Kazakh government has, for example, been careful of its handling of labor disputes since the Zhanaozen events. That said, the Kazakh government has ratcheted up its monitoring of religious groups and economic elites in recent years. This increased monitoring may be indicative of a regime desperate to hold on to power and fearful of actors—most notably economic and religious actors—capable of effecting social mobilization.

The longer the Nazarbaev government clings to power without articulating a clear and transparent succession policy, the greater the likelihood for violence and extremism will become. Nazarbaev has long banked on his and his affiliated parties' dominance in politics. Would-be challengers, understanding that a large political machine backed Nazarbaev, were reluctant to challenge the president. For every potential defector Nazarbaev has had at the ready hundreds of willing replacements.⁶³ This institutional reality, a legacy Nazarbaev inherited from the late Soviet period, ensured high degrees of elite loyalty. Critically though, elite loyalty to a long-serving ruler wanes as the ruler's vitality fades. Nazarbaev, now in his mid-seventies and reportedly struggling with prostate cancer, can no longer expect to command the same loyalty he did in the 1990s and 2000s. Political conflict and instability, once unimaginable in the Kazakh context, is now a real possibility. More specifically, as section two outlines, economic and potentially Islamist-based grievances may be well-suited to elite mobilization in the case of a protracted succession struggle.⁶⁴

This aging autocrat dynamic is conducive to increased violence and extremism in three ways. First, imperiled autocrats like Nazarbaev begin to view groups – political and economic elites, labor activists, religious leaders – as potential threats and respond these perceived threats through increasingly repressive policies and legislation (such as the 2011 Law on Religion that all but stifles Kazakh citizens' ability to practice religion free of government oversight and monitoring). These policies erode the perceived legitimacy of the regime and thereby incline disaffected groups toward violence and extremism.

Second, the aging autocratic dynamic erodes the cohesive glue of single party systems. Though we may dislike single party autocratic systems, the alternative—what Samuel Huntington labels “mass society,” can be even less attractive:

In the mass society political participation is unstructured, inconstant, anomic and variegated. Each social force attempts to secure its objectives through the resources and tactics in which it is strongest ... The distinctive form of political participation is the mass movement combining violent and nonviolent, legal and illegal, coercive and persuasive actions.⁶⁵

Third, with the cohesive glue of the single party eroding, autocratic leaders begin to lose control over political and economic elites, elites who owe their comparative good fortune to Nazarbaev but who now see Nazarbaev as being on the equivalent of political life-support. These elites, freed from the President and the single party, are beginning to build their own networks in central government ministries, in regional administrations, in the economy and in the media. These networks, networks financed by elites' considerable assets both in Kazakhstan and abroad, can readily be mobilized when Nazarbaev's life-support begins to fail.

The collapse of one party rule elsewhere in Central Asia has enabled devastating violence and extremism. The 1992 disintegration of Rahmon Nabiev's presidential party—the successor to the

⁶³ For a concise summary of the institutional origins of the Nazarbaev regime's political stability, see: Eric McGlinchey, “Running in Circles in Kyrgyzstan,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2010.

⁶⁴ For a more expansive discussion of the likelihood of Kazakhstan's growing political instability, see: McGlinchey, “Central Asia Grows Wobbly,” *Current History* (October 2012).

⁶⁵ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 88.

communist party—sparked Tajikistan’s protracted civil war. And the instability that followed the overthrow of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev and his Ak Jol party in April 2010 produced an environment conducive to ethno-nationalist clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, clashes that left more than 350 people dead in June 2010.

IV. POTENTIAL USG RESPONSES

The preceding analysis has identified potential drivers of VE/I in Kazakhstan at three levels. At the individual level, concrete grievances, broader ideological objectives, and desires to avenge insults committed against family and friends have contributed to VE/I in Kazakhstan. At the group level, dense social networks—membership in trade unions in the Zhanaozen case and allegiance to the militant Islamist organization, Jund al-Khilafah, in the case of the 2011 bombings—provided coordinating mechanisms that helped facilitate VE/I. Finally, at the macro, state-society level, key political drivers—specific violations of political, civil and human rights—motivated the Zhanaozen riots and, according to Jund al-Khilafah’s press statements, the 2011 bombings.

Fortunately, violent extremism in Kazakhstan has been rare and, in most cases where violence has occurred, drivers are readily identifiable. As such, it is possible to identify a variety of ways that the US Government could further mitigate the risk of VE/I in Kazakhstan. These are outlined below.

It also is important to bear in mind what *doesn’t* work. When designing programs intended to address VE/I, the USG should bear in mind the observation contained in the CVE Programming Guide:

Historical trends, as well as more recent ones, suggest that frustrated expectations for economic improvement and social mobility are a far more frequent source of Violent Extremism than mere economic deprivation. More often than not, discontent arises not so much from the system’s failure to deliver, but from its inability to keep up with expectations—especially those of the educated, upwardly mobile and achievement-oriented elites that emerge through modernization, economic development, and globalization. There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that relative deprivation and frustrated expectations—for economic benefits, political power, and/or social status—can be important drivers of VE ... *What is critical here is not so much the material grievances that social marginality produces, but the far more dangerous message that acute forms of social exclusion may convey to those who are its victims: state and society alike have turned their back and given up on you.*⁶⁶

Therefore, it should be remembered that while traditional development projects that build infrastructure, enhance social services or provide employment opportunities are valuable for a variety of developmental and political reasons, they do not necessarily help to counter the drivers of VE/I.

Promoting Police Reforms to Mitigate the Potential for Ethno-Nationalist Violence

The Kazakh police force has become increasingly mono-ethnic in the years since Soviet independence. There is no evidence that the almost exclusively Kazakh face of the police force was causative of the ethno-nationalist violence that has intermittently unfolded in recent years, this largely ethnic Kazakh police force may be permissive of ethno-nationalist violence, particularly of ethno-nationalist violence committed against minorities. The 2007 violence against Chechens in Kazatkom

⁶⁶ CVE Programming Guide, pgs 13 and 15.

illustrate this point. The police in Kazatkom, rather than stopping the violence, remained on the sidelines while an angry crowd of ethnic Kazakhs attacked ethnic Chechen residents of the village.⁶⁷

The Kazakh government recognizes the mono-ethnic nature of its police force is something that demands redress. In June 2012 Kazakhstan, in partnership with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) launched a new initiative, “Policing in Multi-Ethnic Kazakhstan.”⁶⁸ The project’s goal, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities explained during the project’s presentation in Astana, is built on the belief that Kazakh “policing that takes into account the multi-ethnicity of society, can make a significant contribution to the prevention of ethnic tensions and conflicts.”⁶⁹ The OSCE initiative is one that can benefit from the U.S. Government’s considerable experience with police reform in ethnically heterogeneous communities in the United States as well as the USG’s experience partnering with foreign governments to further police reform in similarly ethnically heterogeneous societies abroad.

Institutionalizing Mechanisms for the Resolution of Labor Disputes

Kazakhstan’s track record in dealing with labor disputes, most notably labor disputes in the extractive industries, has been mixed. For the most part, labor disputes have been peacefully resolved. The December 2011 Zhanaozen violence between striking oil workers and regional authorities stands out as a notable exception. The Nazarbaev government’s acknowledgement, moreover, that the Zhanaozen police used excessive force and overstepped authority suggests that, while central authorities may be respectful of labor’s right to assembly and association, regional authorities can productively partner with their central government counterparts so as to institutionalize—at the local level—mechanisms for the peaceful remediation of labor disputes.

The USG, along with U.S. non-governmental organizations such as the Solidarity Center, have extensive experience working both in the U.S. and internationally to improve the tripartite relationship among labor, business, and governments. Such efforts can productively be expanded in Kazakhstan. The analysis offered in this report suggests that both Kazakh labor and the Kazakh central government favor deliberative and peaceful mediation of labor disputes. Business, most notably management in the extractive industries, as well as local and regional governments, should be encouraged similarly to respect labor rights to association and assembly and to follow the central Kazakh government’s lead in advocating for deliberative models for labor dispute remediation. Finally, given widespread public sentiments that wealth from the extractive industries disproportionately accrues to political insiders, this key economic sector can also benefit from the establishment of industry watchdog groups to ensure increased transparency.

Encouraging the Reform and Reorientation of State-Sanctioned Religious Institutions

The vast majority of Kazakh citizens, as the survey results presented in this report confirm, are not inclined toward religious extremism. The Kazakh government’s restrictive approach to religion thus is curiously at odds with the real atmosphere of tolerance that Kazakh President Nazarbaev himself

⁶⁷ “Russian Website Reports ‘Pogroms’ Against Chechens in Kazakh Village,” *BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit*, March 19, 2007.

⁶⁸ “OSCE High Commissioner Launches Multi-Ethnic Policing Project in Kazakhstan,” June 26, 2012, <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/91689>.

⁶⁹ “‘Policing in Multi-Ethnic Kazakhstan’ Project Presented in Astana,” *Kazinform*, June 28, 2012, <http://inform.kz/eng/article/2475790>.

frequently notes in his public remarks both in Kazakhstan and abroad. One potential cause behind the Kazakh government's restrictive stance on religion may be inertia. The Kazakh state inherited from the Soviet period two large bureaucracies whose sole purpose is to manage religious affairs: the Spiritual Association of Muslims and the State Committee on Religious Affairs.

These large bureaucracies need not and likely cannot be dissolved. They can benefit from reform and reorientation. The USG and U.S. NGOs, together with the Kazakh government can work with the Spiritual Association of Muslims and the State Committee on Religious Affairs, to re-orient these bureaucracies' missions away from monitoring and control and toward what ultimately is a more stabilizing goal: the promotion of interfaith understanding. This development response, understandably, will be one that will demand extended engagement so as to achieve desired outcomes. In the short run, the USG can advance the goal of religious freedoms by encouraging the Kazakh government to repeal the overly restrictive 2011 Law on Religion.

Encouraging Transparent Succession Mechanisms

Finally, at the diplomatic level, the USG can and should explore ways of engaging the Nazarbaev government on the issue of how to institutionalize transparent and meaningful succession mechanisms. Although the Kazakh constitution imposes a two-term limit for presidents, Nazarbaev, as Kazakhstan's first president, is exempted from this limit. Moreover, in June 2010, the Kazakh parliament passed a law naming Nazarbaev "Leader of the Nation," granting the president authority to shape domestic and foreign policy were Nazarbaev to decide to step down from office. The net effect of these two laws is uncertainty if Nazarbayev will voluntarily leave office and, in the event that he does formally retire as president, if he will continue to direct Kazakh politics through his "leader of the nation" status. USG efforts to get the Nazarbaev government to resolve this uncertainty would help mitigate potential political instability that can give rise to VE/I.

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